

Colleges, Cows, and Contentment: Perceptions of Northfield, and the College Choice

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Executive Summary:

Setting: St. Olaf is a small liberal arts school located in Northfield Minnesota, approximately 45 minutes south of the greater Twin Cities area. Over half of the 3,000 students are from Minnesota.

Problem: Students from all over the country choose St. Olaf, but their reasons are different. Factors affecting choice are different for each student, and include, but are not limited to home town, family relations, and personal desires. Students at St. Olaf also have a relationship to Northfield, although that can vary greatly depending on the student's needs.

Methodology: Twenty students were interviewed to share the personal experience of choosing St. Olaf, and his or her perceptions of Northfield.

Observations:

- Much of the college decision is personal and not led by large patterns.
- A student's relationship to Northfield varies depending on access to transportation, as well as student needs.

Synopsis: Students like the location of Northfield for being close to a large city while retaining a sense of isolation and small town charm. However, to increase involvement with Northfield students need more access to transportation. The community of St. Olaf is also a drawing factor for many students, but also keeps many students on campus and out of Northfield.

Abstract:

St. Olaf College is a liberal arts school of 3,000 students located in Northfield Minnesota. Northfield has a population of 18,000 people, and is located 45 minutes south of the greater Twin Cities area. While 47 states are represented in the student body, over half come from Minnesota or its bordering states. College decision is shaped by many factors, location of school being one. We examined the non-institutional factors that led to a student choosing St. Olaf. Once the decision is made the student has a relationship with the town, but the association can vary greatly. Students from Northfield are familiar with the town and are physically close to home but often do not see family more than a student from farther away. Themes that emerged include family, community, isolation, and contradiction. However, the individual choice and interaction with Northfield differ greatly student to student.

Setting:

The location and setting of our study is very important, for our research focuses on the interactions between St. Olaf students and their surrounding community. St. Olaf College, the setting for our study, is a small liberal arts college of slightly under 3,000 students. Founded in 1874 by Norwegian immigrants and associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, today Lutherans make up only half of its student population. While boasting representation from 47 states, and 22 foreign countries, the student body is made up primarily of students from the Upper Midwest, particularly Minnesota.

Sitting atop Manitou Heights, the college's matching limestone buildings gaze over the quaint town of Northfield, and the farmlands that surround it. By being located on top of the hill, St. Olaf forms a distinct community as compared with the host town of Northfield. This separation can cause the college to be labeled a "bubble" with little information entering or leaving the college grounds.

Northfield, the town of "cows, colleges, and contentment," is a thirty-minute walk down tree lined St. Olaf Avenue, where each house along the way is architecturally unique. The town itself is home to slightly under 18,000 people, and is built along the banks of the Canon River, a tributary of the Mississippi.

A small main street runs parallel to the river and is defined by many small restaurants, coffee shops, and local businesses. Highways 3 and 19 intersect in the town, providing a direct link to The Twin Cities and its ever expanding suburbs. Over the course of the last few years, Northfield has begun to be increasingly identified with these suburbs, as many chain restaurants and stores such as Target, Cub Foods, Applebee's, and Walgreens move into the area. This "suburbanization" has caused a small identity crisis within the town as it tries to expand while still keeping in touch with its unique 19th century history and small town heritage.

Northfield itself is approximately 40 miles south of the Twin Cities, the largest metropolitan area in the Upper Midwest. This puts the college within easy reach of a major airport, an important aspect for out of region students. Being located south of the Cities along a major Interstate also puts St. Olaf in a more central location in relation to the surrounding Midwestern states, making it a shorter drive than similar colleges in the area. The Cities also offer a big city alternative to students who may be slightly jaded with the "small town" life St. Olaf and Northfield offers, but while many students acknowledge the comfort of having that option, few take advantage of its resources.

St. Olaf's location in Minnesota and the Midwest are also important to this study because there is a distinct culture that being located in Minnesota and the Midwest offers the college. Being an area with a strong farming heritage, the Midwest is seen as a place of strong religious and family values, as well as a place that emphasizes hard work. Minnesota however also holds the perception

of being relatively more “open-minded” and accepting than its Midwestern counterparts. Thus our interviews took place not just within the small “bubble” that is the St. Olaf community, but rather within the much larger context of an expanding town centrally located within the greater Midwest.

Problem:

Both Jacob and Rachel had different initial approaches to research. Motivated by personal reasons both wrote how they understood the problem being researched. Much of their personal experience both in choosing a college as well as interacting with Northfield determined how each looked at the data. Being a student from the hustle and bustle of life on the East Coast, Jacob wanted to have a different experience in college. He was looking for a place where he could slow down a bit, but also experience a more community based life than what exists on what Jacob feels is a very individualistic coast. St. Olaf and the Midwest appealed to him, because he saw embodied in them some of these values. However, he always remained curious as to what drove other people to St. Olaf. Did St. Olaf’s location in the Midwest affect other people’s decision to come? Jacob set out to study how his experiences as a non-Midwesterner compared with other people from different geographical regions as well as with people who were familiar with the Midwestern culture. He wanted to see if there were any patterns that might arise in why people chose to come to St. Olaf, and what sort of effect its location played into that decision. To go along with this question, though, Jacob began to be curious about what exactly it was about the Midwest, or about small Midwestern towns such as Northfield, that was so attractive. He became interested in exploring what peoples’ perceptions of Northfield were, what sort of interactions students had with the town, and how these might have changed over the course of their years of study. As his research progressed, he became intrigued with the topic of “suburbanization” and the transformations that many small towns in the Midwest are going through, as the culture here begins to speed up to become more in line with the East Coast.

Why do students chose St. Olaf? When Rachel started her college search she knew she wanted to be at a small school that was not in the center of a large city. The location of the school was important to her, but it was not the deciding factor. The numerous statistics available helped narrow the college search, but ultimately statistics did not determine the outcome. Her reasons cannot be the same as all other students, so why do students choose St. Olaf? We set out to learn why our peers chose St. Olaf, and to see if there were marked differences between those from the upper Midwest versus those from further a field.

Secondly, once students have chosen St. Olaf they automatically have a relationship with Northfield. Do students pay attention to the town? Rachel's younger sister is currently in her first year of college, and the relation between her school and town is not as positive as the relation between Northfield and St. Olaf. Rachel was curious to discover how students perceive the connection between the town and school, and how, if at all, this relationship can be improved.

Methodology:

Our study consisted of twenty personal interviews. Initially we distributed questionnaires to first year corridors and other random students. However, our motivation for this was unclear and the information given did not yield usable results. Some students expressed interest in the project, which in some cases led us to interviews. Most subjects, however, were chosen from a list of potential students known to be from Northfield or from a non-northern Midwest town. Five students interviewed attended Northfield high school, seven are from the upper Midwest but not Northfield, and eight are from other states. We interviewed a higher proportion of first year students because they are closer to the college search; it is difficult for a senior to remember the specifics of choosing a college. The interviews were conducted in Buntrock Commons, or outside on the patio. Students were assured that their answers would be kept confidential and names would be changed.

Individual interviews allowed us to learn of the personal situations that went into choosing St. Olaf. However, these results cannot be used to make wide claims for all students. One student does not speak for ten. Our questions fostered thoughtful responses rather than a simple yes or no reply. The questions asked the student to speak on factors such as location, family, and urban setting, among others that were or were not important in the college search. The student was also asked about involvement and interaction with Northfield as well as personal perceptions and stereotypes of Northfield as a small Midwestern town.

The way in which we gathered evidence allows us to know the specifics of how an individual student chose St. Olaf and how that student perceives Northfield. Particular college decision factors could be voiced rather than trying to fit the categories defined on a survey. However, the interviews were so personalized that larger patterns were difficult to decipher.

Findings:

Each student interviewed had different reasons for choosing St. Olaf. Some were more concerned about getting out of his or her hometown, while others found community to be more important. Although we did not find the same

stories, some common themes did emerge from the interviews. Family, community, isolation, and contradiction were addressed in some way in every interview. We have created a few composite portraits of students to create a fuller idea of how students think about the college choice and Northfield. Each portrait is representative of one of the previously mentioned themes, and we intend for these to be a tool for the reader to ascertain the complexities involved in selecting a college.

Family:

Connection to family can determine where a student attends college. Some students like to be close enough to go home on the weekends, while others try to get as far away from home as possible. St. Olaf has a strong tradition of legacy students; up to a third of students have a parent who attended St. Olaf. Family expectations can determine where the student can attend school. Once at St. Olaf the communication with family dramatically changes and the relationship between student and parents is altered.

Those students interviewed from Northfield all mentioned the benefits of going to school in their hometown, which included being able to go home when they wanted. However, these students do not go home as often as one might think. Most Northfielders visit home once or twice a month, but not for an extended period of time. According to one first year, “the last people here on breaks are townies.” She went on to explain that people from Northfield are hesitant to go home and often spend some of the break on campus. Some expressed a guilt or awkwardness about being from Northfield, as if it was “taking the easy way out.” Although geographically quite close to home the Northfield students interviewed made a point of explaining the split from home. Living with peers and away from parental guidance allows Northfield students to gain independence from family while at the same time having close support if needed.

Students from the Midwest also commented on the ability to go home.

Although they may not actually go home often, knowing that the option is available is a great comfort. One first year from Illinois explained her college choices as such: “My parents drew a circle on the map and told me I had to stay inside the circle. My brother is here, and I liked the campus, and my parents like it, so I guess there wasn’t much choice.” Her parents wanted to be able to visit her easily, and do travel to Minnesota often. Students from Minneapolis/St. Paul suburbs tended to visit home more often than students from Northfield. Why this is so we do not know. However, those students who do go home appreciated the ease at which is possible due to Northfield’s proximity to the Twin Cities. In general students see family more as the years go on. First year students are eager to split from their family and forge a new

life. After the student's identity is well established and the student is comfortable with college life he or she seems more willing and wanting to see family. The worry that interacting with family will diminish the new found autonomy disappears after a few years at college.

Rachel's hometown is a mere 50 miles away, and she relishes the fact that she can see her family often. More often than not it is her parents who come to Northfield rather than the other way around. Although she does not go home often, she too appreciates that she can easily go home if needed. Rachel actually feels like she has a better relationship with her parents now than when she lived at home. At the time when Rachel was searching for colleges she did not anticipate how much she would enjoy being close to her family.

Family connection to St. Olaf also influences college decision. A first year from Northfield whose mother works at Olaf commented that he "always knew I'd be coming to Olaf." Another first year was not pressured into choosing Olaf even though her father attended. However, once her decision was made her father expressed his happiness. Still another first-year from New Jersey was strongly influenced by the fact that her two older sisters were both current students. For her to come to St. Olaf she did not have to leave her family behind, because much of her family was already on campus. She also spent many of her childhood summers with extended family in Minnesota, and so had her immediate family not been here, she would have had other family members close by. Many of the out of state students, including Jacob, have relatives, or close friends from home, that live in the northern Midwest, and provide a comforting place to visit.

Some students have fond memories of attending the Christmas concert, homecoming, or other events with family members. Although it is not possible to know how much these early experiences with St. Olaf came into play in the student's senior year of high school, it is impossible to deny the likelihood of influence. One sophomore from a Minnesota suburb went as far as to say "I mean I basically came to Olaf because I had spent a lot of time here because of [my sister], and the times that I spent here were really good. So if she would have gone to Dartmouth, and I would have had a good time if I went to Dartmouth and hung out with my sister, I probably would have gone there. So I don't want to make it sound like I depended on her, but it probably would have influenced where I would have spent my time."

One Northfield student grew up with Olaf practically in her backyard. As the youngest of 4 it was important for her to be close to her family and be a part of their lives. She mentioned "my oldest sister chose St. Olaf so that she could be a part of my life, so when I looked for colleges I knew it was important to be close to my family and be a part of their lives." On the other side of the spectrum, a sophomore from Indiana said that he "wanted to get as far away

from home as possible. St. Olaf was actually the closest school I applied to.” It is not that he has a bad relation with his family, but instead he valued being away from home and wanted a school experience that was “vastly different from my home life.”

Although some students’ parents work at Olaf, there is still a clear separation between home and school. “Being at Olaf is a whole other world,” explained a first year, “I’m in a different living situation, and not with my parents.” A senior looking back on her family connection remarked that initially she rarely went home and made St. Olaf very far from home, even though her parents live in Northfield. She was eager to have her own experience, which was difficult since her three siblings had attended St. Olaf.

Robert, small town Upper Midwest

Robert is a junior from Jamestown, a small Midwestern town that in many respects is very similar to Northfield. Aside from the general population size, Jamestown also has a river that bisects it, a “sleepy little main street,” and a small college. The strongest reminder of his hometown though, comes from the Malt-O-Meal factory. “We have Jamestown Good Cookie Factory and there’s often times the smell of cookies in the air, and so whenever there’s the smell of Malt-O-Meal, it reminds me of home.”

When Robert was looking for a college, not many schools besides St. Olaf came to mind. His father and uncle were both graduates, and so he has many fond memories of driving up tree-lined St. Olaf Ave for reunions and Christmas concerts. He wanted a “private, more personable” setting, but also wanted to be close to home. While he does not go home often, it was important to be close to his family. “It’s nice,” he says “because it’s not a 30 minute drive where I could come home every weekend...but it’s close enough so if there’s a birthday or something at my house...I can easily go home.” His parents however, make the trek down to Olaf at least once a month to have lunch or participate in other social events.

Had Robert chosen to go to another school, he probably wouldn’t have left the Midwest, because he has always enjoyed the values that are embodied here. He did not want to leave behind these values that he had grown up with, such as strong family connections, church, manners, hospitality, and hard work, though he had no qualms about changing his accent. Trust is also a big part of what Robert likes about the Midwest, and he illustrated this by relating a story about a fall drive he and his mother took in the countryside around Northfield. They came across a small roadside corn stand, with nothing but the corn and a cashbox, and Robert was amazed to see that there was actually money inside it. He stated, “I just felt great that that can still happen in the world. It just shows a lot of trust between people in the community.”

Robert sees many of these values embodied in activities here on campus too, such as the strong church connection, its friendliness and hospitality, and its emphasis on family values and connection. Family values in particular are emphasized through events such as family weekend, and the mother-son banquets. “They take good care of us,” he notes. But Robert has also valued his chance to get out into the Northfield community and away from campus. He enjoys taking long runs three or four times a week, taking pleasure in the relative quickness that he can get to the “quiet and calm” along the country roads. He has also actively sought out opportunities to get involved in the town community by teaching Sunday school lessons at a local church. “Being a college student I was missing seeing families all around and having those connections...it was just a really comfortable feeling, to have that family,” he stated as he reminisced about his time at a Northfield church. Being able to integrate himself more into the community was one way for Robert to deal with St. Olaf’s “bubble effect.” While he does acknowledge there is a bubble, “It’s a bubble full of great things...and should be taken advantage of to the fullest.” A lack of things to do does not reflect as much on the town, he suggests, but rather on a “lack of creativity” on the complainers’ part.

Being able to live in an honor house, as he does this year, has also allowed him to become more aware of the Northfield community around him. He sees the Northfield-St Olaf relationship as something strongly valued on both sides. St. Olaf is able to take advantage of many of the unique things Northfield has to offer as a relatively small community, and Northfield community members also take advantage of the benefits a college brings, like its concerts and community outreach programs.

The fact that Northfield is growing at such a rapid rate, Robert sees as being beneficial to both the college and the town. Stores like Target are a “one stop place for everybody,” and a positive effect on the economy. “I don’t think it’s bad for the town to grow...I just see that as kind of a natural progression and I’m not going to fight it or anything.” But he did also mention he would like to make sure Division Street remains relatively unaffected to keep the small town atmosphere. Altogether Robert has been very happy with his decision to come to St. Olaf and join the Northfield community. “I’m in the right spot,” he says smiling.

Community:

The subject of Community has many different aspects to it. Mark Smith explains that community can be explored through a multiplicity of lenses, each of which can be used to help focus the discussion of the St. Olaf community. “We’re a community in a small school in a small town.” This quote from a St. Olaf student helps identify the St. Olaf community in terms of its “place.” A

community of people can be defined based on their geographic orientation, and one look at the list of St. Olaf groups on thefacebook.com website can help show this. Groups are formed based on if people are from Minnesota, or outside of Minnesota. There is a group for East Coasters, and most dorms on campus have a specific group for them as well. People define their community based on where they are or where they are from and everybody at St. Olaf shares our specific location.

Communities of interests are also a way people at Olaf can identify themselves. Interviewed students mentioned being drawn to the college because of its strong music background, its religious community, or the opportunity to play Division III sports. These interests help create social networks that draw the students into the school and make them more involved. They provide students with a sense of belonging to a larger network of people.

While seeing communities in terms of geography, or interests at St. Olaf, most of the interviewed students tended to refer to community as a value. One first year from Oregon talked about wanting a “close community experience” in college and to be at a place where he could “actually connect with people.” “There’s a general community that’s strong, somewhat unique to St. Olaf,” spoke another student. These students are seeing community as a value based on connection with other people as opposed to a strong sense of individualism. They also recognized the role that our location plays in helping to foster this “community” feel. By being secluded above the town, and with what some students consider to be little access to transportation, the students are forced to make a community, which ultimately gives them a closer relationship with their fellow students and the college. One student revealed that he actually does not even think of Northfield because the emphasis on the St. Olaf community has provided for all his needs.

In Smith’s discussion of community, he goes on to provide three qualities linked with life in a community: tolerance, reciprocity, and trust, all of which were referred to in one way or another by the interviewed students. Many talked about the “open-mindedness” that they feel is exhibited in St. Olaf and Northfield. Whether or not students were liberal or conservative, many mentioned that there tended to be openness to all ideas. Northfield students also spoke at length about the reciprocity that exists between the town and college, one student describing it as a “symbiotic relationship.” St. Olaf provides the Northfield community with one of its largest employers, and use of its gym, libraries, and natural lands. Future endeavors, such as the St. Olaf wind turbine are for the benefit of the whole Northfield community and not just the college. Northfield in return provides the students with a surrogate home. Places in town all openly welcome students with friendly smiles and many activities that may not be found in a non-college town, such as peace vigils and an active

local theater companies. Finally trust is also a big part of the community here, from leaving bags outside the cafeteria, to unlocked and shared post office boxes to unattended money boxes at roadside corn stands, students appreciate the level of trust and safety the college and town provide.

Alex, Northfield Minnesota

When Alex began his college search he knew that he wanted to attend a small liberal arts school with a good reputation. He also wanted a friendly place where he could feel comfortable and make friends. With that description St. Olaf seems like it could have been his first choice. But instead Alex chose a small liberal arts school in Wisconsin. Part of the decision was influenced by his high school experience; Alex is from Northfield. In Northfield High School Alex felt “a pressure to not stay in Northfield.” At Beloit in Wisconsin he found the situation different than expected. The industrial town did not encourage much interaction with the college, and he found the people to be less open. Interestingly, Alex cannot speak of his first college choice without comparing it to St. Olaf. After a year he decided to transfer to St. Olaf. He says he “never really fit in at Beloit. I knew Olaf would be different, it’d be easier to make friends, and the music program is better. If I was going to transfer I had to choose a place I knew I’d be happy.” The community of friendly Oles reassured Alex that he was making the right decision.

He mentioned that when he was younger he always saw himself going to Olaf, but in high school he changed his mind. Now Alex is a junior counselor and happy with his choice to transfer. He realizes that the high school pressure to get out of Northfield is not important, and now he enjoys attending school in his hometown. The advantages include being able to see his family if desired, an intimate knowledge of the town and the professors, and a friendly community. At the same time, he expressed some remorse that attending school in his hometown could “impair his personal growth” because it does not have the added challenges of a new town.

Alex is very aware of Northfield, even if he goes to town only twice a week. Alex feels that Olaf and Northfield have a healthy relation and that the town is proud of its colleges. Also, even though Alex could go home with relative ease he only goes home once or twice a month. However he said he “tr[ies] not to see my family too much. If I don’t see them I feel like I’m on my own and I don’t have to depend on them.” Nevertheless, he does enjoy the fact that he is close so that his family can come to concerts and he can still see his younger siblings. There was no family pressure for him to choose Olaf, in fact if anything he feels there was pressure to not go to Olaf. His family wanted to ensure he pursued all his options including those out of state. However, Alex finds the location to be ideal; the town is close enough to easily get to the twin

cities, yet it can still retain some of its small town charm. However, Alex is not pleased with the new developments that are making Northfield look like a suburb. He likes to think of the town as “quaint” but with the new stores the town is “losing some of its individuality.”

Isolation:

When students choose St. Olaf they usually have not fully anticipated what life will be like in a small town. Students from the suburbs may complain that there is nothing to do. However, they are not alone. A student from Northfield admitted that “I realize that there really isn’t much to do. During high school I was always at home on a school night and never went into Northfield, but now I realize there isn’t much excitement, but it hasn’t brought down the love for Northfield.” True, Northfield does not have all the opportunities of a big city, but many students see the complaints of boredom as a lack of creativity. A care-less junior remarked that feelings of isolation “are a choice. You can stay on campus all the time, or you can get away and do things.” A junior from Minnesota mentioned that St. Olaf brings in lots of entertainment and music concerts that are just as good as something available in the Cities. Other students would strongly disagree.

However, isolation may not be perceived as a bad thing. A sophomore from Indiana says “I think St. Olaf enjoys a great place in Northfield because it’s isolated enough from the Twin Cities, that by staying on campus you can relax and chill out, and don’t feel the pressure to go to town. It encourages people to study, it’s positive because it allows people a quiet hovel to recede to and do intellectual work and not be distracted by flashing lights and noisy streets.”

This same student also mentioned that he came to college to study and expand his mind, not to be a part of big city life.

The idea of being able to study and concentrate on studies came up often in interviews. When searching for positives of St. Olaf’s location a few students expressed a joy with living in a small town. A first year from a Minneapolis suburb likes that Olaf is not in a big city. “I like being in a small town. I look out my window and see fields, not ugly buildings.” The solitude of a small town is appealing to some, especially those from large cities. A first year from Chicago even mentioned the clean air as one of the benefits of Olaf’s location. The concern of safety also arose. Students from Northfield did not mention safety, but students from suburbs did. The fact that Northfield is a small town makes some students feel very safe. Also, the location of St. Olaf in relation to town adds an extra layer of safety. A junior from a suburb said “I think Olaf has a really attractive location because it still feels far away and safe from Northfield and other cities, but close enough that it is walkable and on a nice day it’s totally doable to go down without a car.” This brings up the question of

whether St. Olaf feels safe because there is no need for highly visible security or if it is naïve to pretend safety issues do not exist.

First year students often complained about transportation. In the middle of winter, without a car, is it difficult for students to get into town. Students were usually aware of the bus that goes into town and Carleton and other places, but most had never used it. Those who have tried to use the public transportation have found its hours too restrictive. “I wish one could call for a ride in the evenings,” said one first year from Oregon. “They have the ‘call for your ride-it’s free!’ but I’m like, that’s only from eight to five and I get out of choir at five-thirty, so I can’t do any of that, and I can’t go anywhere with my friends.” Reflecting back, a junior from the suburbs said, “The fact that they don’t let you have a car really changes how you have to interact with the surrounding neighborhood. Yeah, Northfield is a walk away, but that’s on a nice day. But in the middle of January you’re not gonna go volunteer in Northfield if you don’t have a car.” Another first year student said that he’d “like to see it (campus) a little closer to Northfield to make it a little more accessible during winter for those of us without cars.” Clearly campus cannot be moved, but the lack of transportation is a negative aspect of St. Olaf’s location and increases feelings of isolation.

Rosie, suburban Minnesota

When Rosie began looking at colleges in high school, she had little criteria other than that she wanted to stay in state. Her entire family and future lie in Minnesota, and so she saw little incentive to leave. She wanted to be sure to be near a large city, so that she would have fairly easy access to what she was used accustomed, being from one of the largest suburbs of the Twin Cities. So how is it that she ended up at St. Olaf? Rosie thought the students at Macalaster were all “snobs,” she claims, and there was a girl she knew who was going to Gustavus that she did not want to spend the next four years of her life with. That left Olaf as a non-spectacular, but non-offensive choice. She never even did an official campus visit, just hung out with a friend she knew. Rosie states that, “It was almost by default that I ended up at St. Olaf.”

Adjusting to life at Olaf was not very easy for Rosie either. The lack of diversity bothered her, and without a car she found it very hard to do things, being that “there’s not a whole lot to do in this college town besides go to college.” She also found the winter weather here was prohibitive; discouraging her from any activities she might have taken up in town. While she knew what she was getting herself into in coming to a rural town, she never realized that she “wouldn’t be able to release myself occasionally.” It got to the point where she actually considered transferring out after her first year, but stayed with the hope that things would get better as she got older and lived here longer, which

they did.

Having access to a car was key in helping her adjust. It gave Rosie a mode of transportation, and a way to get off campus when she needed to. She now goes into the Cities at least once a month. She also uses it to transport her to her volunteer work at the local schools in town, which she does for her Education major. Rosie now views St Olaf's location in a more positive light, describing it as "attractive."

To Rosie, Northfield is a "sweet, innocent, safe little haven" of a town that is also not a typical Minnesota small town. It is more progressive, and more educated than most, which she attributes to the presence of the two colleges in town. The town growth also does not bother her very much. She sees it as "inevitable...and the town owes it to itself to make it a positive thing."

Ultimately, though, Rosie finds nothing extremely spectacular about Northfield, and while the college and town have a good relationship, she believes it should not be overemphasized. St. Olaf and Northfield are two distinct communities, and the college needs to keep its focus in the classroom and not start putting its sights on the town. Through all the hardships of her early years, Rosie has come out thoroughly happy with her decision, and is eagerly anticipating next year when her brother will be joining her as a first-year Ole, a choice she refused to let him turn down.

Contradiction:

One idea that students expressed was the "I want it both ways" mentality. The quaintness of Northfield is enjoyed by students, but so are the big box retailers. Students also like being close to Minneapolis/St. Paul, and are torn on whether it would be better to be closer or further away. Students like the ease of Target and Cub, yet also like the small town charm of Division Street. One sophomore from the suburbs put it this way, "I wish there was some way the college people could be more involved with the Northfield community, like if we were closer. Well I don't even want to say that because I love how it's a separate community and allows you to focus, and we have so much farmland and prairie around us. I really like that, so I guess I can't want both things."

The location of Northfield is precarious; it is far enough away from a big city to maintain its character as a small town, yet the suburban sprawl of the greater Minneapolis area is encroaching on Northfield. Students from Northfield especially have noticed the increased suburbanization of Northfield and one student thinks "the town is losing some of its individuality. I still remember it (Northfield) being a small town, sort of quaint, but now it's becoming more suburban." However, this student also expanded on the benefits of being close to a big city and having the options of a big city almost at his fingertips.

Another type of contradiction students encounter is the difference between the

stereotypes of an upper Midwestern town and the reality of Northfield. When asked about stereotypes students had this to say: “People think that small towns are conservative and do not partake or think about larger events,” and “nothing important happens and it’s just fly-over country.” Another student described Midwestern stereotypes as “ignorant to the way things work,” and as having ideas that are “five to ten years behind” those on the coasts. However, the stereotype of a small town filled with conservative, hard working farmers does not fit Northfield, according to students. “Northfield doesn’t fit the stereotypes, there are about 5,000 students here, and lots of intellectual conversation that isn’t expected of a small town, and lots of speakers come to town so there are actually lots of ideas around,” one student summarized. Another remarked, “From my perception and guesses, Northfield is populated by normal small town folk, and professors, and professors’ kids, and other people who work in the cities, so it has a pretty diverse population.”

Many students mentioned how they feel St. Olaf and Carleton’s presence in Northfield helps to foster this sense that Northfield is “not your regular Minnesota small town.” The colleges help “diversif[y] the number of things you can do,” spoke one student. A junior mentioned that the higher education brings with it more liberal views that allow for shops like natural food co-ops, and events like Saturday morning peace vigils, that would not be common in non-college towns. By looking at political signs during the most recent election one student noticed that more conservative signs appeared on the edges of town, where people were farther away from the colleges. Whether the ideas the colleges bring in are liberal or conservative, however, another student noted that “the colleges help keep the town young and maintain a sense of fresh ideas.”

Jennifer, West Coast

Unlike Robert, there was very little in Northfield that reminded Jennifer of home. Used to the bustling life in her city of 70,000 people amidst the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, Jen was disturbed to come out here and see only sky. In fact there was little about the Midwest that did appeal to her: “I did not like the weather, I did not like the bugs, I did not like the landscape,” she firmly stated. Yet something still drew her out here.

When Jennifer began looking for a school she knew exactly what she wanted: a small liberal arts college with a close community experience and strong music program that was not very close to home. Her family actually encouraged her to get away not because they don’t get along, but because “it’s necessary for the intellectual development of a person to move away from their parents.” So she began her search, and St. Olaf actually turned out not only to be the closest one that she applied to, but was the smallest one, too. She would have preferred to

attend a college in a larger city, and actually wishes St Olaf was in a position more like Macalaster, but she makes do with St. Olaf's close proximity to the Cities. Even though she takes advantage of it less than she would like, Jennifer still enjoys having the comforting possibility of the Cities in her reach. What then attracted her to St. Olaf if the location seemed to hold little appeal? More so than the geography, the culture that St. Olaf and the Midwest exude attracted her. While some of the customs were slightly quirky and unfamiliar to her, she loved the open-armed, open-minded welcome she got from the first time she set her foot in town. It also caused her to realize and appreciate more the customs that she has at home that are different than they are here. Even though St. Olaf is not her ideal setting, she still loves the town. To describe the beautiful, quaint town she says, "It's the ideal old downtown that I think everyone wants to have in their picturesque mind." She thought it was perfect when she first came, but soon realized there were some drawbacks, suburban sprawl being one. With just the mention of Target, or Cub her attitude changes. "I hate it, absolutely hate it," she quips. "[It]'s more disgusting to me than anything else." While she understands the need for progress, it saddens her to see these "quick, cheap, easy to put up structures." She does her best to do as much shopping as she can in town, but is disappointed that many of her favorite stores have begun closing. Transportation is also a problem that she sees in the St. Olaf and Northfield community. While she enjoys St. Olaf's distance from Northfield, and the community that it engenders on the Hill, it makes it hard to get off campus. In addition, the transportation systems that are offered, such as the Love Bus and the shuttles, are far from adequate. She wishes the times these shuttles ran were expanded, and their service more punctual. However for all the less than satisfactory parts, and even though there is very little chance she will stay in the Midwest after graduating, she is incredibly happy with her decision. The community of people she has met is more than she ever could have asked for.

Summary:

To our initial surprise, there were few factors that students had in common when choosing St. Olaf. There were no patterns common for all Northfield students, or all students from outside of the upper Midwest. The college decision is very personal; each student had a very different story. Some students are more concerned with family connection while others look at the proximity to a metropolitan center. Although students shared with us their reasoning, there was much left unsaid. We cannot re-create the conversations students had with parents and the process before the acceptance letter was sent back to St. Olaf. In reality we can only know what students perceive as the factors that were important. We cannot forget the possibility that students may

have excluded important reasoning because it felt too personal.

The college decision is not an easy one. As explained by Kathleen M. Galotti, a professor at Carleton College, the college decision “has ramifications for family ties, friendships, and vocational and career plans.” The decision affects the student’s future after college in terms of “career opportunities, probability of admission to a graduate school” and in a personal realm, “intellectual development and social status.” In one of her many studies of the college decision she found college-bound high school students rated campus size, location, and campus atmosphere to be the most important institutional factors in the college decision. However, as with our study, many questions were left unasked. She does not mean to conclude that there are only four factors that affect the college decision, but rather that those were ranked by students as important aspects in their choice.

Students often commented on suburbanization of Northfield. Generally students do not like it because they feel it takes away from the character of Northfield. Although probably unavoidable, students would like to see Northfield stay a small town and not have more big chains open business here. The students had different reasons for not liking the effects that suburban sprawl brings. Some were disappointed that the larger chain superstores were beginning to push the smaller Division Street businesses out of business. Other students however were not as disappointed with the big chains, as with the way it changes the aesthetic appearance of the Northfield community, enjoying the pleasing nature of the well-planned old architecture in Northfield, as opposed to the often haphazardly, quickly designed structures that populate the suburbs. As long as Northfield keeps its downtown Division street zone, it could never really be counted as a suburb. As much as students may dislike the suburbanization, not one mentioned a willingness to give up the benefits. The one interaction all students shared was utilizing these large chain stores. They acknowledged the benefits the town gets from the expanded economy, and rising property prices, and since it is unlikely they will be able to reverse the town’s growth, they are learning to accept it.

The acknowledgement of the suburban sprawl on the part of St. Olaf students shows that even if they do not necessarily consider themselves a part of the Northfield community, they at least have an awareness of the town itself. When asked how their perceptions of Northfield have changed since coming here, many mentioned that they have become more familiar with it, more aware of what it has to offer, good or bad. They have built a relationship with the town, some more than others, and appreciate its uniqueness.

Students from Northfield have already had this awareness, and many times find themselves defending their hometown against students not from Northfield, mentioning a shallowness, or self-centeredness about the students who do not

try to understand the town. But the fact still remains that most students do not think about the town very often, because as many mentioned, they get all the community feeling they need on campus. Some felt Olaf would be better served by keeping the student focus on their studies and in the classroom, while others felt the college has a responsibility in promoting the benefits the town has to offer. A sophomore thinks St. Olaf should emphasize the unique things that make Northfield such a great town to have a college in. "We have a Buddhist Meditation Centre! We have a center for sustainable living, we have all different kinds of churches, we have an Indian restaurant, I think they should play that up. And the town smells like cereal, it doesn't get any better than that, like on a warm summer day when it smells like cookies and popcorn. That's the best."

Although not explicitly stated by all the students from Northfield, each made clear the separation from home and school. Even though St. Olaf is located in their hometown, it can seem very far away. The students are able to separate themselves by creating a new realm of community. By creating new friendships at St. Olaf and living with peers, students feel a sense of independence not possible during high school. Students may be geographically close to home, but a daily life that is different than home life can make any situation seem far from home. College is a new experience in many ways; living arrangements, daily schedule, and family obligations are different. The change of lifestyle is one way that students can feel separate from home. One way to interpret this shift from home identity to school identity is through Symbolic Interactionism. The definition of a person's identity is dependant on the particular situation. A person's role as a student changes when he goes home, then he becomes a son or brother. The remark from a student from Northfield that he "reverts back to more of my Northfield identity during the summer" exemplifies how situation defines identity. Goffman's role distance theory reasons that individuals desire to separate themselves from the role they occupy. Thus students from Northfield are able to distance themselves from their home identity and occupy a student identity. All students at St. Olaf inhabit a student role, as Goffman would say, because the sense of self is shaped by the interactions between others and the social world. Therefore students understand themselves as students because they interact with other students and fulfill the expectations of the student role.

Although there were few, if any, negative comments from students about Northfield, there is room to strengthen the relationship. At many larger universities located in sizeable cities, programs have been created to integrate students into the community and improve not only the relation but also the surrounding area. However, many of these programs are created because the surrounding neighborhood has a troubled history. The Vice-President of

Fordham University summarized the issue: “We know that if the surrounding neighborhood is in trouble, then we’re in trouble.” Although the neighborhoods surrounding St. Olaf are not dangerous to the extent of downtown Los Angeles, St. Olaf could learn from these integration programs. The University of Pennsylvania invested in its West Philadelphia neighborhood by installing more lights and hiring local residents to serve as “safety ambassadors.” Northeastern is building a residence hall where students and working class residents live side by side, and Fordham has created a library for local teenagers. These are just a few of the ways in which schools are working to improve relations with the community.

There are many topics that we did not cover in our research. When asking students about their college search our questions were focused on factors outside the actual school such as location, family, and proximity to a large city. We did not delve into academic appeal, professor to student ratio, or athletic interests. Research by George Washington University, however, shows that a college known for its academic appeal and other related factors would help it draw a more national base of students. By directly correlating academic “quality” of a school with its market appeal, the study showed that there is a hierarchy of a colleges’ spatial attraction based on national, regional, or local appeal. Given the prompt, students would likely have included reasons including the school itself. Once the decision is made and a student is living here it is difficult to remember exactly what was important when applying to school. Our research focused on non-institutional factors for choosing St. Olaf. Consequently, the answers we received reflected the questions asked.

The St. Olaf Admissions web page includes a link about a “community of faith,” and while many of the interviewed students did not specifically mention religion, many others included a religious school as one of the qualifications they were initially looking for, and many included “Lutheran” as a Midwestern stereotype. The college was not only founded as an academic institution, but also as one that centers on a life of faith, and many students enjoy the focus that is given to religion. One student from Alaska mentioned that she enjoyed the respectfulness given to all religions on campus. Many of the students also found their primary outreach into the Northfield community through the local churches. Some taught Sunday School lessons at St. John’s Lutheran Church, while others enjoyed the chance to volunteer for charity walks at St. Thomas Catholic Church. While many students do not embrace the colleges’ religious heritage, it is still apparent that some still enjoy the benefits that being a “college of the church” bring.

Given more time it would be fascinating to research how Northfield residents view St. Olaf. The variance of relation to the school in itself would yield interesting results. This, however, would require time and resources not

available for a semester long project.

One plan of action that we suggest after our research involves improving transportation options. Most of the first year students at St. Olaf do not have cars nor have access to vehicles. Access does not necessarily involve allowing more students to have cars, however. It is important to distinguish between improving transportation options into town, and creating transportation situations that could potentially turn the college into a “suitcase campus.” Lack of transportation is what keeps many students on campus and out of town. While staying on campus has its benefits, the town of Northfield has much to offer students. Several students expressed the desire for better and more transportation to Northfield, as walking into town on a February afternoon appeals to very few people. If it were easier for students to get into town the student-town interactions could be increased and improved. Unwanted feelings of isolation could be reduced through easier and more prevalent options for student transportation.

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Appendix A: Protocol

Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in my project for a research methods course required for my major in sociology/ anthropology taught by Professor Chris Chiappari, who is supervising my project. My project is aimed at examining the relation between St. Olaf and Northfield. We are particularly interested in understanding what, if any, influence the location of St. Olaf plays into college choice, and I will be interviewing students both from Northfield, Minnesota, and distant states. I will be asking you a number of questions, and the interview will take about an hour. I will write a paper that will be available on the sociology/ anthropology department web site, and I may present a summary of my findings at a professional sociology or anthropology conference.

I will protect your identity and the confidentiality of the information you give me. This means that I will not disclose your participation in this project to anyone else or include information in any papers, presentations, or discussions about my project that would allow someone else to identify you.

I hope the results of our study will contribute to a greater understanding of the reasons students select St. Olaf and how perceptions of the town change over years both from students from near Northfield and further a field.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decline to respond to specific questions, or you can stop the interview at any point. If you change your mind about allowing me to use your information after the interview, please let me know by April 30, 2005.

I will give you a copy of this statement as well as my contact information if you have any concerns or questions.

Thanks again for agreeing to be interviewed. I am anxious to hear your responses to my questions.

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Appendix B: Questionnaire

If this questionnaire, or any questions asked herein make you uncomfortable, you have the right to abstain from answering that/those questions. You also have the right to refuse to fill out this questionnaire in its entirety. Information will be used for analysis purposes only, and will be kept strictly confidential

What is your year at Olaf?

What State are you from?

What is the size of your hometown?

How often do you go into Northfield each semester? (estimate)

How often do you visit the Twin Cities each semester? (estimate)

How often do you go home each semester? (estimate)

If you applied to other schools what are they and where are they located? (city and state)

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Questions:

(To be read before the interview begins)

-You have the right to abstain from answering any of the following questions, if you so desire.

-If you feel uncomfortable at any point during questioning, you have the right to terminate this interview.

-Information will be used for analysis purposes only, and will be kept strictly confidential.

Explain the geography of your hometown (lakes, mountains, coastline etc.)

What were you looking for in a college? Campus size, city size, liberal arts

Did you look at schools outside of your home state? If so, how many?

How did you learn about St. Olaf?

Did you visit Olaf before applying? In what context?

To what extent did Northfield's location affect your college decision?

What appeal did Minnesota hold in your decision?

Why did you choose to come to St. Olaf?

How important was it to stay close to home?

How important was it to be near a big city?

Where are your friends at St. Olaf from geographically?

How familiar are you with the Midwest?

What sort of activities are you involved with in Northfield?

Where do you go in Northfield and what do you do?

What kind of values do you see embodied in the Midwest?

What sort of stereotypes do you have of a small Midwest town?

What are the positives and negatives about St. Olaf's location, Northfield, and Minnesota?

How would you describe "the bubble" effect that St. Olaf has? (Does it have to do with access to resources (ex cable tv), the rural location of the college, other factors?)

How would you describe the relationship between Northfield and St. Olaf?

How do you feel about living in a rural town?

Has your perception of Northfield changed after living here?

Where do you expect to go after graduation?