

The Dialogue of Race on the St. Olaf Campus

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to study the dialogue of race on the St. Olaf campus. The idea was to bring awareness and reinforce the importance of understanding race on campus through dialogue. The study was done through a series of questionnaires in one-on-one interviews of selected students, staff, faculty, and administration at a small, private liberal arts college in the upper Midwest. There were 32 selected students that participated, 16 students represented students of color, while the other 16 students were Caucasian. Also, a focus group was held to gain a broader sense of varieties of student's opinions. Three staff, faculty, and administration were chosen to represent a broader range of experiences and understandings of the impact of race on St. Olaf campus.

Setting/community:

St. Olaf College is nestled in the quaint town of Northfield, Minnesota and shares this town with Carleton College. It is a Private Liberal Arts College affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America founded in 1874 by Norwegian Lutheran immigrants. It is a driving distance of about forty-five minutes southwest of the Twin-cities. St. Olaf focuses on a sense of community, global education, and environmental sustainability. It holds strongly to their mission statement of liberal arts education through the Christian faith and gospel. Part of the St. Olaf mission reads, "St. Olaf College strives to be an inclusive community, respecting those of differing backgrounds and beliefs." (St. Olaf College Mission Statement) It is a college of 3,073 students. The St. Olaf 2008 enrollment statistics state racial/ethnic composition as; 1% African American, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Hispanic/Latino, 0.1% Native American/Alaskan Native, 2% Non-resident International, 4% Unknown, and 86% White. 81% of students receive

Institutional Gift Aid, 63% of this being Need-Based aid, and 18% non-Need-Based (Merit Only aid). (www.stolaf.edu/about)

St. Olaf College prides itself in the strong sense of community many students feel. During the week there is time designated as community time. A large portion of the students at St. Olaf will study abroad during their four year in college. It is one of the top liberal arts colleges in the country that sends its student abroad. Environmental issues are also on the forefront of the institution. Besides the acres of natural lands, recycling program throughout the campus, green bike program, it also houses a wind turbine fondly known as Ole and recently welcomed Regents Hall, the new science center on campus which is considered one of the greenest buildings in all of the United States. Students, whatever their major, are required to take a list of general education requirement this in turn having them enter buildings and spaces that they normally would not. St. Olaf is a division three college and also offers intramural sports. Any and every student is welcome to join. There are 196 organizations on campus and 18 are recognized multicultural organization. (www.stolaf.edu/about) The majority of the multicultural organizations come under Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach also known as MACO. Students of every background are welcome to join. As the years have gone by more multicultural organizations are sprouting up as a result of a growing population of the students of color. The St. Olaf campus is strikingly different today from its origins 135 years ago.

Methodology:

Our objective is to create spaces and structure for reflection, analysis, and dialogue with selected students, staff, faculty, and administration through a series of questionnaires in one-on-

one interviews. We chose a set of questions we thought would reflect what we wanted to bring into the larger picture on the topic of race on the St. Olaf campus. We interviewed 32 students (16 students represented students of color and 16 represented Caucasian students). We approached students in person and through emails to find people willing to interview with us. We also wanted to hear what St. Olaf's staff, faculty, and administration had to say about race on campus. We chose individuals from staff, faculty, and administration who represented a diversity of professions and multicultural backgrounds to provide us perspective from a non-student point of view and gain perspective of changes over time. We also held a focus group, attended by nineteen students and one faculty member. We communicated through word of mouth and email to those who would be interested in being involved in an open table discussion of their experiences on the St. Olaf campus.

Problem:

Although St. Olaf is a small private liberal arts college, diversity is strongly emphasized. St. Olaf has organizations such as Multicultural Affairs & Community Outreach (MACO) and International & Off-Campus Studies programs that promote diversity and culture to their students. As researchers, we see that the dialogue of race is a unique opportunity for college students of diverse cultures to express frankly and safely the impact of race on campus while learning from each other's personal experiences on campus. However, race is rarely a topic among conversations due to the lack of communication and experiences that allows us to explore the role of diversity on campus. We feel that dialogue could bring two or more sides together and work toward understanding the multiplicity of personal experiences that exist on campus and in the greater society but are sometimes are not explicit topics of conversation. It seems that race is a topic that is often avoided despite evidence of real concern for each other. Honesty, respect,

fears, and personal experiences can prevent a conversation of race from being discussed. We see that speech is action. Vocalizing a dialogue may bring us closer to an understanding of race on campus. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to illuminate understanding of the difficulties and obstacles involved in instigating and sustaining the dialogue of race on campus and raise awareness by engaging a wide range of individuals to explore the impact of race and its dialogue on the St. Olaf campus.

Findings:

St. Olaf's student body is predominately White. When the student respondents were asked the question "Do you or how do you notice race on campus?" a majority of the respondents felt the presence of a diversity of races on the St. Olaf campus, but only on a small scale. "It wasn't no St. Paul. You don't see it until you experience it. It's obvious that it's not home anymore," replied one student. The student respondents notice race through organizations, such as MACO and Student Support Services (SSS). Many notice diversity in the cafeteria where groups of students are easily identified by the area in which they sit on a regular basis. One student said, "People tend to group together. For example, the Hmong girls sit together in the cafeteria." The respondents felt that it's not due to segregation, but that multicultural students tend to stick together. A student replied, "It's almost necessary to be with someone you can connect with without being uncomfortable." Sticking together means having someone who has similar experiences. Many other types of groupings of students in the cafeteria are noticed by association with sport teams, and other activities that foster shared experiences, but these patterns create a less immediate and visible connection than that of race.

The influence of shared experience is a strong factor for determining how students connect when they become a part of the St. Olaf community. We may also assume that people

are born and socialized into certain categories and tend to stick strongly together— for most of us. One student noticed race on campus through the minorities because she is a part of the minority population. She continued by saying, “I tend to search for someone to relate to, who has a similar background” and “similar experiences.” When asked what she meant by searching for someone to relate to, the student explained that she came from a diverse community and that “it would be nice” to know someone who has had similar experiences as her. She said that she is more comfortable when there is someone who can be understanding and approachable to her experiences as a student of color because students who are not “minority do not have the common ground and similar experiences to relate with.” There are certain things that do not need to be explained.

The dialogue of race is both a source of tension and a point of growth and understanding because tension is necessary for growth and understanding to happen. A student stated this about whether or not the dialogue was a source of tension or a point of growth and understanding, “More understanding, because you can see where other people are raised through culture and not by skin color.” To expand, how one is raised can be reflected on how one understands race. Those embedded in a culture can also contribute to their understandings of the topic of race. St. Olaf College is a predominately white; these students have their heritage, but some are not embedded in their culture to think of other cultures. Therefore, these students lack the exposure of other cultures and face culture shock when they come to St. Olaf and see students of color. This is another issue some white students have stated because the majority of the white students come from small towns or places where there is a small population or no population other than their race. When seeing another race put them in a situation where they are either curious and ask a lot of questions or else pay no attention to race. A student of color said,

“Some people do not understand each other because they fear the unknown- something really weird. [It is a] source of growth because the more we talk about it, the more we can understand each other. Sometimes people just assume things about the race/culture. That’s how tension gets brought up. We need to clarify things.” This interviewee makes a strong point because generalizations and stereotypes are always made about race and is used against these groups in demeaning ways. If misunderstandings were addressed, stereotypes and generalizations wouldn’t have to be issues the different race groups face.

“Do you think it has an effect on interaction as well?” Race is somewhat invisible because the dominant culture on campus is homogenously white, and everything else is different. Interviews indicated that students tend to interact more with peers of their own race. Women demonstrated strong same-race preferences while men interacted inter- racially if race was not a present factor. The strong tendency to be with someone of a similar background, as most of the student respondents said, is a matter of common understanding and shared experiences. For example, a White student said, “biology majors tend to have more friends within the biology department than in the theater department, and vice-versa. There is more connection there.” Whereas, students of color feel that it is due to the lack of understanding of one another” or as he puts it, “people tend to stay closer.” Closer, this means to the people that a particular student can interact with without awkwardness and hesitation, according a student of color.

It is not a matter of defining through race and identity, but a matter of cultural identity. Many students grew up in different environments with different exposures and styles of learning where understanding situations were often taught differently. A White student argued that almost most students of multicultural background “stick together,” and that race should not play a factor in categorizing them. “Cultural is more of identity than race. How does one define race? What

matters the most is embracing the culture and not see race as the culture.” For example, many respondents recognize race in the cafeteria, “because you can pin point where the majority of the Caucasian students are, meaning multicultural students sits together in a particular place together that makes them more noticeable to the visible eye, according to a student of color. However, what about the football players who also sit together or the cheerleaders or the volleyball girls? Culture and experiences determined who your friends are and not based on the skin color and hair color of a person.

Within the discussion of ‘diversity’, white students often included the role of socio-economic diversity, varied experiences, and age diversity as a major influence on campus as well. When discussing this same topic with students of color, the discussion stayed more focused on racial diversity. This reminds me of the connection between responses of students to the question, ‘Is race an emotional topic for you?’ All white students responded that race was not an emotional topic for them whereas students of color responded that race was a deeply emotional topic for them. Yet, some white students spoke about feelings of extreme discomfort and anxiety on the topic of race – are these not also recognized as emotions? Perhaps due to this, other types of divisions such as socio-economic situation are more closely tied to the emotional connection to structural inequalities that shape our experiences as students on campus, and young adults in the greater society.

Another way in which students of color and white students said they notice race on campus is when one student asks another student if they know someone. If the student is of color, it will be mentioned, “Do you know Gertrude?”- “No, I don’t think so.” – “She is Hmong” or “She is white” is a common way in which students are identified. It can be a way to create clarity

and specificity when trying to identify someone. An administrator we interviewed said that, “In order make choices you have to be around choices”.

One student from the focus group said, “Race is seen, but is not integrated.” The cafeteria was a common place students used as an example to show race. When looking at the cafeteria students of color sit to the right in the first few tables and the white students sit everywhere else. How does this reflect race? Students of color sit together and judgments are made immediately- all students of color sit together all the time and always in the same spot. How is this statement fair? It is not because not all students of color sit in the first few tables to the right and only sit together. This statement can also be said about the white students because students who play sports, music, organizations, etc... can sit together, but because these students are white and do not stand out; students of color are more noticeably because of visible differences.

What many people don't seem to realize is that “dialogue” can spark many behaviors. It's time we raised the bar and realized that we need to aim for a *quality* dialogue about race — not settling for its mere existence. First, we have to acknowledge what are qualities are needed for the dialogue of race. To the question, “Do you think the dialogue of race, as a point of tension or a source of growth and understanding?” one student answered, “I feel that St. Olaf is trying to grow from it, by increasing dialogue. There is tension, depending on the group of people and the people of conversation in class. But many students are afraid of being called racist or prejudice. A conversation can have different meanings depending on the group of people. A group of minorities' conversation on race can have a different tone and composition than a group of white students with a minority student in the conversation.” Events such as Boxes and Walls enables the dialogue of race and enables exposure to a multiplicity of individual students and group experiences to be shared. Boxes and Walls attempts to share the feelings and struggles that other

students goes through on campus and to let the outsider experience how it feels to be a student on campus who is not of the majority culture. Boxes and Walls encompasses racial, national, and gender and sexual orientation experiences of students represented at St. Olaf.

Although many students see the dialogue of race as source of growth and understanding, there is still tension due to the lack of understanding and emotionally intense atmosphere that conversations of race can produce. A “lack of understanding of each other” and how groups deal with experiences differently is an obstacle in inter-racial understanding. “People don’t want to be seen as racist or offend people,” “The Caucasian is very afraid to talk about it,” these were the thoughts of one St. Olaf student. Often times when the topic of race is brought up, history plays a role in how race is spoken about and understood. One student said, “The dehumanizing things that our ancestors have put upon people has perverted the trust of people and put us in an awkward situation. It’s not that we don’t want to talk about it; it is how do we approach it in a way that doesn’t bring up the sensitive past that puts everyone in a bad position?” However, isn’t that the meaning of dialogue? How do we converse in a safe and comfortable environment that allows voices to be heard? Tension gives rise to sources of growth and understanding. The dialogue of race is fear inducing and defining, the fear of offending another party and being categorized or categorizing.

The question posed was, how does the idea of political correctness affect the dialogue of race? The overwhelming reaction was that it was a silly idea. The constant focus of being political correct hinders people from saying what they really want to say.. A fear of stepping on someone’s toes keeps people having a genuine, honest conversation. What one truly wants to say is silenced and only what is deemed appropriate is voiced. Political correctness is a barrier. Words are swallowed and emotions are veiled with a bright smile. If the words are not

swallowed then there are times when one can get all knotted up in a conversation just in trying to keep up with the correct vocabulary. The vocabulary that the language of political correctness includes was one that was decided without consulting the people political correctness is directed to. In this respect political correctness can be seen as discrediting a person. “I want you to see me and acknowledge me and if that means being uncomfortable when asking a question, then so be it, you make me feel uncomfortable in my skin just about everyday. Let me tell you when you’re saying something wrong, I mean you are talking about and to me.” Political correctness can be offensive to many in minority groups because they did not have a say in what was politically correct and what was not, they had to go along with what way considered correct for them. Political correctness has become a shield for whites it is not minorities asking that people be politically correct when speaking or interacting with one another. A white student stated that, “it is a way for whites to address race by avoiding race.” The dialogue is very politically correct but at least the dialogue is happening. Addressing but still avoiding! Going back to the statement that it is usually white students who are most politically correct another interviewer mentioned political correctness is often used by white students because there is an underlying feeling of guilt; a guilt for the past and present realities. It is an unconscious realization that, yes, there has always been and always will be a power struggle and as it stands now whites have ended up on top. There is a messy history and an ever evolving history that we must face and work through to get to a better place; the feeling that by digging up the past would be more offensive than avoiding and to a large extent ignoring the dialogue now and today.

As the conversation of political correctness goes on emotions get touched on. When the topic of race is addressed all agreed that it is an emotionally charged topic. Even those who say that they do not get emotional when talking about race, because it is something they do not think

about, if an accusation is made then a fire is born. When sitting in a class and a professor brings up the topic of race a white student might just state that they feel uncomfortable when at an event where there are many students of color because they are in the minority. A student of color sitting in the room might just make a comment, 'welcome to my life' and this student who really has no defined feeling toward race will get riled up and defend their stance. Those who do not care, care when it is challenged or attacked and those who live the life and those who do care have a constant emotion. Many students of color enter this dialogue of race with hostility. There is a feeling that you do not get it and you do not care or else you would not have made that comment. Though it might come off as hostility many at times it is hurt, hurt that thought was not put in before that statement was made; the hurt of the feeling that a student of color was not in the room.

Frustration; "why have this conversation because it is a conversation that goes nowhere" a student stated, or "minorities talk about race too much" from another student. .These are two extremes on the emotions that come along with the dialogue of race, one was mentioned by a student who stated that they do not think of race on campus and another who said that well race is who I am. Race is an emotional topic as it pertains to the individual for when the dialogue is brought up it tugs on strings that might be used to the tugging or on ones that have never been touched. There were students who stated that just the fact that race is not a dialogue on campus there are many emotions that they keep inside and let out when in the shower! This too is frustration. When the word emotional is dropped everyone thinks tears and tissues and for some students that is what it is. Then again there are the students who say that they have just given in to the frustration on fighting, crying, and talking only to get nowhere but this interview. Just

about all interviewed concluded that when it comes to race it is a more emotional from students of color on campus than it is for the white students, whatever the emotion.

Regarding student's perceptions of campus cultural by race, it appears that students respond to the perception of race with feelings of tension and find it difficult to adapt to college life at St. Olaf. Ancis, Sedlacek & Mohr (2000) examined the effects of race-ethnicity on campus, descriptions of the participants' behavior toward race, causal attributions about the source of the behavior, the participant's perceived interaction, and socio-demographic characteristics. African American participants confront more "racial-ethnic conflict on campus," feel more pressure to associate with labels, and face less equal treatment by the staff, faculty, and teaching assistants as compared to the white students who do not feel the racial tension of a diverse campus (Ancis, Sedlacek & Mohr 2000). Thus, a common response to diversity on campus is pressure and fear of acceptance.

The exclusion of race is caused by the public's belief in stereotypes that create the tension and rejection when it is turn into a dialogue, meanwhile, exposing those stereotypes can reduce the ideas about one another that prevent the development of relations. At least the people of color, in one study, said that they do not feel a great overall satisfaction with the college life and environment compared to the majority white student. This might be due to the fact that the school's community is not inclusive of them. Therefore, they feel excluded and do not experience college like the white students. Other research discovered that this exclusion is associated to lack of knowledge about the issue of race and as dialogue increased, fear of labeling decreased. The direction of the relationship of race seems to be the fear of holding one's position and still being able to express concerns about the issue of race. Taken as a whole, it appears that exposing the matter of race and its importance would generate an increase in the

acceptance of race in the general society. Opening the dialogue of race would expose the powerful effect it has on learning and understanding.

There is no concrete or apparent definition for the term race, although, there have been many attempts to give race a distinct meaning. Race is constructed not only by the conventions of social categorization, but also by the norms of social behavior, such as on St. Olaf's campus. According to a student of color, the structures of St. Olaf's academic programs are "separated." She said, "Most people who do major in American Racial and Multicultural Studies are mostly students of a multicultural background with a diverse experience." This student feels that class subjects should be structured in an integrated manner to decrease the alienation by the separations of classes from one another, such as English Literature or African Literature or Native Indian Literature. It would give students the chance to understand the relation they stand against each other, while other perspectives are brought in and create a multiplicity of frameworks of understanding.

Dialogue can strongly influence understanding and aid voicing of opinions. It allows two or more sides to come together and express their feelings and find a common ground of communication and understanding. With the question "Is race ever a topic of conversation among you and your friends?" Most respondents answered, "Yes, when the conversation takes place among diverse students." A few respondents felt it is easier to ignore the topic of race because it does not affect them personally. A student of color stated with confidence that race is a topic of conversation "all the time". She has been surrounded by race her entire life. Lifelong exposure to racial diversity has made race a comfortable topic of discussion for her. That student sees dialogue as a way to "clear the misconceptions of ideas and bridge the gaps." By having the conversation of race, knowledge can be gained to overcome the differences that separate races.

However, not all students feel the same way as her. Another student felt that the topic of race is a “loaded word”. Race carries heavy and intensive meanings for many students. “It is a sensitive topic... due to a society that teaches us to be respectful and not offend people,” replied a White student.

Based on outside research, the common response to different environments is to fear acceptance because the minorities of the campus do not have an environment of similar background as the white students (Ancis, et al., 2000). Adapting to the campus environment may not match the students of colors expected academic values due to the lack of support with the diversity that exists within the campus.

Challenger (2003) examined the importance for diversity during college admittance and having awareness of race on college campus. He said that, as a student’s own life contact with multicultural individuals increased, students were both more likely to perceive a “better learning environment” (Challenger 2003). This relationship remained after controlling for a sustainable dialogue interracially with students, staff, and faculty who meet weekly to discuss issues. They also found these campus dialogues have improved the campus environment while gaining knowledge from one another, along with teaching in new ways that allow a variety of opinions to be heard. Thus, according to Challenger, any contact with the dialogue of race is associated with reduced tension and rejection. However, since this study was observational, we cannot know if the students, staff, and faculty reduce subconscious judgments or is able to have a conversation in a sustainable manner.

Black Issues in Higher Education (2003) conducted an interview with Dr. Joe R Feagin, a noted scholar and graduate research professor in sociology at the University of Florida, about race and its impact that plays a factor on college campuses. *Black Issues in Higher Education*

posited many questions to account for stigmatizing the importance of race and the issues it brings in reality. One of the questions asked, “Why do people feel uncomfortable talking about race in this country?” (Black Issues in Higher Education, 2003). Additionally, the question about being politically correct influences the trouble with freedom of speech that we are guaranteed as a right in the United States.

In the first question, Dr. Feagin (Black Issues in Higher Education 2003) believes that race is still an unspoken matter because we want to cherish the good moments and deny that these problems exist still today. This question allows us to analyze the difficulty that students have not being able to bring up the subject of race without feelings of prejudice. Questions such as the problem with political correctness were an attempt to manipulate tension among the topic of race; meanwhile it is decreasing our rights to freedom of speech. Higher society created these terms to “reverse discrimination” and change the way individual are thinking on the general public (Black Issues in Higher Education 2003). Effective dialogue is required to initiate awareness of the impacts that race has on students, especially to students are not personally affected by race.

However, in response to this need, Dr. Feagin replied, “The more outspoken they are about racism in this society, or for that matter any of the problems in this society, the more critical, the more progressive they are, the more they become targets for removal from their positions in this White-normed environment” (Black Issues in Higher Education 2003). While education yielded some positive results regarding fear and rejection, in the long run, contact with the issue of race produced stronger results. Thus, Black Issues in Higher Education demonstrated that bringing awareness causes less rejection and fear.

The majority of the people interviewed noticed race on campus through multicultural organizations- HCO, CUBE, Karibu, Team Tibet, etc... One student of color said, "It's something really important because there are so many organizations on campus. For example, HCO, Team Tibet, etc... We come together under Harambe. We all come together and work together so others can recognize us on campus. We are generally the majority on campus." Many of the interviewee has expressed this same thought because if all the multicultural organizations were removed, the campus will only have Caucasian students only. The majority of the color students are involved in some sort of multicultural organization where they organizations are dominantly students of color. If more Caucasian students were more involved with these multicultural organizations, race would not have to be seen only through the multicultural organizations.

Multicultural organizations are not the only way people notice race on campus. The Student Support Services (SSS) and the Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach (MACO) offices are also places many interviewees have mentioned where they notice race. One Caucasian interviewee said, "You see a lot of groups and when I walk into SSS." These two spaces provide services for students of color and many students are found hanging around the provided spaces. However, some Caucasian students have wondered how come there are places like SSS and MACO for multicultural students. Some have felt it is not fair to have places like SSS and MACO because they cannot use their services.

In an article, 'Restructuring for Whom? Race, Class, Gender, and the Ideology of Invisibility' by Margaret L. Andersen published in the *Sociological Forum* (2001), the author

illuminates the concept of ‘color-blindness’ that plays a vital role in how race is approached, and connects to our research at St. Olaf. She states,

“We need new ways of thinking inclusively, such as recognizing the continuing significance of race and ethnicity, shifting our focus from the perspective of dominant groups and recognizing the multiplicity of experiences while placing this in the context of an analysis of privilege and power. Yet, I fear that the liberal framework of color blindness makes us silent in our thinking and speaking about race. Some groups in society have a more complete view, particularly of the system of stratification that buttresses their lives and the lives of others. Little wonder then that campus politics about multiculturalism can pit groups against one another, instead of helping students see the unifying components of social structural organization” (Andersen 198).

At St. Olaf, how do we understand the structural forces that make it possible for 14% of our campus to be minority students often involved in organizations that many of the 86% of white students are unaware of? Lack of awareness was a major factor noted by many students, and one white student was concerned why it was up to her personal effort to search for the programs on campus that were concerned with multiculturalism. On the topic of institutional involvement, many white students noted that they were unaware of programs like SSS and MACO, and if they wanted to know about such programs they had to search them out and ask many questions to find out where they were located and what they did. Some white students also noted feeling that they would not feel welcome in the spaces designated for multi-cultural organizations. Implying that the conversation of race is only for people of color. A barrier exists between understandings of inclusiveness. Many students involved in multicultural organizations wonder why more students, often the majority white audience, do not attend, and some white students are unaware such events and organizations exist, or are unaware their presence would be welcome.

The question, what is your opinion of St. Olaf's approach to multiculturalism, yielded a poignant response from one student, "what approach to multiculturalism?" The administrator interviewed stated that at St. Olaf, "its an old fashioned approach," operating from an "old fashioned notion about diversity. The approach to multiculturalism "needs to come from strength, not from the missionary model that it's the "right thing to do". Our language is out dated as well, and at St. Olaf are constantly talking about race, but speaking through a coded language to describe organizations like DCC or CUBE. He noted that this coding in our language and vocabulary is a way to cope with racial diversity but does not lend itself to honest conversation. The habit of speaking with 'politically correct' terminology is also a factor in suppression of dialogue he said.

In an interview between a white female interviewer and a black female student, it was said that on the St. Olaf campus, it is "easy to forget about race". For a campus that is 86% white, some white students have never had friends, or relationships with students outside their racial group. It is possible for a white student at St. Olaf to go four years without much or any interaction with students that are non-white. To compound the fact of a majority white campus, a senior white male student stated that, "I don't feel welcome in the conversation of race," and "don't like talking about it to be honest". The same student said he "would not feel comfortable," and felt that his "input wouldn't be wanted" in a dialogue or conversation on the topic. In comparison to this uncomfortable feeling noted by a white male student, a black female student spoke of her experiences, and added to the same question, "You don't think it makes me uncomfortable?"

We note earlier the importance of relationships in affecting how race is spoken about, and it is clear that there is much uncertainty, discomfort, and anxiety involved with many St. Olaf

student's ability to break through the barrier of discomfort. The theme of discomfort, nervousness of offending, and confusion over vocabulary, connected to the act of speaking in 'politically correct' terms was especially common for white students who were raised and educated in predominantly white towns, and school systems. The white students who were raised and educated in towns of greater racial diversity said that the conversation of race is "not an uncomfortable subject" yet at St. Olaf, it seems the topic is "not brought up unless there is a problem". This same student, a white male, transferred to St. Olaf after one year at a school on the east coast where he noted, "groups were more rigidly defined by socio-economic class". Although our study does not delve into the influence of socio-economic status, it is possible that with the discomfort noted by students on many sides of the racial spectrum, the connection and shared experience of race is perhaps a stronger indicator of friend groups at St. Olaf than socio-economic situation, respectively.

The theory of 'the veil' proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois is applicable to the experience of race on the St. Olaf campus and sheds insight on how we can understand differences and obstacles in communication. 'The veil,' is a thin porous material through which each race can see each other, but which nonetheless serves to separate them. This permeable membrane often creates a barrier which people on both sides are hesitant to cross. In an interview with an Associate Professor of Sociology at St. Olaf, it was brought up that, "white students often don't realize the risk taken by students of color being at St. Olaf". This unawareness sheds insight to help us understand possible reasons why white students do not also take such risks – which in our findings, is what will ultimately make a dialogue function. The professor interviewed also spoke about the importance of uncomfortable situations and tension to cause real growth, a notion also mentioned by an administrator from St. Olaf who said, "the absence of conversations

is the absence of real growth”. A path of least resistance is easily available to white students on the St. Olaf campus if they so choose. There is essentially no integration imposed on white students, whereas integration is the daily reality of students of color.

Another important theme addressed by students, administrator, and professor interviewed, was the need for more faculty to be comfortable talking about race, and comfortable managing conflict within discussion that may arise as a result of in-class discussion of race. As a collegiate institution, the classroom and opportunity for discussion is one of the most valuable resources we have. Yet, as some stated, the classroom is often a space where conflict and controversy is avoided on this campus. An important factor in the successful dialogue of race is the presence of safe environments to have intentional conversations. Students need to be comfortable in different environments, and more of what goes on in the world and on campus needs to be tied to the curriculum. There is a disconnect noted by many of our interviewees that what is often taught in the classroom is at a distance, and it is not often made personal and practical to the experiences local to us. For example, a discussion of immigration policy and the study of Hispanic culture in class vs. the discussion of the experience and impact of Hispanic immigrants in America and specifically, Northfield, MN. We study at a distance realities that impacts our daily lives on campus, but rarely in the classroom are these two experiences integrated.

The impact of race on the St. Olaf campus seems to be an importance to some and not to some. One student of color stated, “I don’t think race is a problem. I never thought about it... I feel like other people would think too. I think other people who are outside of SSS wouldn’t have a problem about race.” A white student said, “I don’t think there’s a major impact and it’s a liberal arts campus and the majority of people are open.” These two interviewees believe race

is not an issue and does not have to be addressed. Two other interviewees- one student of color and one white student saw the impact of race as “cultures coming together to celebrate diversity.” The impact of race can be seen from different aspect, but those who chose to see race see the impact of race on the St. Olaf campus and those who chose not to see race does not see the impact of race. One white student made a good point about the multicultural organizations’ celebrations, “[the celebrations are] opportunities to learn more during the celebration weeks/months [of each group].” Without race on the St. Olaf campus, there would be no celebrations and the campus will not be informed of other races. However, one faculty brought up the thought of taking away the foods, the entertainment, and the traditional clothing. What will the celebrations be like? This faculty does not believe this kind of celebration is always necessary and a celebration with dialogue of current issues would be better to bring awareness of the different multicultural groups on campus.

Within the walls of the classroom, one can learn a lot about race. Both students of color and white students have said they noticed the classroom does not have a lot of students of color. A student of color said, “Sometimes they really stand out. If you go to a class, for example: If I’m the only Asian in the class, the professor will know if I am there or not. I say sometimes too, because the minorities, some people doesn’t see us to who we are.” This has been a common statement many students of color feel characterizes the classroom setting. A white student said, “I look around the room to see how’s in the classroom and sometimes not just looking at race, but in general.” Therefore, sometimes scanning for students of other races is even done to see who’s in the class. This is sad because it shouldn’t matter which race or what race is in the classroom. The classroom’s purpose is to be used to educated and teach those who are interested in the subject matter. It shouldn’t have to be what kind of race is taking the class and to see how

many there are in the class. The type of class also determines who will be in the class too. For example, “It depends on the class. Chemistry-there are more white kids... If I was to take a class like Asian Studies or social work, I will see more Asian kids. Asian kids seem to take those courses. It does have to do with the school. It does have a lot of white kids. No matter what class you take, you’ll see more white kids,” said a student of color. Even this student of color had generalizations made about which courses students of color are more likely to take and not take.

In order to have a dialogue on race, some sort of relationship has to be built because it will help with the direction of the dialogue. Having a relationship with the person you’re talking to make the conversation personal and the conversation is able to grow. We found these types of relationships are not present in the classroom or among classmates, making the topic of race a taboo topic. We have to learn how to take it out of the academic setting and make it a personal conversation because that is how we will be able to have this conversation. We can choose to have this conversation in an academic setting if faculty, staff, administration, and students create a space where dialogues on race can be discussed without having to worry about offending others or creating conflict. This brings in the issue of responsibility because many of our interviewees believe it should not only be the responsibility of faculty, staff, administration, and students of color to educate the campus about race. Many people feel they have to be exemplars of their race because they do not only represent themselves but the whole race. With this said, everyone needs to take responsibility.

If many students on campus come from backgrounds and experiences of limited contact and interaction with races outside of their own, it must be the responsibility of higher education –

St. Olaf- to create a more realistic environment for student interaction and exposure to students with different experiences and backgrounds. Many people noted the importance of the college years being a form of preparation for life. The journey to racial diversity and integration on campus must also come from the genuine strength that different life experiences bring to the table – and benefits to all that different backgrounds offer. Yet tied to this is the necessity of spaces that facilitate honest discussion. Honest discussion is often messy – and as one student stated, “pretending like everything is hunky dory is not gonna work out”. It was talked about by students, an administrator and professor that the classroom is often only a place for comfortable conversations. Conversations about race go through the professor or through the material in an indirect manner. Even in classes about race, the topic is still tip toed around. Also, not all faculty feel comfortable talking about race, and some faculty have been here a long time, when St. Olaf was a mostly white establishment. Opening the discussion of race can be difficult, especially if there are many students of color in a class, and a professor is unsure of how to proceed with discussion.

Recently, some students in the Campus Ecology class put together a visual display of the distance professors travel to get to campus every day. Through an environmental lens, this project implied value to those professors able to live near St. Olaf. Yet, if the institution also values a student body and faculty that reflect the type of diverse backgrounds and experiences that can benefit the education at St. Olaf, it is necessary to acknowledge the possible difficulties in getting faculty to come to a small town in the Midwest. This example shows the importance of understanding conflicting objectives. In this example, the definition and role of college education is not only classroom academics. It is also an exposure to a variety of people whose lives have been shaped by a variety of experiences.

The dialogue of race, by several of those interviewed, was also mentioned as a conflict. Through conflict comes progress or so Karl Marx would argue. Marx believed that society is constantly trying to enhance itself and in order for enhancement to take place there will be an upheaval. He would believe that for the social change- in this case the dialogue of race on the St. Olaf campus- to take place there would have to be a discourse. Bringing this concept to the St. Olaf campus the challenge is for all on campus will have to step into discomfort, unknown territory, leave the idea of political correctness at the door and embark on a potentially incredibly emotionally charged journey. This discomfort and upheaval is necessary in order for this dialogue to be normal. St. Olaf is an institution that prides itself in pushing their students to the limits and therefore producing a well-rounded person, then, why not step up the challenge on having the dialogue of race.

Conclusion

A lotus is a flower found in the dirtiest waters in the world. At full bloom it is a hue of gorgeous pink and white and floats along on a green pad that many at times blends in with the dirty water it floats in. The dialogue of race on the St. Olaf campus is like that lotus. As mucky as this dialogue is the beauty lies in what this muck can produce. It opens up hearts, minds, and souls. It is that lotus that serves as a reminder that though the current state might be all muck there is beauty. When individuals think of race they think of the drama the dialogue will cause but if we took a step back we can start to see that there is more than just the mess. Why not walk away knowing more about the beauty of a different culture within your own borders. As we worked through this research throughout this semester we only realized how much we do not know. With each interview with each group meeting more information spilled through every

pore. This research taught the importance to celebration; the celebration of people. Without a doubt the dialogue of race is one that a work in progress at St. Olaf but instead of always entering it with fear or discomfort or hostility step in with a thought that “today I’m going to get something new.” Each day should end with a lotus just as the dialogue of race of the St. Olaf campus; a conversation that bring life, a beginning not rather than an end.

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