

**“They happen so fast!”:  
Deconstructing the Discourse of  
Relationships at St. Olaf College**

**James Cahalan, Liz Lampman, Clara Swanson, and Andrew Wilson**

**Professor Chris Chiappari  
Department of Sociology/Anthropology  
St. Olaf College  
May 2010**

## **Abstract**

Various forms and degrees of relationships are an integral part of the college experience. In this study we examine different types of relationships at a small, private, Liberal Arts College in the Midwest in an attempt to understand why these relationships exist and how they are formed. We administered a voluntary-response questionnaire via campus mail, and conducted 26 one-on-one interviews with members of the campus community. Building off of previous research we focus on relationships as a key component of the college experience and examine relationships between students' close friends, and their romantic partners. We observe that students seek relationships that provide a comfortable experience and we examine students' frustrations and confusion with relationships in terms of the "weird" norms and relationship-laden language on campus. As it was, nobody could really pinpoint why these frustrations existed. We hypothesize that social pressures from school, parents, media, and other students cause a feeling of necessity to meet the expectations set by the school. These expectations are unachievable, and mislead students into feeling intense pressures that ultimately lead to the confusing, complex structures of relationships found on campus.

## **Setting the Stage**

St. Olaf College is a private liberal arts college located 35 miles south of the Twin Cities, in Northfield, Minnesota. Northfield, a town of 19,000 permanent residents and college students, provides students with opportunities for service and entertainment. The collective college community contributes socially and economically to the life of the town, and their interactions with each other and with Northfield residents maintains an overall positive community feel. The extent to which St. Olaf students interact with the community varies greatly student to student, but it is important to consider the surrounding context as it influences much of campus life.

Founded in 1874 as a College of the Church by Norwegian immigrants, St. Olaf values students' physical, mental and spiritual development through a commitment to global social awareness and responsibility. The College, both as an institution and a group of people, places a strong emphasis on sustainability, international and domestic off-campus study, and music, with one-third of students involved in musical groups and ensembles.

St. Olaf, fondly nicknamed “The Hill” for its geographical elevation above the city of Northfield, boasts a highly active and engaged student body of approximately 3,100 and a student-faculty ratio of 13:1. The majority of students live in on-campus housing, in 11 residence halls and 18 academic and special interest houses. These students participate in 27 intercollegiate athletic teams and over 200 student organizations. They share one cafeteria (Stav Hall, commonly known as “the caf”) and one campus café, the Cage. Also housed in Buntrock Commons student center is the Lion’s Pause, a student-run pizza joint complete with tables and chairs, two stages, couches and televisions, and an arcade; Fireside, a common lounge with a fireplace and large windows; and the student post office. Other common shared public spaces include Rolvaag Library, Tostrud athletic center, Dittman fine arts center and the Christiansen Hall of Music.

Incoming first year students arrive on campus several days to a week before upperclassmen return to campus for orientation activities collectively named “Week One.” This week consists of mixers such as “the Awkward Dance” and Playfair, academic orientation sessions focused on reading, writing, and balancing commitments, registration and opportunities to meet as many members of the incoming class as possible. These students are placed in one of five first-year dorms and live in corridors with 10-20 other students and two Junior Counselors (JCs), older students who help foster a relatively smooth transition into college life and a sense of community and acceptance in the corridor, the hall, and the campus in general.

### **Introducing the Context**

St. Olaf College encourages students to come into contact with one another. With so much shared space, students can hardly avoid interacting with their peers and professors, and the

“community feel” of the campus is a big selling point for Admissions. Students still have the power to choose to what degree they care to engage with this community, and in what arenas; but students’ relationships inevitably play a significant role in the college experience, regardless of their type and intensity.

Students’ lives at St. Olaf are in some ways shaped by the demographics and the institutional goals of the college, but in other ways, the student experience does not always accurately reflect these superimposed goals. Our personal experiences at St. Olaf have led us to conclude that the attractive features of this institution, such as study abroad opportunities, social justice and advocacy efforts, and opportunities for faith and spiritual development, change from being appealing to students to being a source of pressure for students once they are fully integrated into the community. It all comes down to time. The school brags about students’ balanced lives; however, we have all experienced the difficulty in finding balance. For some, academics loom largest and both social and spiritual development fall by the wayside; extracurricular involvement and social opportunities dominate the schedules of others. A handful of St. Olaf students appear to have the whole puzzle figured out: they engage equally with the academic, the extracurricular, and the social. These “typical Oles,” over-involved but successful, set the standard.

But beyond campus involvement, what defines social status and success? Relationships! Thus, our research on relationships at St. Olaf may contribute to an even larger conversation about the implicit values upheld by the student body as well as highlight the disparities between institutional values and students’ values.

## Literature Review

### *College Culture and Friendships*

Edward Y. Hartshone (1943) details the complicated layers of college society and calls for the distinct tones of these microcosms to be studied in detail. Hartshone emphasizes the culture and society of each individual college community over that of the psychological and physio-somatic conditions of a particular age group. Because of its overlapping membership, a college's cultural norms are passed along; there is no break in the cultural evolution of the community. Hartshone asserts that the informal friend-groups that students form at college have the largest effect on the college culture and experience. He elaborates on the various ways in which these groups may be formed at the college, but also acknowledges the peripheral influences that affect group formation. Though published in the 1940's, Hartshone's work can be useful because it is likely one of the first assertions of colleges' distinct sub-cultures. In fact, Hartshone's detailed conjectures about the formation processes of informal friend-groups allow us to look at St. Olaf from an outsider's perspective without losing our own resident knowledge.

Michael Moffatt continued the study of college culture by examining student life at Rutgers University. Moffatt disagreed with Hartshone, saying that "idiosyncratic local sources" were not the most important influences of undergraduate culture. Instead, the institutional structure of higher education, general mainstream culture, and especially youth culture were the biggest shapers of college culture (1991). Moffatt encourages us to look at the ways in which St. Olaf's relationship norms are affected by larger societal forces.

In her recent ethnography of undergraduate culture, Rebekah Nathan offers us a solid base of comparison. Her assertion that "as anthropologists learn in their overseas experience, one can never really 'go native' or expect that one's own experience is indicative of the

experience of others born in the culture,” helps us realize that though we ourselves are members of the culture we are studying, we cannot assume that our experiences are the same or similar to other students’ experiences (Nathan 2005).

James J. Ponzetti, Jr. (1990) presents an explanation of what happens without friend groups at college. While research implies the impossibility of social isolation at college, we should not expect to hear from every single student that they perceive of peer groups as an essential part of their college experience. Nathan even acknowledges that the range of experiences of individual students is much broader than what the “normative expression of student culture” may be (2005).

As students at this school, we recognize the daily pervasiveness of friend groups in students’ goals, expectations, and performances. Anthony Lising Antonio (2004) presses the issue of friend groups at college to discover what effects they have on educational and self-confidence. Unlike Hartshone’s earlier work, however, Antonio takes race, class, and gender into account when he measures the students’ self esteem. The results indicate a correlation between peer groups and self-concept, but also demonstrate that these conclusions cannot be isolated from such categories of experience, identity, and social structure as race, class, and gender. Given the composition of this student body, race may not play a central role in our research, but we may find different categories of experience to influence students’ responses.

### ***Romantic Relationships***

College can be an important time for young adults in forming romantic relationships. Many studies have sought to understand how and why college students choose specific romantic partners. Luo and Zhang (2009) investigated the factors of romantic attraction using a speed-

dating program. Because the study involved speed dating, it is most likely relevant when looking at the specific criteria St. Olaf students use in choosing *hook-up* partners.

In contrast, Pamela Trotter's (2010) study of college students' attitudes about romantic relationships found that a majority of students believe that religion and moral values are very important in a partner or potential partner. Education level was also found to be important. The importance of these gages of similarity in romantic partner selection is most likely relevant in terms of *long-term relationships*. What criteria do St. Olaf students use in selecting partners for long-term relationships? Are similarities in background, beliefs, major, residence hall, or friend groups important in choosing a partner?

## **Problem**

When we began to examine St. Olaf as a society and a cultural entity, the intricacy and interconnectedness of social groups at St. Olaf earned our attention. The dynamic nature of relationships stuck out because we recognized that the discussion of it is such a part of the common discourse on campus. As members of this community for the previous three years, we have noticed that groups form and dissipate, shift and overlap. We have witnessed confusion as friendships morph into romantic relationships, and when friend groups either separate or fuse due to two individuals' romantic relationship. We have also witnessed friendships and friend groups *not* change due to other forms of romantic partnerships. As Sociology/Anthropology majors these patterns and anomalies are of *particular* interest to us, at least we like to think so. At times we even believe that our choice of major might equip us with the tools to understand this microcosm more effectively. But, and this must be emphasized, we do not only witness social

evolution and change in this community; we are wholly and inevitably involved in the subject matter of this project.

So as we asked other students to answer questions about relationships on campus, we were also trying to compare our opinions with other students'. We are, in essence, seeking to understand whether our conclusions are normal or not, and therefore, whether we are normal or not. Perhaps this zooms out too much though, and implies greater generalizations about some inherent desire for normalcy. Do we acknowledge social pressure to fit into the norm? the mainstream? At some level yes, but we also study relationships to address the burning questions and frustrations that plague us at the end of every day, every term, and probably at the end of our time here.

These frustrations seem to result from unfulfilled desires, and also result from private rejection of cultural practices paired with simultaneous compliant behavior in the public realm. It seems that students refer to the culture of the St. Olaf community as "weird," yet personally, we acknowledge that we know the rules and play the game. Or, more accurately, we think we know the rules and we're pretty sure we're playing the (seemingly prize-less) game. We cite the smallness, the isolation, the limited age group, and the common experience of being students as reasons that make St. Olaf "weird." Students may also be frustrated because their desire for a comfortable environment and friendship is unfulfilled. This ethnography attempts to shed light on relationships in this weird place; it is an attempt to understand the algorithm that St. Olaf students use to form relationships.

## Methodology

The majority of our data was collected through a number of one-on-one personal interviews. We conducted twenty-six total interviews divided almost evenly between genders and class years over the period of a few weeks. We selected the students with the aim to generate a diverse interview pool. We tried to incorporate students who were connected to the campus in varying ways and had fewer connections to each other and to us. Our hope was that the responses from these interviewees would more accurately reflect the diversity of student attitudes on campus. We contacted the students verbally or via email. Their answers were recorded and contributed to our data.

The interviews lasted anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour and were loosely structured around a set of questions we formulated prior to engaging in the interviews. Our interview questions were divided into four different types of relationship at St. Olaf: friendships, romantic partnerships, roommates, and student/professor, as well as general thoughts about relationships at St. Olaf. The questions were formulated in the hope that they would help us to untangle the many different perceptions of relationships on campus, as well as point us in a direction as to *why* St. Olaf has such a seemingly odd culture of relationships and why they exist. “When do you consider someone a friend instead of an acquaintance?” and “How do you define a romantic relationship at St. Olaf?” are both examples of questions.

Two hundred surveys semi-randomly distributed to student P.O boxes were also a method of gathering research data. They were used primarily to give us a general sense of students’ attitudes toward the different types of relationships on campus. They were two pages in length and included basic questions such as “how many close friends do you have?” and “what have you done with your friends this week?” 25 of these surveys were completed and returned

to us, giving us a 12.5% response rate. Data was also gathered through participant and non-participant observation around the St. Olaf campus for the duration of this project. Prior to and throughout the study we discussed our perceptions and experiences with a variety of our own relationships on campus. This allowed us to begin unraveling the loaded concept of relationships and focus our topic. It also allowed the four of us a chance to voice our frustrations, concerns and hopes for the project ultimately leading to a more productive experience.

We originally sought to compare what we identified as the four main types of relationships students form on campus: romantic, friendships, roommates, and professor/student. After we began interviewing students it became apparent that romantic relationships and friendships were much more important in students' lives; however, we also must note that we were most interested in romantic and friend relationships and inadvertently included more questions concerning these types of relationships. We acknowledge the important roles that roommate and professor/student relationships play in students' lives, but we think it most appropriate to focus on friendships and romantic relationships.

At the beginning we wanted to know how long people expect their relationships to last (through college or beyond college), and therefore whether the nature of support people seek from relationships is temporary or lifelong. This question quickly slid out of focus, though, and the interview questions we developed aimed at how students form relationships, what they seek in relationships, and what they expect from them. We feel that these questions more accurately pertain to the original anxiety that inspired our research of this topic, that being the misunderstanding of the unwritten "rules" which determine student society at St. Olaf, in terms of friend groups, romantic relationships, and broader social interaction.

It is natural that we are curious about how and why students form relationships on campus, but we have found that the study of one's own community requires more than observation and conclusion. On the contrary, in almost every discussion of our work we mention our personal ties and relationships, and we acknowledge that our personal experiences in this place are perhaps the largest driving force of our study. We are also aware that each of our social networks is inextricably linked to the others, and we note that our mutual relationships may also contribute some unusual commonality between our experiences. On a related note, it has been a challenge to cross social boundaries in order to give breath to a more comprehensive voice for the St. Olaf experience.

While brainstorming lists of interviewees, we identified specific social groups that we wanted to invite into our research. But with some of the groups we also found this task impossible because none of us knew any members of that group well enough to ask them to do an interview. An opposite dilemma has made us realize the intense interconnectedness of social groups and the complications that arise when we are interviewing people about such personal matters as their relationships. Once we made our list of potential interviewees we each intentionally selected people from the list to interview; there were some names on the list that could "obviously" not be interviewed by certain members of our group, usually due to previous or current romantic relationships or sometimes due to complications with a friendship. During our interviews, we also encountered areas of sensitivity, which may happen in any interview about personal matters, but may also have been heightened due to the social interconnectedness on campus. We are invested in and indebted to this community, but we are also trying to study it. How do we do this without affecting or maybe damaging our personal relationships? How do we respect the privacy of our peers who are also deeply invested in relationships on campus?

## **Findings and Analysis**

When talking to students about their perceptions and experiences of relationships at St. Olaf, we noticed two particular themes that arose consistently throughout our conversations: comfort and frustration. Thus we provide an explanation of each to enable a more thorough understanding of the context within which our relationships operate. We will enter this discussion with the examination of a few unique terms used by St. Olaf students when talking about these themes within relationships.

### **Comfort**

The desire for comfort was consistently and frequently discussed throughout our interviews and questionnaire responses. In almost every relationship students engage in, they seek the most comfortable situation.

### ***Home***

On a day-to-day basis, students will use the word "home" to refer to their dorm room or their honor house/apartment/residence. St. Olaf students expect their homes to be a place where they are comfortable and can talk about their troubles or complaints with the people they live with: "I want to live with people I feel at *home* with, where I can come home and tell someone about my day." Many students also desire a fun atmosphere where there is laughter and joking. "If you're busy, you never see each other, and then you come home and spend time together, your room is a safe haven. I love coming home and just having my room filled with people, with all my friends there, waiting for me, and we can just chill together."

## *Friendships*

People form friendships at St. Olaf for a number of reasons; one international student reported that his friends act as his family while he is away from home. Very simply, students form relationships in order to construct a comfortable space where they can relax and take refuge from other stressors. Students report that they meet new people through current friends and work, in classes, first-year dorms, and extra-curricular activities. “Schedules determine who we run into on a regular basis,” and friendships often form out of multiple shared contexts and repeated interactions, such as people who live in the same dorm and participate in the same activities. Many people tend to stick with the friend group formed early on in the college experience, thus supporting Nathan’s finding that important relationships are formed early in one’s college career (2005). Some attribute this connection to group members having similar interests, while others say that the level of comfort the people share is what drives them to stick together.

Friendships are a basic part of life at St. Olaf. Moffatt (1991) found intense friendships to be the “central social relationship” that affects students’ happiness and sense of self. One student claimed, “Everything I do is with friends.” These activities include eating meals in the caf, doing homework, working out, watching movies or playing video games, and partying on weekends. This pattern of constant interaction supports Nathan’s suggestion that college students center their lives on a small network of close friends (2005). Many students describe their close friends as the people with whom they spend the most time.

Students value trust, communication, reliability, fun and, above all, comfort in their friendships: “Friends are people I can be myself around.” For many, this means that close friends share important life details and can discuss deep topics and relevant issues. They feel

comfortable asking for help. Friends are expected to listen and understand their friend's perspective, but more than that, they need to give input, reciprocate feelings of trust, and "genuinely care."

Being comfortable with friends allows students the freedom to be themselves. Students value friends who "put up with [their] bullshit." "If I'm in a bad mood," one student said, "I might snap at [my friends] and they won't hold it against me." Another said she feels like she's still figuring out how to be herself and that her friends tolerate the ups and downs of that process. Students do develop a comfortable rapport with friends and in doing so can relax without feeling that they have to perform or impress each other.

People take friendships very seriously at St. Olaf. "Friends are people I can be myself around, I'm comfortable opening up to them about more than classes and stuff. And *also that they're comfortable with me, opening up to me.*" According to one student, "you never know who your real friends are until you're in a rut and life sucks. And there are friends who are nice and encouraging and friends who really dig down deep and get you out of there. Those friends really accept you for who you are, like 'I've come to understand you and I like it.'"

### ***Romantic Relationships***

Some students reported that many long-term relationships form within an existing friend group or early on in a first-year dorm; these avenues provide some level of comfort that complete strangers would never have. Finding a significant other in a first-year dorm, many times very early in the year, also provides comfort in the sense that both students have a shared living experience and are in the same "I-don't-know-anyone" boat. Students also pair off within established friend groups. Two students who share the same friends and most likely are

themselves friends will end up spending increasing amounts of time together, eventually leading to a committed romantic relationship.

Students form long term romantic relationships as additional support systems, or as respites from stress. Students explained that “it’s nice to have someone steadily there” and “to have someone to come back to at the end of the day.” Students value their partners as people with whom they can spend a lot of time in different contexts. Significant others are people one can depend on to help relieve the everyday stresses of student life, talk to comfortably and openly, and make one happy. Romantic relationships are also comforting because they provide consistent and reliable support.

The degree to which relationships provide comfort depends on the proximity of the two individuals, and since students do spend so much time in close contact, those in a relationship can receive comfort almost indefinitely. One student explains, “We’re like pinballs – we hit each other, cross paths so often.” For some students, the seriousness of long-term relationships reflects the intensity of their search for comfort.

## **Frustration**

Many students express feelings of frustration toward different aspects of relationships. This frustration stems from the inconsistencies in relationship norms and the confusion they cause.

## ***Minnesota-nice***

*Minnesota-nice* is a term used to describe a personality or disposition, and the behavior that stems from those. Most subjects ranted about the rampancy of a *Minnesota-nice* mentality on campus, in which people are constantly friendly and polite to the point where confrontation is

nearly impossible. Students noted that someone who is *Minnesota-nice* is extremely passive-aggressive, has “weird barrier problems,” and accepts invitations when they would rather not: “People really aren’t straight-forward, they don’t know how to confront issues.” Subjects expressed a frustration toward how hard it is to tell if someone is really interested in you or if they are “just being nice.” *Minnesota-nice* does, however, encompass “all the good things about St. Olaf like being friendly, having a girlfriend, being sporty but studious, and being really nice without being condescending or anything.”

### ***Awkward***

There is a sense of severe trepidation at the thought of approaching new people with interest in starting a relationship. Some say that’s why romantic relationships often start within friendship groups – it’s not awkward to approach someone you already know and ask for a date. When expectations, character, and intentions are unknown, the potential for social faux pas and awkwardness increases. And in the case of rejection, “it’s awkward when I have to see [them] all the time!” Approaching less well-known acquaintances in public can also be awkward, because of the uncertainty of intentions, reciprocity, or interest. “You’re not sure if they think you’re a crazy guy, or if you’re acting like a jerk!”

According to questionnaire responses, students would like to feel more comfortable approaching unknown peers to form new friendships but because of this “awkwardness” feel unable to do so, which results in frustration.

### ***Party***

Parties are a great place to meet people at St. Olaf. When there is alcohol involved, people’s inhibitions about breaching the “awkward barrier” become less prominent. One person explained the hazards of making friends “the St. Olaf way: go out, party, get drunk, and then not

know anybody's names.” This sentiment illustrates the difficulties in forming close, meaningful relationships across different settings. One first-year student distinguished her “party friends” from other friends: “I tried to be best friends with all these girls I partied with, and then I'd call them up when I had an issue. They didn't want to deal with it and I realized they weren't my real friends.”

Parties are often singles-friendly events, as “it's weird here to be a couple and party.” Parties are the perfect site to enact the classic “College Experience,” when alcohol removes our “weird hesitations about stuff” and can lead to drunken hookups. One student said, “I never really go looking for a relationship, and when I do I'm never sober.”

Party culture is a site of personal negotiation for many college students, as we figure out our own boundaries and learn how to relate to other people, often people we know less well than our closest friends. Interviewees expressed frustration with the “meeting-people-when-you're-drunk-and-then-not-ever-saying-hi-to-them-again” model for interactions; they also expressed disinterest in changing or rebelling against that model.

### *Cliques*

With the danger of dichotomizing in mind, we perceive two main opinions about friend-group formation. One is that groups form first year and stay relatively constant for the rest of college. The other is that people will make immediate connections with a certain group of people, typically in their first year residence hall, and eventually leave the group and join a group of people who have more similar interests. “People who have things in common stick together.”

People seem to stick with their clique of friends whom they eat with, live with, study with, etc., and only interact with other members of society in a removed way. While some students noted cliques as less prominent at St. Olaf than in high school or friends' universities,

many interviewees lamented the fact that “it doesn’t work to combine cliques here, they just don’t get along.” A female student argued that cliques can actually merge, but that overall “friendships here are consistent, and cliques don’t change from freshman year.” One student explained how “people have groups here,” and that “it’s hard to integrate into a new group.” Students observed certain rigidity between different groups on campus, which makes it difficult for students to form friendships outside of their social groups.

This becomes especially evident when starting a new romantic relationship, because most “successful [relationships] start through friends and stay within cliques.” Often people feel “awkward” about approaching someone outside their own group, or feel that this is often not socially acceptable. Students agree that it is obvious when boundaries are crossed because “you recognize people and see them with other certain people regularly, and you know who is friends with whom, but not necessarily who is not friends with whom.” In everyday conversation, it is not uncommon to hear students referring to “our friends,” members of a particular group of people.

### ***Romantic Relationships***

The patterns of romantic relationships on campus provide great frustration for students. Whether included in or excluded from romance on campus, students were very vocal about their complaints. In one sense, frustration is rooted in pressure from multiple directions. Students feel societal pressure to find a “mate” at college; the fact that many students’ parents met in college (especially parents who attended St. Olaf) compounds this societal pressure. Pressure also comes from students’ peers at St. Olaf. Many reported that there is pressure to be in a serious relationship by the time one is an upper classmen. To reinforce this notion, a student told us that by the time a student is an upper classmen, “you’re either engaged or you’re single.” Many

interviewees expressed that relationships form quickly; “They happen so fast!” Not only do relationships form quickly, but they also intensify quickly. Oftentimes students study, eat, party, and sleep together giving students the impression that “romance is serious here.”

Many students expressed confusion and cluelessness at how partnerships form. Answers like, “no idea,” and “...I don’t know...I’m clueless” were more frequent than we expected. These responses reflect single students’ frustration that they are excluded from the relationship milieu. So some students would like to be a part of the romantic relationship culture, while others reject it and feel frustrated by the constricting nature of romance on campus. One student explained, “A very small percentage of students are dating for fun, and because I’m not an ‘in-it-to-win-it’ person, I find it difficult to relate to people who are so serious.” Other students went so far as to say, “some people seem to be looking exclusively for marriage!” According to our interviewees there is a considerable lack of a dating culture at St. Olaf; instead students observe serious relationships, drunken hook-ups, or singledom. In terms of relationship formation, non-heterosexual students definitely have a different experience. One interviewee said, “Being gay makes it different, because it’s out of the mainstream. There are not as many strong relationships on campus between gay men; there are a lot of us, just not many relationships between two people.” The lack of visible relationships amongst gay students also provides frustration.

In general, we tend to talk about all relationships on campus in terms of “our frustration over an issue.” For example, people talk about romantic relationships more when there is an issue with one (or a lack of relationships to begin with!). Many believe that St. Olaf students are not good at talking about relationships and blame this inability on how passive we are as a whole. Relationships loom large not only as a conversation topic, but also as a source of anxiety and frustration for students.

## Discussion

Given the stressful environment at St. Olaf, we as students seek sanctuary in relationships. What we expect from these relationships is comfort and counterbalance to the stress we face every day. Close friends and significant others provide the best environment of comfort and ease. Our dependence on familiarity in a comforting environment causes many students to stick with their original group of friends even if we do not quite enjoy such company. As one interviewee stated, it is “comforting to know that someone will call you, and that you will be included.” Even if remaining with one’s original group is not the most desirable choice, it is still easier to stay with what has already been established, what already has a certain level of comfort and ease.

Students feel that comfortable relationships are key to their experience here and will make them happy and whole in their life at St. Olaf. Such high expectations have led to romanticized notions of the perfect relationship: the perfect friend or the perfect boyfriend/girlfriend/future spouse. When their relationships fail to meet these expectations, they feel frustrated and confused in the gap between experience and fantasy.

Carol Delaney notes that though there might be various “subcultures,” groups, or views within a social setting (i.e. St. Olaf), they will usually define themselves against or in relation to the mainstream or hegemonic cultural practice while still incorporating the concepts and values associated with it (2004). We have made clear that the practice of engaging in serious, long-term romantic relationships is by no means what most students, or even a majority of students do. Yet it still seems to be the case that as the perceived norm on campus, all other practices and beliefs are thought of in terms of their relation to long-term, committed relationships.

Nealon and Giroux further explain that people can only recognize themselves and be recognized by others in terms of a preexisting social law (2003). The perceived law at St. Olaf is the long-term relationship, and students are only able to recognize their romantic habits in relation to what they perceive to be the “normal” thing to do. In not wanting to follow the perceived relationship norm, some students become frustrated in their lack of options. Students feel that their only options are no romance, a serious, long-term relationship, or participation in the drunken hook-up scene.

Finally, the closeness of the community on campus is both beneficial and detrimental to our relationships. It makes intense and comfortable relationships possible and easy to form; but that ease is countered by our inability to avoid constant interaction. We come into contact so often that it sometimes seems we do not have any control over the frequency of interaction and therefore the intensity of relationships.

### **Further Research**

Since we originally intended to examine the longevity of relationships, we suggest further research on the continuation or discontinuation of relationships formed at St. Olaf. This research might take into account students’ intentions in forming relationships; what do students expect from relationships upon their formation? We found that romantic relationships here can be intensely serious, is this because students are thinking about the continuation of these relationships after they graduate? We found that friendships are focused on providing comfort in students’ immediate environment, their present and everyday lives; does this mean that students do not imagine a future with their close friends? When St. Olaf students graduate do they seek new relationships to provide immediate comfort if they are separated from the friendships they formed during college?

Future relationship studies should explore other colleges to discover whether the “weirdness” that St. Olaf students talk about is unique to this setting. It could be tied closely to this particular age group or this generation, or it could be dependent upon geographical location. Such a topic could even warrant longitudinal study nationwide in order to begin a larger conversation about why people seek relationships and how people talk about them.

In regards specifically to St. Olaf, we found remarkable similarities between what students valued in romantic and friend relationships. Further research could examine why such similarities exist between two seemingly different forms of relationship, and how students decide to draw the line between these relationships. Is the difference between romantic relationships and friendships purely based on sexual activity? Or do students differentiate between these relationships in other ways?

## **Conclusion**

The way students talk about relationships reveals both the joys and the frustrations that students experience on a day to day basis. The language about relationships at St. Olaf depends on this particular setting and region; the lexicon for student interactions is highly specific and students use this set dialogue almost exclusively to talk about relationships. Expectations for relationships between students are inseparable from broader pressures to which St. Olaf students feel subject. Students seem to desire relationships in order to find comfort and be comfortable, but students also feel that they *should* form relationships either because of an innate drive or due to social pressure. As a result of pressure and of students’ interpretations of what is expected of them, they often feel frustration because the resulting relationships do not fulfill the expectations. In the same vein, students can feel frustrated because their desires do not fit the norm that they

are supposed to go by. The larger discourse of relationships reveals the values students place on relationships as well as the ways relationship experiences cause students grief. In short, students talk about relationships because they are immensely important in students' lives.

## Works Cited

- Antonio, Anthony Lising. 2004. "The Influence of Friendship Groups on Intellectual Self-Confidence and Educational Aspirations in College." *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75(4): 446-471.
- Busboom, A., D. Collins, M. Givertz, and L. Levin. 2002. "Can we still be friends? Resources and barriers to friendship quality after romantic relationship dissolution." *Personal Relationships*, 9(2): 215.
- Delaney, Carol. 2004. *Investigating Culture: An Experiential Introduction to Anthropology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Hartshorne, Edward Y. 1943. "Undergraduate Society and the College Culture." *American Sociological Review*, 8(3): 321-332.
- Ledbetter, A.M., Em Griffin and Glenn G. Sparks. 2007. "Forecasting "Friends Forever": A Longitudinal Investigation of Sustained Closeness Between Best Friends." *Personal Relationships*, 14:343-350.
- Luo, S., and G. Zhang. 2009. "What Leads to Romantic Attraction: Similarity, Reciprocity, Security, or Beauty? Evidence From a Speed-Dating Study." *Journal of Personality*, 77(4): 933-964.
- Moffatt, Michael. 1991. "College Life; Undergraduate Culture and Higher Education." *The Journal of Higher Education*. 62(1): 44-61.
- Nathan, Rebekah. 2005. *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Nealon, Jeffrey T., and Susan Searls Giroux. 2003. *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield.

Ponzetti, James J. Jr. 1990. "Loneliness among College Students." *Family Relations*, 39(3): 336-340.

Trotter, P. 2010. "The Influence of Parental Romantic Relationships on College Students' Attitudes About Romantic Relationships." *College Student Journal*, 44(1): 71-83.