

Running Head: THE GREAT CONVERSATION

The Great Conversation: Investigating a St. Olaf Tradition

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Ethnographic Research Methods

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Abstract

The Great Conversation is a two-year, unique learning experience on the St. Olaf campus. This almost 30 year old tradition champions intense reading of Western literature, and thoughtful debate on themes and topics encountered in these texts. The Great Conversation has a formative influence on the rest of participants' experience at St. Olaf, both in academic and personal ways. But understanding the program can not occur only through this simplistic lens. By analyzing the program from theories of elite/elitism, and ethnocentrism, one can more fully comprehend the depth of this program.

Executive Summary

Abstract

The Great Conversation is a two-year, unique learning experience on the St. Olaf campus. This almost 30 year old tradition champions intense reading of Western literature, and thoughtful debate on themes and topics encountered in these texts. The Great Conversation has a formative influence on the rest of participants' experience at St. Olaf, both in academic and personal ways. But understanding the program can not occur only through this simplistic lens. By analyzing the program from theories of elite/elitism, and ethnocentrism, one can more fully comprehend the depth of this program.

Main Points

- The Great Conversation is a discussion-based program. Students engage in a high level of in-class communication based on the themes from each text. Due to this open dialogue students learn to share opinions freely and wrestle with contrasting perspectives. Students develop efficient abilities to have group discussion throughout the five courses.
- Both students and professors in the Great Conversation experience a high amount of reading and writing above and beyond that of their other classes.
- The Great Con has a formative influence on its students both academically and personally. The program has the potential to change students' academic major and interests because of its interdisciplinary structure. The program has the potential to influence students' personal worldviews because students encounter intense themes.
- Participants in the Great Con develop a common bond that spans across class years. The Con creates community for its students as they share both academic courses and first year dormitories. This community gives students social capital, a network of connections

based on shared experience. This group structure has the potential to become lasting friendships that carry through one's time at St. Olaf.

- Connors have adopted a healthy rivalry between the Ellingson and Kildahl cohorts. Each cohort bases this rivalry on the perceived academic rigor of one cohort versus the other, seen in differences in syllabus, amount of readings and papers assigned, and difficulty of exam questions. Designations of which Con is 'harder' seem arbitrary and varied to the point where 'everyone wins.'
- Con professors believe teaching in the Con to be more challenging than teaching their departmental courses because throughout the two years they will teach outside their area of expertise. The Con is also a more demanding commitment because of the extra reading and preparation required. However, they choose to teach in Con because it is rewarding and they appreciate the unique characteristics of Con students as some of the best on campus.
- The Great Con is an elite program at St. Olaf because it is set apart by a selective application process, a residential component and a specific academic rigor. St. Olaf College specifically states that Con is not an honors program, meaning that a Con education is not officially 'better' than a regular St. Olaf education. Con is sometimes perceived at St. Olaf to be elitist, meaning that those associated with the program adopt airs of superiority and think their academic experience is 'better' than those who are not in the program.
- The Great Con is similar to other national collegiate Great Books programs. The Canon Controversy has targeted these programs' focus on teaching the foundational works of Western civilization as being ethnocentric. We believe that the Con is not ethnocentric

because it acknowledges its Western focus, does not claim to include every great work, is careful not to overlook minority writers that have made important contributions to the Western tradition, and has a flexible syllabus that can be changed to include different texts each year.

Introduction

“Are you a Conner?” “Great! Ellingson or Kildahl?” These phrases are some of the few questions first years ask one another in the first few days of their collegiate experience. A “Conner” is the slang label given to participants in St. Olaf’s Great Conversation program. The answers to these questions are significant; in a sense they provide students with an initial way to frame the new people they meet and orient the initial direction of their time at St. Olaf. The Great Conversation is a residentially-oriented, academically rigorous, and discussion-based program that commits itself to exposing bright and driven students to a broad survey of foundational Western works. It defines itself in its promotional brochure as a “sequence of courses that introduces the major epochs of Western civilization to students through the direct encounter with great works of human achievement.” With both enthused advocates and critical detractors, the Great Conversation undoubtedly provides a unique educational experience to a select group of 120 incoming students each year.

History and Setting

The Great Conversation experience is a unique sub-culture at St. Olaf. Entrance into the program is determined by a completed application and essay that all incoming students have the option of submitting. The program annually admits an average of 120 first years, though the applicant pool is easily twice that number. These students are then assigned to live in one of two learning communities, called cohorts, based in the first year dorms of Ellingson Hall and Kildahl

Hall. Each of these cohorts is led by three professors for two years. Administrators purposefully create these intentional living communities, hoping to create a vibrant academic community out of the classroom and give students a shared support system.

At its core, the Great Conversation is committed to fostering intentional encounters with fundamental works of the Western tradition. Wanting students to interact with the West's unique intellectual heritage, the program "traces the evolution of literary and artistic expression, philosophic thought, religious belief and the sciences of human behavior in the modern world" through a succession of five academic courses (St. Olaf College 2009). These courses are roughly divided into epochs spanning the last two millennia: "Greeks and Hebrews", "Romans and Christians", "Medieval Synthesis", "New Forces of Secularization", and "Dissenters and Defenders". Professors utilize an assortment of intellectual media to instruct their students. While their academic department officially states that students "read epics, plays, essays, and philosophical, political, and religious documents", students also listen to symphonies and operas, analyze paintings and architecture, and watch dramas and documentaries (St. Olaf College 2009). Great Conversation professors have free reign over the syllabus but are guided by a tradition of certain Western works utilized by former professors in the program.

The Great Conversation is oriented around class discussion. Students are encouraged and expected to share their own ideas and reflections from the text as well as critically listen and respond to the contributions raised by others. Taking an interdisciplinary approach to education, the Great Conversation uses themes present in a variety of academic genres to interpret the works students encounter. Students participate by "challenging the ideas expressed in the works and challenging their own ideas as well, thus joining in the great conversation of men and women through the ages about perennial issues of human life" (St. Olaf College 2009). Students

not only contribute orally but also examine themes through literary analysis and research papers throughout the courses. Professors have flexibility in arranging different assessments including oral speeches, debates and written essay exams.

The Great Conversation was founded in 1980, having won a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in order to pilot the program at St. Olaf. In the past 28 years, the program has stayed true to its original design. Originally the program was comprised of a single cohort housed in Ellingson Hall and consisted of six total courses. The program has satisfied numerous general education credits from its inception, including three writing credits, a first year seminar and two History of Western Culture credits, among others. Originally the Great Conversation also offered a History of Science credit, but that has since been rescinded. The program has enjoyed continued growth in the last three decades. As the number of applicants increased, classes were expanded, and eventually five professors were recruited to lead a single cohort. In the academic year of 2005-2006, the Great Conversation expanded into its current state of two cohorts comprised of three classes each. The program is highly regarded by faculty on campus, and even the Admissions department recognizes the Great Conversation as it attracts prospective students to St. Olaf.

This Great Conversation program, often referred to as Great Con, is set in the larger contextual frame of St. Olaf College. St. Olaf is a private, four-year, liberal arts college located in Northfield, Minnesota. The college was founded in 1874 by Lutheran Norwegian immigrants, and vestiges of its origins still have a viable presence on campus through its students with Norwegian roots and adherers to the Lutheran faith. St. Olaf presents itself as a college of the Church, specifically the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and it seeks to foster conversations of faith in an atmosphere that “welcomes people of differing backgrounds and

beliefs” (St. Olaf College 2009). St. Olaf has a national reputation as being a liberal arts college that emphasizes academic rigor, integrity and cross-disciplinary collaboration in order to develop students' ability to think critically on global and local scales. St. Olaf draws over 3,073 students from the 50 United States as well as 30 international countries. St. Olaf prides itself on its commitments to study abroad programs, sustainability and its acclaimed music department.

Methodology

Our investigation was conducted with a primary focus on interviews and secondary focus on direct observation of Great Conversation classes. We began the research process by emailing Great Conversation alumni and discontinued students requesting a thirty minute personal interview. We emailed the Great Conversation director about our desire to conduct professor interviews and class observations who then emailed Great Con professors our inquiry. In order to reach first year Great Con students, we emailed four Junior Counselors, known as JC's, in Ellingson and Kildahl Halls our inquiry who then emailed their corridors and/or halls. We attached our IRB and project information statement to each initial email we sent. As alumni, professors and students learned of our research, they also voluntarily emailed us if they desired to participate. After our initial interview requests were sent out, further interviews were arranged as student volunteers emailed us who had heard of the investigation through word of mouth. We arranged interviews with alumni and discontinued students from various years, current students in the program, and roommates of program students using this method. Members of one class of sophomore students also emailed us to set up interviews after we observed their classroom and their professor notified them of our desire to conduct personal interviews and their opportunity to volunteer participation by emailing us directly.

As listed in our project information statement, emails, and IRB, we proposed to conduct

personal interviews, which ranged from fifteen to forty-five minutes each. Twenty-five total interviews were conducted over three weeks. We interviewed eight alumni from the classes of 2009 and 2010, eight current students from the classes of 2011 and 2012, two discontinued students from the classes of 2009 and 2010, four current Great Con professors, one director of Great Con who is also currently teaching, two roommates of current Conners and one Admissions counselor who is also an alum of the Great Conversation. All class years were represented in our interviews. One or both researchers were present at each interview depending on availability. We conducted the interviews according to previously prepared and approved subject interview questions catered to each subject group of alumni, current students, professors, et cetera. A tape recorder was used during the interviews when available, and we took personal notes both in conjunction with or in absence of the tape recorder. The interviews were conducted in semi-private settings including library study rooms, personal offices, and The Cage, a campus snack and coffee shop.

After the Great Conversation director emailed Great Con professors our inquiry to observe their classes, we received a number of invitations from professors by voluntary email response. Influenced by class scheduling and time constraints, we conducted in-class observation of two Great Conversation classes. Each class period was fifty-five minutes long. One was a first year class in their third Great Con course while the other was a sophomore class in their fifth and final course of the program. Two researchers were present during each class. We sat at the back of the classroom in chairs separate from the discussion table. We took personal notes during the class period. During one class we were formally introduced to the class by the professor. We then made a brief statement about our project's purpose, methods and intentions. We also verbally informed the students of our desire to conduct personal interviews outside of class time

and their opportunity to volunteer. During the other class we were not introduced, but following the class period the professor emailed the students notifying them of our desire to conduct personal interviews and their opportunity to volunteer participation by emailing us directly.

Questions

Initially we sought to investigate the Great Conversation program as a unique tradition at St. Olaf. We wanted to go beyond its formal structure and see the variation of experiences people had in Great Con as students, alumni and professors. We also decided to investigate the perceptions of roommates of Conners to see how the Great Con was viewed and experienced by people not in the program. As former members of the program we were aware going into our research that a unique bond is held between Conners due to their shared experience. Our own shared experience was a very positive one and we looked upon our two years in the program with nostalgia and good humor. However, we also recognized that not everyone involved in the program had these feelings, so we wanted to gather a wide range of perceptions and discover how other experiences were different than ours. We decided to pursue several broad topics in our interview questions, and we organized them to cater to each individual's relational identity to the program e.g. professor, director, student, et cetera. For both current students and alumni we were interested in why they were initially attracted to the program, if or how the program influenced their friendships at St. Olaf, and whether the program acted as a formative influence in their academic direction and their personal worldview. We also wanted to investigate their opinions about the Great Con classroom structure, discussion focus, and residential component. For students who were no longer in the program, we were particularly interested in their decision to leave the Great Con program and what influenced them to do so.

Professors and the director of the program were the next individuals we investigated. As

individuals holding positions of authority, we wanted to know how they viewed the Great Conversation and why they thought it was a valuable asset of the college. Are they able to sense its greater impact on students and on the campus? We were interested to learn what drew them to teach in the program, and the differences in the Great Con classes from their regular departmental courses in terms of overall atmosphere and workload. One of the many admired aspects of the Great Con is its commitment to interdisciplinary teaching. Each of the professors that comprise a teaching team often comes from a different department on campus. We wanted to know whether professors enjoyed this collaborative process as well as any potential obstacles it created.

It was also necessary to investigate the role of the curriculum in the program and the specific books that are covered in the courses. Over the course of our two years in the program we had been assigned around 70 works from our syllabus. How do professors negotiate decisions about which works to use? At its core, the Great Conversation involves professors and students interacting with texts. We wanted to know how the professors decide to frame each course and how they decided which authors to use and which authors to disregard.

As our research developed, we began to realize the program's function as a collegiate "Great Books" program. According to Tomcho, Norcross, and Correia's research on Great Books curricula, as of 1994 there were a total of 39 American colleges and Universities that offered a Great Books type program at their institution (1994: 92). Their findings made it clear the wide breadth of authors and texts such programs offer and the diversity of literary encounters college students have with the "great works" of the Western tradition. A common point of reference for the tradition of Great Books programs in the United States can be found in Hutchins and Adler's 54-volume collection entitled *Great Books of the Western World*.

Published in 1952, this was self-promoted as the canon of “the greatest works the West has produced” (Hutchins and Adler 1952). It is very interesting to compare the authors and titles from this volume with the authors and titles that are chosen by Great Books programs half a century later. Tomcho, Norcross, and Correia reported that the most commonly read texts of today’s Great Books programs are the Bible, Homer’s *Illiad*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Homer’s *Odyssey*, St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, and Plato’s *Republic* (1994). But while these texts might often find their way into a Great Books syllabus, there are literally hundreds of other texts, or portions of texts, that are currently being included by any particular program. Naturally, some institutions will value some authors over others. There has been national debate on the merits of including some authors at others’ expense, resulting in a controversial reconsideration of the value of the Western canon within higher education. We wanted to analyze professors’ perceptions of the controversy surrounding Great Books curricula, and their response to the Con’s place within this debate.

It was necessary to identify several theorists around which to frame our questions. Because the Great Conversation emphasizes discussion-based learning, we assessed its relationship to Habermas’s theory of the ideal speech situation. Next we analyzed the Great Conversation as an elite program within the context of the St. Olaf culture. The Con is an elite group, meaning it is a select group of people who have outstanding attributes, such as abilities, intellect, or specialized experience. But does its elite status continue over into an elitist attitude, or a consciousness of, or pride in belonging to this select or favored group. Because the Great Conversation is an elite academic program, Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction seemed to be an appropriate theoretical framework for the results of our investigations.

Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu studied how cultural resources, processes, and institutions hold individuals and groups in competitive and self-perpetuating hierarchies of domination” (Swartz 1997). Central to these relations is his idea of cultural capital. Cultural capital is prestige accumulated based on an individual's consumption practices. High cultural capital results from ‘consuming’ those tastes and behaviors considered to be elite. While Bourdieu considered cultural capital to exist in three states, the embodied and institution states are the most relevant to this discussion. The embodied state of cultural capital refers to “the ensemble of cultivated dispositions that are internalized by the individual through socialization and that constitute schemes of appreciation and understanding” (Swartz 1997). Some examples of this type of cultural capital are music, works of art, and works of popular culture. It is something you acquire consciously or not, but unlike material goods you can only consume cultural capital by understanding its meaning (Swartz 1997). Often, cultural capital is acquired based on one's background and changes depending on one's environment. The second state of cultural capital is the institutionalized state. This refers to one's educational credential system, or their qualifications. It is linked very closely with the labor market, as educational achievement and high cultural capital can help someone enter into certain elite fields and can lead to success in their career. Although there is not necessarily a correlation between cultural capital and economic wealth, people possessing cultural capital have the potential to access economic capital closed to others without it.

Cultural capital is also associated with Bourdieu's concept of social capital. Social capital is a network of connections people may accumulate. People are more likely to accumulate these connections and become a part of a network based on shared experience with others in the group,

including possessing similar tastes, behaviors, dispositions and consumption practices. Social capital reproduces itself as people internally adopt dispositions and are attracted to belonging to specific networks where others who don't share the same values are excluded. Like cultural capital, social capital often depends on one's background and can be passed down as one is more likely to adopt connections based on past experience.

When Bourdieu looked at the modern world, he saw an unequal distribution of cultural capital, and he saw the educational system as playing a major role in reproducing this inequality. The education system values the elite culture. “The educational system effectively defines certain traits and arenas as valuable, to the detriment of others” (Crossley 2005). So, when you receive an education, you learn about the valued type of culture. Because education serves people based on the framework of valued, or dominant culture, a student is more likely to be successful if he or she enters school with knowledge of that culture already established. They can then fit into the educational framework without having to adopt new skills or learn new expectations. Educational success and knowledge of the elite culture can benefit a person economically as well, because one will be familiar with the cultural capital that society has arbitrarily deemed valuable and will more likely receive access to the jobs working with such relevant information. In that sense, “the educational system functions to reproduce the class structure...because of the links between education and cultural capital” (Crossley 2005).

Bourdieu's ideas of cultural capital and social inequality as a result of education relate to our study of the Great Conversation. Does the Great Conversation teach and perpetuate the cultural ideas that Western Society has deemed valuable? Will the students who have experience being in the Great Conversation get a better education than their non-participating peers on the

basis of their acquired propensities, values, and skills as learned in the program? We want to know if the Great Con provides prestige on the basis of its potential elitist status.

Habermas

Jürgen Habermas set forth a sociological theory of knowledge called communicative rationality. He proposed that by engaging with others, mutually learning and thrashing out differences, we can arrive at a more rational and universal point of view (Crossley 2005). This is what is known as the Ideal Speech Situation. Habermas describes the ideal speech situation in which “actors are equally endowed with the capacities of discourse, [and] recognize each other’s basic social equality” (Calhoun 2007) When there is a free debate of ideas, the exchange of reason will eventually lead participants into a better or the best argument (Crossley 2005).

This relates to our desire to see how Great Conversation classroom discussion proceeds. We wanted to see if the classroom discussion supported free communication and recognition of all participants’ equality. We wanted to see if participants engaged in an ideal speech situation through debating and supporting the validity of each others’ ideas.

A Brief Overview of Findings

Through our interview research, we found that the Great Conversation has a strong reputation among students and professors at St. Olaf as being a longstanding, established approach to encountering foundational Western works, or as students put it, “books everyone’s supposed to read.” Students have the expectation going into the program that they will be exposed to a wide range of topics and important Western literature in a discussion-based setting. The opportunity to participate in Great Con is considered both rewarding and demanding. Students must stretch themselves to accomplish the quantity of readings and to write and discuss at a ‘quality level.’ Professors must also stretch themselves to work beyond their area of

expertise in order to teach in a broad survey course. They must also devote preparation time unlike they do for any other class. A professor stated that this opportunity is one “that encourages both students and faculty to throw themselves into the challenge for the sake of the program... they do it because learning is worth it for its own sake.”

Students in the Great Conversation have a reputation for being high achievers. The professors we interviewed explained that prior to teaching in the program they had heard that Con students are some of the very best on campus. After teaching in the program, they could only concur. As one said, “What keeps me coming back each year are the students; I’ve discovered that by and large, the students that self-select the Great Con have more intellectual curiosity than the average student. They’re interested in ideas. I like the fact that they not only work with ideas but play with ideas.” But students and professors agreed that the Great Conversation is not for everyone. For the program to be right for you, you should be ambitious and be willing to spend more time reading, writing and discussing than you would in another course. It really depends on one’s interest in analyzing literary and a large array of historical works from the Western civilization in an interdisciplinary discussion-based setting. As St. Olaf admissions counselor said, students must challenge themselves to go “above and beyond” in order to experience Great Con as the “epitome of a liberal arts education.”

We grouped our analysis of the Great Conversation according to three different experiences. First, we assessed the student experience of the Con as it relates to the themes of discussion, workload, formative influence, community orientation, and program rivalries. Second, we analyzed the professor experience in terms of their workload and interdisciplinary collaboration. Lastly, we looked at the Con from the point of view of non-participants and placed it within a national context. These perspectives considered the Con’s elite status and relationship

to the Western canon.

The Participant Experience

In the Classroom: Discussion-Based

Central to the Great Conversation is its commitment to being a discussion-based course. The program is organized to be taught in a seminar style, emphasizing the exchange of ideas among all class participants. The grand majority of students we interviewed enjoyed the opportunity to be in small groups and to have lively, invigorating and stimulating discussion. One alum told us she enjoyed being in this college class the most because of its foundation in discussion. Students have the opportunity to learn from other students and professors based on the group's varied reactions to texts and synthesis of themes. We found in our investigation that there is a progression of students' ability to have group discussion throughout the five courses. One alum remembered her initial tendency to only direct questions to the professor, and one current first year student lamented the fact that many classmates try to dominate the conversation. However, by the last course there is usually a highly cooperative level of discussion. This was apparent to us as we observed a sophomore class in their final Great Conversation course.

During our class observations, it was apparent that each class period usually focused on either a specific text or a specific set of themes. When this is viewed within Habermas's framework, the purpose of the Great Conversation becomes very clear. Students are supposed to interact with one another about their ideas and questions from the text in order to arrive at a better understanding of what the text is saying. In the sophomore class, students were discussing a novel they were reading. In looking back over our observation notes, we realized that we had written the following: "there's an idea that they're trying to come to one comprehensive

conclusion – all are trying to wrestle with the concepts in a way to find an ‘answer.’”

Interestingly enough, this comment was written before we were aware of the ideal speech situation, making a compelling argument for the existence of this level of discourse in Con. We believe that Con unconsciously strives to live up to Habermas’s ideal.

However, not everyone had such a positive view of how class discussions normally proceeded. Some students believe that the class environment is 'too open' and limits the sharing of opinions because so many people are vying to contribute. One alum thought there should have been more negative reinforcement and acceptance of disagreement in the classroom. While some students and alumni praised the capability of Con students to lead natural discussions, allowing the interests of students to be the classes’ driving force, others wished the professors would exert their authority more often. One alum said professors “need to step in more [and] be more of a regulator” during discussion in order to stay on topic. He thought students “should be held accountable for what they say.” His desire to veer away from discussing personal stories and “just talk and learn about the text” is upheld by a professor who stated his goal for discussion is to “let the texts directly influence and lead to conversation.” But regardless of whether it is the students or the professor who drives the discussion, the importance of the text as central to discussion remains unchallenged.

In the Classroom: Workload

To specify the intensity of demand that is experienced by students and professors in Con, we investigated what people considered to be the program's most challenging element. Many students expressed the Con's high amount of reading and writing assigned as above and beyond that of their other classes, as well as the classes their friends took like First Year Writing. Students noted the challenge in trying to keep up with all the work and balance their other

classes and extracurriculars with the stress of Great Con. Many students voiced opinions of the intensity of Great Con but balanced them with opinions of its merit. One alum praised the professors for paying attention to students' abilities, saying "the professors were in tune to the work we could do." One current sophomore stated that Con is "time consuming, frustrating, and full of high expectations, but I like them, and it's fabulous." This attitude of loving a challenge is exemplified in her statement that "it's exciting when you succeed." Students noted that it helped with their skills of writing, reading, discussion and confidence in speaking opinions. One alum noted that the benefit of receiving GE credits is reflected in the demanding workload, and another noted that she developed an attitude of preparedness during Con where eventually she knew how much she could read and lived by the idea that "you'll get out of it what you put into it." One alum voiced his satisfaction that he learned a lot in all that the Con covered, but he also said "I don't know how much I've retained" in that the quality of his knowledge varies from text to text, and he summed it up as "good cocktail party material." Clearly with the amount of material the program covers it is not feasible to provide great depth in addition to breadth. Speaking to this phenomenon, one alum said: "They gave us a taste of western canon, but they didn't give us everything. [They said] "after this you'll be able to talk about all of this at a cocktail party, you'll be *the* person, you can hold your own" which is true, but I can't go into depth about what we read. It was a nice overview."

Some students remarked on the frustrating nature of Con that you either couldn't complete some of the works or weren't assigned whole books to read. One alum said that the reading was "too extreme" because they "didn't even discuss it all in class." She said that the students were basically forced to skim because of the sheer amount and that she would rather have had main points or excerpts to read. A discontinued student agreed, saying the program was

“overzealous with the amount of material we could cover.” One alum disliked being assigned excerpts and wanted greater depth to spend ample time to complete books. He wanted to focus on fewer books in order to have a firmer grasp on their themes instead of skimming just to achieve breadth. This differentiation of opinions demonstrates the theme of variations within the Con experience.

Students often complained that there was simply too much to accomplish in terms of reading, and that academic expectations were much higher than their other classes at St. Olaf. Because of the course’s high academic standards, the program is certainly never taken with the intent of improving one’s GPA. One student commented that even though Con was harder with its higher expectations than his other classes, he still felt like he got lower grades for doing harder work. The grand majority of students still found the experience worth it to compensate for worse grades, though there certainly were students who dropped the program because of the worse grades. It wasn’t worth it. They continue in the program because the learning is worth it; it is done for its own sake.

Formative Influence

Two of our interview questions toward students and alumni referred to the program’s ability to impact students. First we asked if the Great Con influenced students’ academic direction and/or their personal worldview. We received a variety of responses regarding the perceived impact on academic major and interests, with no overwhelming theme. The focus of the courses either caused students to pursue a new major or discipline, caused them to decide against majors, or seemed to have no evident academic impact. For example, there were students who believed Great Con steered them towards the disciplines of History and English, and students who decided to pursue Philosophy, Political Science, Religion and

Sociology/Anthropology majors as they gradually realized their affinity for certain themes covered in the program. Other students stated that the Great Con steered them away from certain majors after getting a taste of them through the readings. One discontinued student said that “Con completely made me realize I had no interest in English and History.” On the other hand, some students commented that they entered and left the program with the same academic interests. For example, one current first year explained that he had approached the program because he wanted to study humanistic writings as a supplement to his science major. An admissions counselor validated this varied approach to Great Con's academic influence by stating that they promote the Con to prospective students who voice academic interests that match the program or as a complement to any major because the program “doesn't exclude non-liberal arts majors. It can be a great match of science and human interest.”

Secondly, we explored how Great Con can have a personal impact on students' lives. The responses truly varied. One student reported that texts she encountered caused her to solidify her political identity, one explained how the program helped him to ground his faith, another discovered a great affinity for Jane Austen novels, and several shared that the program has fostered introspection and caused them to contemplate and question matters of theology, morality and humanity. Some students thought that all works impacted them, and one student was unable to name ways in which he had been personally affected. Perhaps one of the most significant ways that the program is able to change students is that they learn how to respect ideas and points of view other than their own. One student, in reflecting on his two years in the program, explained that he has learned the importance of respecting others even if he disagrees with them.

Essentially, the Great Con is a teaching experience that fosters development students'

interests and abilities. It also is a lesson in identity as students discover who they are based on their relationships to Con texts and themes. Through the program Connors are exposed to diverse views. This arena for open dialogue fulfills St. Olaf's goal of fostering respect among its students "for the dignity of others, despite differences in our beliefs." One alum echoed this thought and stated that the classroom's atmosphere of discussion causes students to recognize that all participants, regardless of their different perspectives, have valid points. In reading Great Con texts, students encounter themes to which they may have not been previously exposed.

Synthesizing the complexities of these themes forms in students a skeptical and active mind that seeks out answers. By learning to debate ideas with each other students learn how to take a healthy skeptical approach to all sources of information they encounter. Students learn to not take things for face value but face the challenge of exploring texts with myriad possibilities, not necessarily a set answer. Within this framework individuals are prepared for future social and academic life. Students are given the power and confidence to share their opinions. The Great Con program helps them learn not only about Western civilization but how to navigate being a good student. They encounter previously addressed unwritten rules and learn how to healthily balance a rigorous academic workload with acknowledgment of their own limitations and course requirements.

The Social Experience: Common Bond/Community

The majority of students commented on the Great Conversation's community. Because of a shared interest in the program's material and the first-year residential component, Connors tend to develop strong ties with one another that deepen over their time in the program. One alumni stated that "people became really good friends with each other through Con" based on the "camaraderie of consistently having a class together and living together," and a current

sophomore stated that relationships in the program are dynamic, growing over the course of the program. These friendships often extend beyond the two years of classes, and several students commented on the unique bond and enduring connection they shared with participants in the program even after it had finished.

At first, Connors associate with each other academically. The community is built through consistent class experiences, creating an intellectual bond among students within the program. Because the program is intentional in fostering community, it's often easier to build friendships in class because of the amount of time spent together. One alumn said when "you spend five classes together you get to know them better than others because it's rare to spend five classes with the same people." Con students learn how to work well with each other through the two years and form a cohesive academic community. The effect of having the same students in the same type of class five terms in a row struck students as more intimate than other academic opportunities, especially because of the friendly and open class environment.

Secondly, the first year residential community of the Great Con also fosters social development. Many students stated that their first year living was improved by the program's presence in the dorm. Because of the shared academic experience, one alum said that the "class opened up the possibility of getting to know people in Ellingson because you knew so many people on every floor." The collective learning environment allows students to carry on interesting conversations outside of the classroom and to help one another process and understand what is being learned in class. Connors know that people in their first year dorm will probably have similar intellectual interests. Because you get to "meet people who identified with you" it is easy to form lasting groups of friends.

Others stated that these two factors were mutually enhancing. Getting to know people

outside of the class in a social atmosphere made class more enjoyable and improved their ability to interact. Past and present students also commented on how the intentional living situation aided their time *in* the classroom. Being in the same dorms provided students with convenient help with homework, the ability to work out ideas and continue conversations beyond the classroom, and made it easy to form study groups. One current first year said that “if you want to start a study group you just walk next door,” and according to the reports of one first year who is not in program, there is a 'Con corner' in Kildahl's common student lounge where Conners hang out and study together. One sophomore said that her Con study group is full of close, respectful friends who don't look at her differently for being in Great Con. This close bond shared by Con participants was referred to as a 'family' several times throughout interviews. Students appreciate this support because “people get it”; they understand the Con experience.

The intense academic and residential community of Great Con provides its students with a level of social capital not received in other programs. As we previously introduced, social capital is a network of connections people may accumulate. The social capital students receive by participating in the Con is a network of peers centered on the same coursework and same dormitories. We believe that the Great Conversation gives more social capital to students than they would ordinarily receive through the separate experiences of taking departmental classes and living in the dorms because of the comprehensive shared experience. After all, the foundational element of social capital is shared experience. Theoretically, the Con network has the best potential for establishing a friend group. Students become friends with others they wouldn't necessarily be friends with if they hadn't been part of the Con because their lives are more entwined.

The idea that people within the Con seem to 'get it' implies that people outside of the Con

do not 'get it'; they do not understand where Con students are coming from. Those outside of Con may have trouble understanding aspects of the program, like its workload and community events, and its little nuances, such as an affinity for making quirky jokes about Western authors and texts. If there is this disconnect, this would imply that the Con social network offers its students a type of support they are unable to find elsewhere. This realization, whether it be conscious or not, contributes to the development of a collective identity. There is even a name to call this identity: a Conner. Students adopt this practical nickname early on in their time at St. Olaf, but they spend the next two years imbuing it with meaning.

The Social Experience: Rivalry of Difficulty

As mentioned before, the Great Conversation houses participants in the Ellingson and Kildahl first year dorms. During our interviews we asked current students and alumni if they sensed a rivalry between the Ellingson and Kildahl cohorts. We found that most students believed that there was a rivalry between the two sections but thought it was a fun and healthy part of the experience rather than being too intense. Overwhelmingly, we found that students and alumni believed the rivalry was based on who did more work. Ellingson Conners from all years were quick to establish that they had an immense, rigorous workload and that the Kildahl participants had it easy. Senior class alumni had nicknamed Kildahl “The Great Chat,” while junior alumni explained that they had called Kildahl the “Slacker Con.” One Ellingson alum stated that “we did a lot more work than them to our gain,” while one current Kildahl sophomore stated that her cohort is “more legitimate and well-rounded.” One ‘Kildahlian’ supposed that it depended on the semester, while another laughed and admitted he thought that his was “definitely the easier of the two Cons.” Students who commented on these distinctions referred to differences in each cohort's syllabus, amount of readings and papers assigned, and difficulty of

exam questions. One alum stated definitively that if you asked this of any Conner in Ellingson or Kildahl that “both would say their Con is harder and their professors are better.” One alum thought that “each Con thought they had the best situation for opposite reasons” of difficulty and rigor versus free and flowing. He thought this attitude resulted in an atmosphere where in each cohort “everyone was the winner.”

The Professor Experience

Teaching in the Great Conversation provides an environment where professors mature in their teaching styles through cross-departmental collaboration and encounter challenges in teaching outside their department. The intimate interdisciplinary approach professors experience in Great Con mirrors that of the Con students, encountering a myriad of topics in any give course supplemented by an intense workload and community. This investment in team teaching amounts to a smaller conversation within the Great Conversation program.

Firstly, as we noted before, the Great Conversation aids students in personal and academic formation. In the same way, the Con offers professors an opportunity for personal development through close academic collaboration. Because professors teach within the same cohort over two years, working alongside and observing their colleagues’ teaching methods provides the potential for mentorship. One professor said that as a Great Con faculty member she “learned about being a professor” from her peers as they served as “models of what a professor could be.” Often, cohorts are made up of a combination of veteran and ‘rookie’ Great Con professors, furthering the potential for mentoring relationships to develop.

Like students, professors are also exposed to a plethora of topics housed in multiple disciplines. This happens in two different venues: professors are able to learn about each other’s area of specialty, and they accomplish all of the readings assigned to their students. Each

professor is given the opportunity to offer their expertise when it relates to a theme or period covered in the readings. These plenary lectures both model different lecturing styles and give professors a better understanding of each others' research. Also, in the program, students read works that they wouldn't normally read otherwise. Similarly, one Great Con professor stated, "There were all of these books that I knew I should read and I knew I wouldn't read unless I taught them."

Finally, as already explained, the Great Conversation is characterized by its intense workload. Students are not the only participants who face this challenge, as professors are also called upon to work above and beyond regular class demands. In fact, workload was one of the reasons cited for why some St. Olaf professors choose not to teach in the Con. Cohort meetings occur at least once every week, and all Great Con professors devote a week at the beginning of the summer to discuss forthcoming syllabi. Professors also have to be prepared to teach an entire range of topics that aren't their specialty. One professor stated that one of the most challenging aspects about teaching in Con is, "the sheer amount of preparation because you're hardly ever a faculty member in the field you're an expert in." As previously mentioned, professors must complete all of the course reading, and as any student would tell you, this takes a great deal of time. Unfortunately, professors are not given more time to prepare. They also attend evening commitments like group lectures and field trips outside of their usual work day, which they then must fit into their regular schedule. But in the end, professors, like their students, find the Con to be a very rewarding albeit very time-consuming experience.

The Outsider Experience

Elite Status

As previously stated, an elite group is a select group of people who have outstanding

attributes, such as abilities, intellect, or specialized experience. Elitism, on the other hand is a consciousness of, or pride in belonging to this select or favored group. One idea we wanted to analyze was how the unique nature of the Great Con program functions to set it apart as an elite group at St. Olaf. At the most basic level, the Con's elite status originates in the way the program is framed: it is a selective program that only admits a certain number of student applicants, it involves a housing component, and is acknowledged to be academically rigorous.

These factors share similarities to an honors program. Typically, an honors program provides alternative or supplemental learning within a larger institution of higher education. Honors programs often require an application for admittance, feature students who work closely with faculty, and are expected to perform at higher academic standards. Many honors programs also include a living community and involve students for multiple years of their college education. Comparatively, the Great Con embodies this framework and according to one professor, "intellectually enthusiastic students [that are] better than average."

But despite the similarities, St. Olaf does not call the Con an official honors program because it would indicate that Con is an exclusive program that is more challenging than the St. Olaf education as a whole. St. Olaf considers *all* of their students elite and consider the general St. Olaf education to be an honors experience. Calling Con an honors program would contradict this message, so they are willing to call it 'unique' but discourage the perception that Con is somehow better than the 'regular' St. Olaf experience.

Clearly the Great Conversation is elite is because it is somewhat set apart from other academic experiences during the first two years of college. As we said earlier, elitism is a consciousness of, or pride in belonging to a select or favored group. Sometimes Con's separation from the general St. Olaf education is confused for elitism, and its identity as an elite group is

assumed to be pretentious. For instance, in talking with a student who had not participated in the program, she explained that she perceived Connors as being slightly self-righteous, pseudo-intellectuals, who consider themselves to be the “real liberal arts of the college”. This becomes a loaded claim, especially when we were told by an admissions counselor that she considers the Great Con to be the “epitome of the liberal arts.” A liberal arts education is typified as a selective education that emphasizes an intimate classroom experience where you really work alongside professors to encounter a wide variety of topics. The Great Conversation does that to an intensified degree, within an already esteemed liberal arts college.

Professors and students both inside and outside of the program say and seem to understand that the program is different than the average St. Olaf classes and academic programs. Although the promotional material and program descriptions do not claim to offer a more academically rigorous learning environment, the common understanding is that this is what students receive as a whole. While one of the things that makes the con elite is the academic abilities of its students, when the professors start talking about con students being 'better', the idea of elite blends into elitism. All of our research found that professors rate the students as better than average, and students rate professors as better than average. The fact that participants compare their experience to other classes, students, and professors on campus, and are often very positive about their experience could indicate that they believe participating in the Great Con gives students a 'better' academic experience than the students who were not in the program. This is essentially an elitist attitude.

The concept of the Con being elite continues to blend into elitism when you consider the generally acknowledged idea that the Con is not right for everyone. While this is often not due to an individual's academic stature, but rather their learning preferences or academic interests, the

fact that the program cannot be for everyone sets the Con further apart. Great Con students are aware of their academic prowess due to their ability to get into the program which is said to be harder than others on campus, and they take great pride in their program experience. But perhaps con students do not take their perceptions to their logical conclusions. They admit that their work is harder than in other courses. They say that the professors are some of the best they've had at St. Olaf. And they recognize that their peers in con operate at a high academic level. But for the most part, the grand majority of con students stop there; they have a healthy pride, one that does not intentionally seek to put other students down. As a whole, Conners tend to be enthusiastic about their experience, but enthusiasm has the potential to be misunderstood, or as one alum put it, "there might be a fine line between being exclusive but also being interested in a really neat program that they're a part of."

Perhaps this is why perceptions do exist on campus that Conners are somewhat elitist. For example, one JC commented about his perception of Conners in the dorm, saying, "I personally don't like it when people who are in the program act like they're something special or that they're so different from another person." Continuing this theme, one discontinued Conner thought that academically, "the entire program itself seemed pretentious" and that "discussion encouraged egocentricity of the people talking in class."

Based on all of this information, we have found it to be very difficult to establish the *nature* of elitism within Great Conversation. Yes, the program is elite, and yes, the students have a very high opinion of their program. But if anything, we would stress that Conners are in a complicated position. For one thing, St. Olaf defines the Great Con as "not-an-honors-program," and interviewees reiterated this position to us during interviews. But Conners also realize that they are a *different* group of students. Each Conner must negotiate for themselves whether or not

these two ideas will lead them to adopt an air of conceited superiority towards non-Conners on campus. We feel that most Conners would have a difficult time explicitly acknowledging their program as elitist. Perhaps that is why the rivalry of the cohorts centers around the relative difficulty of each section. This rivalry provides an arena where students can explicitly acknowledge the intensity of the program without fear of being considered pretentious. And we do not think students in the program are comfortable with the thought of being considered pretentious by the general St. Olaf population. Are some con students pretentious? Probably, but we feel it would be an overgeneralization to say that Conners are pretentious as a whole.

The Western Canon

The relationship between the Great Conversation and elitism is further negotiated in another, larger arena—a national arena. When we began to research the Great Conversation at St. Olaf, we were curious to see how it fit into a greater national context of Great Books programs. As we investigated Great Books programs, we came across the issue of the culture wars in education, and more specifically, the Great Canon Controversy. Essentially, the culture wars were a national debate concerning the historical emphasis that was being placed on Western culture and civilization in institutions of higher education. The way the canon controversy fit into this was that people began to question if it was appropriate for college students to be exposed to “a common body of knowledge...[that was purported to be] the best writings of the Western tradition” (Butterworth 1992). When something is presented as ‘the best’, that assumes that something else is ‘not best’. In the case of the canon controversy, critics claimed that the authors included in the canon’s list of works were dominated by dead, white, Western men, with hardly any multicultural or minority representation. This was found to be problematic on epistemological and political grounds. It claimed to present universals in knowledge and

experience; critics asked how the Western experience could claim to be a universal experience. Secondly, critics claimed this exclusion delivered a message of oppression, and voices that had previously been silenced in a physical sense were now being silenced in a literary one (Casement 1996: 50). Collegiate Great Books programs were forced to respond to the criticisms, and in the 1990's they began emphasizing global culture and a more multicultural curriculum. With this information in mind, we were curious to see how the Great Conversation placed itself in the context of this debate.

When we began our interviews we were unaware of the intensity of the canon controversy. So as researchers, we did not to ask students about their opinions of a controversy surrounding the Con curriculum. We posed several questions about whether or not they like the books they had read/were reading in Con, and in some instances these comments were later found to be relevant to the canon controversy. We did, however, include a question to the professors as to how they fit about the Con curriculum in light of the 'Great Canon Controversy'. First of all, each of the professors we interviewed was aware of the debate, and their ease of response indicated they had considered the issue before. They began by acknowledging the preponderance of dead, white, male authors within the Western canon. However, within the Con, the professors do not want students to think that women were not thinking and writing during the time periods of study. Women are important to the canon, and Con professors want to include them, not based on their gender but because of the merit of their work. As one professor stated, "We have to be especially clear about making sure we are alert to neglected women writers who *are* very good writers and *have* made important contributions." It seemed like the Great Con professors had been successful in this endeavor, as one alum mentioned to us that there "seemed to be a definite attempt to make sure that we weren't just reading white male authors." Professors

value diversity within the Con curriculum, but ultimately they all acknowledge the necessity of difficult decisions and trade-offs in choosing works. Secondly, each professor explained that they see the Great Conversation as really ‘A Western Conversation.’ The director said that the term “*The Great Conversation*” was chosen back in the early 80’s before the canon controversy really erupted. One professor explained it this way: “By putting a definite article instead of an “A” or indefinite article, [it] implies that there is a single one. Even if you call it “great” in the sense of quantity, that ignores the fact that the Chinese have had a conversation much longer than ours. And if you make it a qualitative thing, it doesn’t sound good when you say “the great”, that you’re saying all the other ones, you know...[are somehow worse]”. St. Olaf’s Great Con program is not trying to capture all great works of the world or even all the books some consider to be foundational Western literature. So while it might be more accurate to call it “The Western Conversation”, or as one professor said tongue-in-cheek “some pretty-good-western-monologues”, both the director and the professors asserted that due to tradition it would probably stick with its original name. Some might think that this is an elitist position to take. We do not think it is intentional. They explicitly mention that they are only using the name “The Great Conversation” because of the longstanding tradition of the program on campus. Additionally, the director of the program mentioned that they will be doing a comprehensive review of their program during the 2009-2010 academic year, and they plan to further discuss whether or not the title should change to “The Western Conversation.”

As we said earlier, we were not expecting students to mention this topic in their interviews. But diverging from the general trend, a unique outlier in our interviews surprisingly gave direct opinions on St. Olaf’s place in the canon controversy. When discussing the syllabus, this alum, though unprompted, passionately stated his belief that the Con is meant to focus on

“the best works of Western thought.” He saw the Western tradition as being more developed than other ethno-geographical conversations. Because of that he didn’t think it was wrong to only read Western thinkers, saying, “What’s so wrong with reading a particular school of thought? And I think, what was so wrong with Western thought? *Just* studying Western thought, that’s not wrong. You don’t need to try to amend it because of developments or politics or some sort of notion that it’s arrogant to only read Western thought.” As he continued his interview, we found that his views paralleled some of the professors’ approach to the debate. He upheld that books should be read based on their merit, and not the background of the author. He continued, “As a matter of fact I think it’s a bit offensive to try to include these token works from other parts of the world just for the sake of doing that. If it’s because they offer a great perspective or even a sort of difference and there’s a dichotomy between Western thought I think that’s great, let’s do it, but let’s not do it for the sake of doing it, let’s do it because it has meaning.” He also believed that St. Olaf’s program is a distinctly a Western conversation, but that neither the name nor the curriculum should be changed. He expressed his concerns, saying: “I feel like that each year Con sort of is getting more liberal in that sense, it’s getting too inclusive of other works. That’s the best way to put it, I fear it becoming too inclusive. And I think that would be a travesty to The Great Conversation. Yep, I call it *The* Great Conversation. Don’t read into it more, I call it The Great Conversation because that’s what it’s called, do we really need to analyze it, do we really need to think is it *A* Great Conversation?”

Clearly this student harbors an air of superiority and elitism in terms of the program’s Western content. However, we would like to stress that these sentiments were *not* shared by the other nineteen students we interviewed. We included this alum’s opinions because they serve as a stark contrast to the non-ethnocentric position the Con strives to occupy. We believe that if the

Con was a tool that effectively fostered cultural superiority and bred the ground for intellectual oppression, more than one interviewee would have expressed the types of sentiments mentioned above. The Con positions itself against the canon controversy. Despite its name, it does not claim to be a universal program covering all influential works of human history. It self-identifies as a Western conversation and does not try to deviate from that role. Additionally, the Con professors do not ignore the argument that programs like the Con have the potential to be used as a means of furthering oppression. One professor responded to this argument by saying, “if you want to advance beyond something you’ve got to understand it...the fact of the matter is that it was the white male authors who..., rightly or wrongly, fairly or not, had the works that were read, discussed and kept in circulation, and in order to understand that tradition, you have to read it.” In order to be able to fully participate in the debate about what should belong in the canon, this professor explained that it was necessary to have a knowledge of what the traditional canon was. This professor even initiates this debate in his own classroom: “Often I raise the question in classes, ‘does this belong in the Great Conversation? Why or why not?’ And there’ll be some dispute.” The Con does permit flexibility within the context of Western tradition. The syllabi for each cohort and each year are never fixed, and there are never any particular works the administration decides the students must encounter in Con. The professors have free reign to select new, relevant works, strengthening the point that they do not believe in the superiority of one list or one knowledge. Based on this research, we believe the St. Olaf’s Great Conversation should not be accused as domineering, ethnocentric program.

It was a natural fit to apply Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital when discussing Great Con’s elite status within the context of the Western canon. Great Con produces cultural capital by instilling students with a foundational knowledge of Western texts which have been

the elite, dominating socio-political forces of civilization. However, in Great Con, the specific texts are coupled with a holistic learning experience. Students acquire skills of critical thinking, analysis and the ability to write and discuss texts at a high academic level. These are all elite skills. The attainment of knowledge of Western civilization and practical skills to succeed in higher education gives Con students cultural capital.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction emphasizes the potentially negative effects of the Great Con at St. Olaf. The specific cultural capital Conners receive could cause students to be seen as exclusive and isolated from the greater college culture. It could work to reinforce stereotypes of Conners as pretentious students only concerned with academics. But the Great Conversation program is not unique in endowing students with cultural capital; as an institution St. Olaf College does as well. Students both in and outside of the program participate in a private, liberal arts education. Higher education does tend to reproduce privilege, and a school like St. Olaf that is recognized as a rigorous undergraduate institution is all the more likely to reproduce elite skills and specialized knowledge to prepare its students for the future. Students who are not in the program also learn to think critically, analyze texts, and write good papers by taking other courses. It could be argued that Con students receive slightly more cultural capital if their experience is indeed 'better' than the classes that could be taken in place of Con, and, Con students will graduate from the program having been exposed to more schools of thought and foundational works of literature than non-Conners. But it could be argued that such knowledge does not have enough presence in today's mainstream U.S. society to be of a concrete advantage to Con students.

So, do Conners get a better education than other students at St. Olaf because learning is focused on dominant culture and intense skill development in reading, writing, discussion, and

critical thinking? The answer is, it depends. As we have conducted our research on the Great Conversation, one thing has been very clear, and that is participants' experiences with the Great Conversation include variations. For some students, they were sorry it had to end at all, while others who had come to realize that it simply was not for them left without completing the program. And in the end that is really what determines whether students are able to get a better education because of the program: the type of each individual student. For students that are ambitious, willing to take on a challenge, and are willing to spend more time reading because of their interest in the types of texts Con offers, then yes, this student will get a better education than if they had simply taken classes with equivalent GEs their first two years. Each interviewee was adamant about needing to fit well with the program, that it is not for everyone. So if you are not interested in the topical focuses of Con, struggle with extensive amounts of reading, and really prefer to live in a text rather than survey it, then you probably would not get a better education by being a part of the program nor would you receive more cultural capital, because you would not enjoy it and would have no intrinsic motivation to excel and learn in the course. Only if you are willing to put in the time and effort will you reap the benefits of participating in the educational experience.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we have ultimately realized that the Great Conversation is a multifaceted experience that is difficult to fully capture even within single research paper. Essentially, the Great Conversation provides its students with a discussion-based classroom experience where they are expected to work hard and think critically. Students are changed through this process in academic and personal ways that affect them throughout their time at St. Olaf. Students are a tight-knit group due to their shared academic and living experience. But, the Great Conversation

cannot be fully understood just from the students' perspective. For professors, the program is an equally difficult but rewarding time-investment where they are also challenged to work above and beyond the expectations of a normal departmental class. As professors learn how to teach with other faculty members over a two year period they develop mentoring relationships and learn from each other in the process. Finally, the Great Conversation needs to be understood in the context of the greater St. Olaf community as well as national Great Books programs. These two outsider perspectives provide a thicker understanding of the program's elite status and position within the canon controversy.

When we decided to do our research on the Great Conversation, we were unsure of what to expect. We began our research from the standpoint of content alumnae wanting to analyze the variations in Great Conversation experiences. We quickly realized that contentment and the Great Conversation do not always go hand and hand. Upon completion of our research, We have come to see that the program is more complicated and nuanced than we ever thought as students. On a personal level, we also struggled in our investigation and analysis of the Great Conversation as an elite structure at St. Olaf with possible elitist claims. We acknowledge that these perceptions exist on campus but also know that if these pose a problem to the Con, there is no easy solution.

We hope that our findings will be of use in the near future as the Great Conversation is embarking on a full program review in the academic year of 2009-2010. Our findings will add depth and perspective to the areas the review committee hopes to investigate. One significant concept we suggest the review committee should examine is the role of the Great Conversation program as an elite structure on the St. Olaf campus. While the program shies away from explicitly professing itself as 'better' than other experiences on campus, we have found that

perceptions do exist that one can receive a 'better' education in Con. Our findings also indicate that some non-Conners do perceive program participants as pretentious. This is significant and we advise the review committee to investigate possible reasons for this perception and investigate ways to further position itself against it. When the review committee addresses the issue of the program's name, we hope our findings and analysis will offer a thoughtful third person perspective. It was obvious to us that the program does *not* set out to instill ethnocentric attitudes in their students. But clearly, as evidenced in the strong words spoken by one alumni, some students do come out of the program with an ethnocentric attitude. The Great Conversation needs to seriously consider if they are being unintentionally ethnocentric. Is this student's opinion truly an abnormality? By more directly addressing the issue of canon controversy within the classroom, we believe that the program could better discover whether their students are truly learning an ethnocentric point of view.

The Great Conversation truly is a unique experience on campus. We hope that our research can serve as a foundation for further discovery of the myriad ways the Con's presence affects the St. Olaf campus.

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