

Fight or Flight: Multicultural Student Life at St. Olaf College

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SETTING

St. Olaf College is a predominantly white, private, liberal arts college with about 3,000 students. It is located in Northfield, Minnesota, has a cherished Norwegian heritage, and is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Students of color account for about nine percent of the student body.

PROBLEM

Numerous research accounts have illustrated the difficulties facing students of color at predominantly white colleges and universities. Our intent was to explore the dynamics of multicultural student life at St. Olaf College, and what might be done to improve it.

METHODOLOGY

The sample population included first-year through senior year students of color at St. Olaf who are associated with Student Support Services (SSS), the Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach office (MACO), and/or multicultural organizations on campus. We interviewed fifteen students from this population, as well as six faculty/staff members involved in multicultural student life on campus. To select these students, we conducted a snowball sample, consulting students involved in the aforementioned groups, created a list, and then extracted a stratified random sample from the list. Faculty and staff members were chosen at the recommendation of the students interviewed, and were not necessarily of color.

OBSERVATIONS

Students of color generally face considerable cultural isolation, experiences with racial and ethnic stereotyping, and even discrimination at St. Olaf. They are expected to educate the broader St. Olaf community about multicultural issues, to be tokens of diversity, to represent their racial or ethnic group, and still be able to gain the most out of their St. Olaf education. In search of support, cultural expression, and empowerment, students often become very active in multicultural organizations on campus and/or more heavily involved

in the SSS program. Yet this is met with hostility and generally seen as self-segregation by the larger student body. The marginalization of multicultural programs and events also leads to further feelings of isolation among students of color. However, these groups and programs play a vital role in multicultural student retention, as they are a crucial source of mentorship, guidance, and support.

CONCLUSIONS

Currently, the situation of multicultural students at St. Olaf mirrors the ethnic and racial marginalization and desegregation that exists in the larger society. This does not reflect well on a college committed to service. Similarly, as more and more first generation college students are students of color, the college's mission demands that St. Olaf become a truly more diverse campus. Given the college's strong Norwegian Lutheran heritage, this move will undoubtedly meet resistance.

The St. Olaf Community

St. Olaf College, founded by Norwegian immigrants in 1874, is a private, liberal arts college located in Northfield, MN. Northfield is a rural Minnesota town, located approximately thirty-five miles south of the Twin Cities, with two colleges and a population of about 17,000 people. Roughly 3,000 students attend St. Olaf, whose mission promotes a liberal arts education rooted in the Christian gospel, and providing students with a global perspective. Also, "Forty-four academic majors, 27 intercollegiate sports, a world-renowned music program, and a nationally recognized commitment to international study help St. Olaf fulfill its mission to develop and nurture mind, body and spirit" (www.stolaf.edu/about). Its strong Lutheran heritage and affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America help it lead the nation in the number of graduates who have earned a Ph.D. in theology. Its rigorous academic programs earn similar honors in mathematics and the natural sciences. Demographically, St. Olaf is a predominantly white college, with about 9.4% of the student body being students of color (percentage indicates the number of students who self-report being something other than white/Caucasian on their St. Olaf application). The demographic makeup of the student body has changed very little to not at all over the last ten years (www.stolaf.edu/offices/irp/enrollment/ethnic.html). The majority of the students on campus, about 62%, receive financial aid, and the average financial aid award is about \$18,000 at a college costing about \$29,000 annually (www.stolaf.edu/offices/irp/Pbl/CDS/03H.finaid.pdf). Thus, we can infer that the St. Olaf student body from a range of economic backgrounds. In addition,

the college's relatively large number of first generation college students creates a St. Olaf community that is socioeconomically diverse.

Statement of the Problem

On a campus dominated by white students and staff, the experiences of multicultural students will inevitably differ from those of their white peers. The wide body of research discussing the experience of students of color on predominantly white campuses is fairly consistent in its findings. Students of color face a large degree of cultural isolation, experience longer and more difficult adjustment periods, confront varying degrees of racial or ethnic discrimination and/or prejudice, and often don't share the same amount of social and academic support as their white peers. These factors have a significant impact on multicultural student retention and academic performance (see bibliography for specific studies).

The purpose of this study is to explore the specific dynamics of multicultural students' experiences at St. Olaf, and whether multicultural students, faculty, and staff view these experiences as positive or negative. We also intend to further our understanding of why they perceive it as such.

Methodology

Our study consisted of twenty-one interviews, fifteen of which were conducted with current students, the other six with faculty/staff. All of our student interviewees were multicultural students, and our sample was created using snowball sampling. An initial group of multicultural students were identified by their participation in multicultural organizations and their time spent in the MACO office. Using these individuals as starting points and asking them for the names of other persons they consider to be multicultural students, we created a list of possible interviewees. From this list, we conducted a stratified random sampling of fifteen students based on their race/ethnicity, gender, and year in school. Out of the fifteen students of color interviewed, nine were female and six were male. There were five Black/African-American students interviewed, four Latino students interviewed, and five Asian/Asian-American students interviewed. Four were first year students, one was a sophomore student, five were junior students, and five were seniors.

For faculty and staff, we sought out six individuals who were identified by multicultural students as friends/mentors of the multicultural student body, heavily involved in multicultural activities, and seriously engaged in multicultural student life. These faculty/staff members were not necessarily multicultural individuals.

For participant observation purposes, we utilized the Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach Office (MACO), Flaten Hall (location of the Student Support Services (SSS) Program), Stav Hall, and multicultural organization meetings. These organizations included the Asian Cultures Association (ACA) organization, Hmong Awareness Group (HAG), the Cultural Union for Black Expression (CUBE), Presente, and the Muslim Student Association (MSA). All requests for interviews were conducted in person and interview notes were recorded in writing. The confidentiality of participants' identities was assured, and so will not be disclosing names or year in school in our findings. Gender and ethnicity are also undisclosed except when interview citations require them. In one case, an alias is used to protect the identity of the participant.

Findings

In one of our final interviews, we asked a student this question, "What should St. Olaf do to improve life at the college for students of color?" His answer provides a telling introduction to our findings:

"People need to learn more about other cultures. Now, the student body is not really integrated, it looks like this (left illustration). There's some mixing, some converging, and some pulling apart. Or maybe it looks like this [laughs] (right illustration). Some people can graduate not knowing anyone from the other group."

The fact of the matter is, the experiences of students of color at St. Olaf differ significantly from those of their white peers, because of the relative segregation and cultural isolation that they encounter. The findings listed below are an attempt to document how these experiences unfold.

First however, a few clarifications are needed. If conducting this research has taught us anything, it is that the experiences of multicultural students at St. Olaf are as diverse as the group of people itself. Also, the need of multicultural

students to be viewed as individuals is very real. For these reasons, we are very wary of depriving people of their individual experiences, stories, and opinions. Yet the nature of our research compels us to focus on those trends and patterns that seem to pervade multicultural student life. Additionally, our findings must not be understood as a description of the “average” multicultural student experience at St. Olaf. No such experience exists; it is very unlikely that any individual student’s experience plays out exactly as we have outlined below.

As two final notes, any use of the term “diversity” in this paper refers explicitly to difference based on race or ethnic heritage, unless otherwise stated. Also, we have decided to use the terms “multicultural students” and “students of color” interchangeably. We are aware that a great deal of debate exists around the use of this terminology. Yet we found that most of those students and faculty interviewed tended to use the terms interchangeably, and so shall we.

Expectations

For students of color who were able to visit the St. Olaf campus as prospective students, they were able to physically observe the campus environment, get a feel for the make up the student body, faculty, and staff, and for a short time, experience the atmosphere of the classroom and cafeteria. With these preconditions, students of color oftentimes formulate expectations of themselves, the campus environment and of student life on campus. In general, students who choose to attend St. Olaf often come with academic and social expectations. However, these expectations vary among incoming students of color. Socially, expectations are slightly different for students of color than those of white students because of the fact that the St. Olaf campus is a predominantly white campus. Academically, students typically feel that college coursework will be more challenging and difficult than high school coursework.

Nevertheless, students of color who were enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs felt they were prepared for college work. Additionally, programs like Upward Bound (federally funded TRIO program like the Student Support Services Program (SSS)) united high school students with college students to help them realize their potential for college. These college students served as mentors and offered personal and academic guidance for high school students working toward obtaining a college education. Socially, students of color expected to be a part of the underrepresented group on campus, the minorities at a predominantly white

campus. Not only would students of color be among the few on campus, they would be among the few off campus as well, in Northfield itself. It is also important to point out that among students of color, there were those who came here hoping to begin their college journey on a clean slate, without any expectations and those who came with their expectations laid out. The following quotes illustrate the variety of expectations expressed by some of the students interviewed:

“I came here without any expectations, I didn’t know what wanted, I just fell into place.”

“Academically, I figured I’d be about average because St. Olaf took in lots of private school kids, from the suburbs.”

“I would like to learn about other cultures, but not feel pushed to meet people. I want to make friends who are lifelong, those to count on in the future, after graduation.”

“I expected more people to be aware of things outside their upbringing and immediate surroundings, be into social and political change, working for change.”

“I knew it was very challenging and that I’d have to compete with people with a better education. I was scared I was not able to succeed.”

Whether these expectations have or have not been met also differ. Overall, academic expectations have been met and students of color are satisfied with their college education. The transition from high school to college has been challenging and the college coursework more demanding and in-depth. Socially, many students of color feel the need to be on a more multicultural campus, with more students, faculty, and staff of color. In order for any student- black, white, or purple, to feel at ease and at home while at college, they must be comfortable in the space they’re in. At a college where most of its students stay on campus, it has great potential to be like a home away from home. If students of color do not feel that they can be themselves in an environment such as St. Olaf, where they are surrounded by white students, faculty, and staff who may not contribute to a welcoming and accepting environment, students of color must deal with the fact that their four years here will be met with great challenges. These challenges may serve as distractions if they are not dealt with in a positive manner and students of color may end up dropping out, transferring, or going through life at St. Olaf unsatisfied.

Consequently, many students of color seek refuge through interacting with other students of color, faculty, and staff, and participate in multicultural organizations on campus.

This social phenomenon among students of color is the foundation that draws others like them to become unified with one another as active members who are reaching for similar goals. These goals are to spread cultural awareness, raise multicultural issues on campus through events and discussion, and express themselves as individuals without being lumped into one group. Even students of color who weren't as involved in multicultural affairs in high school have found St. Olaf to be a starting point for creating communities, developing leadership skills, and increasing their own self-confidence levels of a diverse community.

Experiences with culture shock, stereotypes, discrimination, and racism

During the early stages of adjustment to the campus environment and student life, students of color often begin to experience culture shock. Being a student of color on a white campus affects all aspects of student life. In a classroom setting, students of color are either non-existent or very few. When a student of color is tardy or absent from class, it is more noticeable and easier for the professor and other students to point out. In the field or on the court, students of color can quickly be identified through mere skin or hair color. In the cafeteria, students of color are known to sit together at one table, or in one particular area. These types of experiences allows for many students of color to feel less as individuals and more as a part of a colored group. It also allows white students to look upon students of color as an "exclusive people" who segregate themselves among the rest of the students on campus. As a result, students of color become quickly aware extremely cautious of the issues they must face when dealing with white students.

Before being able to deal with a problem, the problem must first and foremost be acknowledged. White students are often perceived as being ignorant among many students of color because they are completely oblivious to multicultural issues and don't know how to interact with students of color. They are hesitant to break the ice and befriend students of color. They hold to their stereotypes of people of color and are at times afraid to be around people of color alone. At the opposite extreme, some white students who have been able to acquire at least one friend of color feel they have made great strides in becoming more accepting and understanding of people of color.

“The white kids say, “It’s not that bad, what are you bitching about?” They have passive aggressive attitude and smile behind the mean truth.”

“People will talk to me about how they were racist, that they never had a black friend. It’s good...but it’s uncomfortable. People don’t worry about saying more racist things when I’m around”

These perceptions from white students about students of color are causes of stereotypes that lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication. Using the findings from a 2001 Sociology /Anthropology research paper by alumna Jessica Knutson entitled, “White Students Perspectives on Racial Diversity at St. Olaf College” white students believed that students of color were admitted to this college through Affirmative Action. The white students she interviewed felt that race and racism were not issues that existed on the campus; this kind of “white ignorance” is usually apparent in white students who aren't culturally competent. Many white students at St. Olaf come from either small towns or the suburb where there is less ethnic diversity, have parents who have a college education, went to prestigious high schools, come from at least middle class families, and have had minimal or no real exposure to people of color. These students who have had encounters with people of color either have watched people of color as portrayed on television or in the media. Students who had few friends of color in high school or growing up may feel that they have a firm grasp on race issues. Students of color commented on conceptions they thought white students had about them. Here are some responses:

“They think that we like to exclude ourselves from the rest. They ask, why do all students of color sit together? But they don’t notice that many kids are white at the colored table [in the cafeteria].”

“They think we got here through Affirmative Action, that we always get to class late or don’t show up to class...or that we’re here on scholarships.”

“They think that we’re all poor and “ghetto.”

“They think we’re more likely to be lazier, that we have a different agenda. Whites tend to think minorities have different goals in college and for the most part, are too liberal for understanding things like politics. They think that we’re more likely to swear.”

“I don’t want to generalize, because there area lot of different white people on

campus. I'm guilty of it too. There are some who are comfortable with making multicultural friends, but some are intimidated. I've heard some say that minorities don't get good grades and are let in because the school is sympathetic, that we're not qualified to be here (because of programs like SSS), there's a lot of misunderstandings. I try not to think about it."

Students of color often report having perceived feelings of racial discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes. Some white students do not intentionally mean to be racist, whereas other white students are blatantly racist. Stereotypical and racial offensive comments have been directed toward students of color at St. Olaf, other comments are subtler. Many of these stereotypes stem from not only miscommunication from the media, but a lack of communication between whites and people of color. This lack of communication may result in the development of preconceived notions and set the stage for stereotypes, discrimination, and racism. Students were asked, "Have you had experiences with stereotyping at St. Olaf? These experiences may or may not include prejudice or discrimination. Could you explain?" The following are some of the responses:

"It hasn't affected me personally, but talking to other minority students on campus, the majority of them have."

"We're cool because we can sing and dance. We're loud. We can't be trusted. If we can't afford it, we shouldn't come here. We're "people escaping poverty" [referring to the former Professional Exploration Program (PEP) program]."

"People assume I know how to speak an Asian language fluently or that I may not be good at English. "

"People act "black" to me just because I'm black. They say, "I love it when you do the black thing" and "Man, I wish I was black."

"I'm a lazy Latino. Because I'm a minority male, I'm a playa. Some assume I'm so liberal, I'm an atheist."

"I don't even know how to react now, I just kinds let it slide, get it off my back, and for get about it...their loss you know?"

Sometimes there is a lack of understanding within racial groups among students of color. For instance, there are many people who can be categorized as being Asian or Hispanic, but people often overlook the fact that there are

many subdivisions within these categories such as language, dialect, traditions, food, clothing, etc. that people should learn to acknowledge.

“People tell me what it means to be black in America.”

“I have a hard time connecting even with a lot of Asian students here...we’re culturally different.”

“ People don’t realize that there are differences between those of the same ethnicity...such as national identity. You don’t have to be outside of the multicultural group to have these experiences.”

Women of color face a “double barrier” of being victims of stereotypes not only by race but also by gender. Even though this issue was not raised directly within the students we interviewed, except for one example provided, we felt that this was another dimension of stereotypes that exists within the broader category toward people of color. One of our interviewees gave us this example of an incident that took place in a St. Olaf gymnasium:

“You would be a good basketball player, why aren’t you on a team?”

Women of color outnumber the men of color on campus. Professor Joan Hepburn is the founder of the Women of Color group on campus and has worked relentlessly to provide a support group for the young women of color on campus (within recent years, the Men of Color group formed on campus). This group was originally made up of African American women, but throughout the 1990’s has expanded and become more ethnically diverse. The Women of Color group is a framework for discussing issues of importance pertaining to women of color. These issues range anywhere from discussing study abroad trips, to future career choices, to interpreting dreams, to coming up with fundraising ideas, to planning trips and activities and the list goes on. Professor Hepburn usually provides dinners at her home, with the understanding that her women of color enjoy home-cooked meals. She is warm and welcoming and makes her group of women feel like they’re at a home away from home. She often invites mentors to speak at group meetings, and in many ways she has inspired the older women of color to mentor the younger women of color on campus.

Some white professors are also guilty of stereotyping and discrimination. White professors focusing too much attention to racial heritage can lead to discrimination in the classroom. It can result in provide false assumptions of multicultural students and their academic abilities. These professors may feel

that they have more than enough knowledge to inform students about race issues through their research and therefore need no students of color to contribute to class discussions to tell them otherwise. Thus, students of color find themselves being discriminated against and misunderstood. Professors may even expect less academically for students of color and “go easy” on them. A few students interviewed reported that some professors have shown direct discrimination and underestimation of their intellectual abilities. These students shared the following experiences:

“There were three multicultural students in the class. We all missed class once at different times. But the professor pulled all of us aside to say that we’d been missing class a lot. That professor put us together as a group.”

“My professor was unhappy with my performance, but wouldn’t talk to me. The professor went to the Dean of Students office and accused me of cheating. It made me want to leave school. I felt the need to prove myself. I took the test over and we found out that someone else had cheated off of me. I didn’t want to deal with racism.”

“My professor pointed me out in class and asked if I understood. The professor apologized for not talking enough about black people.

Overall, many students interviewed felt that professors believe in their ability as a student are helpful in providing the support needed to succeed academically. These professors have made students of color feel more comfortable in the classroom and in their offices.

“I haven’t really felt any discrimination. I feel some empathy at times, which has caused me to push a little harder because they [professors] recognize that we’re more susceptible to lose motivation.”

“I think that professors not only believe in your ability as a student, they see where your potential may lay.”

“I’ve never had experiences with a professor judging me before seeing my work.”

“I think it depends on the professor. The ones I’ve had have either been lenient or harder. They grade me equally as others.”

“For the most part, St. Olaf has done a good job training professors to help

minority students. It's the students they need to work on."

When students were asked if they felt other students believed in their ability as a student, the responses also ranged.

"I don't care if they believe in me or not, I think me being in college says something in itself. We're all here for the same reason which is to get a college education."

"Students expect a lot from me, I feel that other students feel that I have the ability as a student."

"Sometimes when I worked in groups, I dreaded working in groups. When someone takes charge, I have to prove myself to show that I'm as intelligent as they are. I'm not sure if it's because of the people's personality or because of their race."

"They see me as an outsider and what I have to say is not standard or academically smart. I think outside the box, and it would hurt their grades. They like to regurgitate what they read in the book without questioning it. Or they take professors' words as the final say."

Possessing cultural competency is one factor that may be lacking and therefore causing false perceptions made by white students about students of color. Trying to build one's understanding about people from other cultures is important to help eliminate false notions about those from other cultures. It is easy to lump individuals together based on one experience or one person. This may result in "tokenism," where one person is representative of the whole. In cases where race is involved, especially in the classroom, a student of color may be asked or expected to speak on behalf of his/her whole entire culture and race.

This is a critical point for many multicultural students because if they spend too much time thinking about all the wrong things and questioning themselves and why they are at a place like St. Olaf, they may stay trapped in this culture shock. They may not identify as being an "Ole." Thoughts about leaving St. Olaf, and perhaps transferring to a bigger, more diverse school may arise, resulting in a bitter attitude and less satisfaction with student life on campus altogether.

"I feel like it's been stolen. Life has passed me up. I spend too much time explaining myself and my life to people. They ask me, why do you talk like

that? Why do you have all that hair stuff? Nah ah, that stuff didn't really happen to you. They think it's a joke."

Social Support

Social support is key in students' satisfaction with the college and retention. Friends, especially other students of color, family, role models, and mentors are all essential in providing a sense of familiarity, worth, guidance, and comfort in an environment such as St. Olaf. Campus resources such as the Multicultural Affairs Office, Student Support Services, and Multicultural organizations are necessary at institutions such as St. Olaf to provide a sense of belonging and support network for students of color. Academic support is also important to students' academic performance. Sometimes experiences with stereotypes, discrimination, and racism affect academic performance, it either pushes students of color to deepen their insecurities, to continue questioning their abilities as a student, or it impels them to strive even harder toward academic success. When students of color internalize these stereotypes of oppression, they may feel disadvantaged and unable to succeed academically as white students. Here are a few testimonies from students who felt that such experiences had affected their academic performance:

"[I] think about it all the time and push myself. I ask, how come I can't meet these expectations? I wanted to prove myself to show that I am really smart. I became more driven to prove people wrong, it kind of motivates you, but it's not good motivation."

"It puts self-doubt in my head, I never had that until I got here, the fact that students felt they were better than me...the ones that went to prep schools. I felt they were [better than me] and wanted to be close to their academic performance. If the white students were a "B" student, I'd be a "C" student, just so I'd stay low. My friends always told me how smart I was, but I didn't believe I was, I thought I was here by luck."

Students of color differentiate and sometimes separate feelings of being welcome, accepted, and fitting in. The campus climate plays a significant role in providing an environment for which students feel they are welcome. The way white students, faculty, and staff treat and interact with students of color provides an outlet for acceptance on this campus. Whereas, fitting in may be the biggest challenge of the three due to demographics of the college. The

majority of the students at St. Olaf are white, blond haired, blue-eyed, and come from higher economic backgrounds. Most of the white students here have been educated in a suburban or private school setting. On the other hand, most of the students of color here are from urban settings and have been educated in public schools that are very diverse in terms of ethnic representation. Students talked about their feelings of being welcome at St. Olaf, acceptance, and fitting in:

“I don’t scream that I’m from St. Olaf. I don’t sport St. Olaf clothing, I don’t have pride, I don’t show spirit. It ‘s just a school I go to.”

“Largely, students are very open-minded, which may partly be due to the major.”

“It’s a little bit harder to be recognized as an “Ole” because we’re not typical.”

“I guess I don’t fit in because I’m not the demographic norm. People who stand out and those who don’t fit in are the ones making a difference here, those are the ones challenging the norms.”

“I feel welcome here, admissions chose me for a reason, I had something St. Olaf College would benefit from. I don’t feel accepted here because I’m not white.”

“I feel recruited so people can learn what it’s like to be like me.”

‘I fit where I want to fit.’”

The Summer Bridge Program through SSS, is a core part of the program that allows students who are accepted into the program to experience a small part of St. Olaf College life through a five-week program during the summer that usually begins at the end of July. The aim of the program is also to provide students with study skills, receive academic advising through SSS advisors and SSS upperclassmen who serve as teaching assistants and mentors, and have fun through social and cultural activities put on by the SSS staff. Another important part of the program is that students get to take an introductory biology course along with a lab component, which a St. Olaf professor teaches. This gives SSS students an opportunity to gain exposure to the rigor of college courses, professors, and get an early feel of the campus.

After successful completion of the program, SSS students receive one biology credit that counts toward their graduation requirement. However, the

Summer Bridge Program is not a requirement for being a member of the SSS program. SSS Students may decide to spend their summers doing other things, but many SSS take advantage of this summer opportunity because it may serve as a starting point at St. Olaf and as a bonus, it offers students an opportunity to meet other SSS students. Students of color account for approximately seventy-percent of SSS students. It is during the Summer Bridge Program that SSS students begin to form close bonds with one another. These bonds continue to grow in numbers and in strength as more and more students join the program. Students in the SSS program not only make friends who are students of color, they also make white friends. The majority of students of color however, reported having more multicultural friends than white friends and that the SSS program is one of reasons why.

“More of my friends are SSS students and multicultural students.”

“My closest friends are in the SSS program.”

“We went to high school together and were in the same programs but didn’t become friends until the Summer Bridge Program.”

“The majority of my friends are multicultural...that I met through SSS...we bonded and from there, everyone just stuck together.”

The tight friendships formed during the SSS program have had a significant impact on student of colors’ level of satisfaction at St. Olaf. These friendship groups were reported by almost all of the students interviewed as being sources of support. Not only were friends important aspects of their lives at St. Olaf, their friends were like their family. These friends provide a strong sense of connection that the SSS program helps to build. It was more important for students of color to have a few very good friends than to have many friends who were around and in passing. Students in the SSS program share a commonality with one another, for example, through their life experiences, ethnicities, preferences in entertainment, geographical background, etc. It is this type of understanding between students of color that allows them to be more open and trusting in their relationships with other students of color. These students added that it is because of their friends that they are still here at St. Olaf. A few expressed that friends are an important part of their experience here, but are not the determining factor on their level of satisfaction with the college.

“Over the years, I’ve had lots of friends come and go, so I try not tot let it

determine my satisfaction here. My friends have been really good, they helped me realize that I'm not just some fluke who got into college. They're good for support."

"If my friends weren't here, I wouldn't be here...I would have quit."

"It's not about the quantity, it's about the quality. I don't have lots of friends, but what I do have is a good group of friends."

"My friends are a huge part of why I stayed, even in the challenges and trying to make a difference. I at least have a support system, someone who knows how I'm feeling...someone I can talk to."

There is a need for more effective dialogue among all students, faculty, and staff on campus to address issues dealing with ethnic diversity, multiculturalism, and race on campus. If there is no dialogue between whites and people of color, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and misunderstandings will continue to pervade our lives and infect us with a preventable disease. Change will not happen on its own, someone needs to take the initiative.

"We represent a challenge that they need to have to get out of the comfort zone. If they want to take that challenge, that's when they communicate with us. If not, they need to be pushed by one of their own. We represent change, not only domestically on campus, but the new America- international students, immigrants, first, second, third, fourth generational people whose forefathers struggled to be here. We represent the struggle and that's how I believe faculty and staff see us."

Multicultural Spaces, Cultural Expression, and Support

Another primary way multicultural students rectify their need for social support and cultural expression is through participation in multicultural organizations and MACO and SSS activities. MACO and SSS serve important roles in supporting multicultural students, multicultural activities, and developing a more positive community climate. Yet beyond their determined functions, these offices form needed spaces for students to be among those who they can relate to culturally, as well as those who share their daily struggles and feelings of marginalization. In these spaces, students of color are able to meet new people, congregate, socialize, carry out business, and just be

themselves. In the same way, multicultural organization meetings and activities are important sources of social support and group solidarity among members. A few examples illustrate this point:

“I knew coming here was going to be a lot like my high school – predominantly white, rich-kid culture. But I also knew that there would be others like me – multicultural students who shared common struggles. I came looking for that group of people who I could be good friends with... For sure it has to do with a common struggle. I can’t get away from that; it’s the truth. That commonality builds a special relationship between multicultural students.”

“[I participate in multicultural organizations] because I know the people in those organizations can relate to me and my situation as a woman of color in this country.”

“When I walk into the MACO office, I know I can say whatever I need to say and people will understand... I will wait all day to share things until I go in there.”

“[How do you react to experiences of stereotyping?] With intellectual reproof. I usually get very educational... but eventually I just hang out with colored people. Eventually, I need to get away from that environment, to get away from having to educate.”

“There are certain times of day when I feel like I can act multicultural... When I’m in MACO, I can be multicultural.”

The first two examples demonstrate multicultural students’ need to be around others who can understand their experiences as people of color in a predominantly white environment. The need is real and becomes a point of solidarity amongst an otherwise very diverse group of people. Though most students acknowledged that the summer bridge program formed the basis for many of their relationships, what keeps them together throughout the years at St. Olaf seems to be their common experiences as people of color at a white college. Moreover, the last three examples illustrate the importance of spaces like the MACO office and multicultural student organizations in creating a type of haven for these students on an otherwise white campus. They are places where students of color can go to feel at home.

The reality of these places as multicultural spaces is also demonstrated by white students’ reaction to these spaces. For example, students of color are highly criticized for eating meals together in the cafeteria. They are accused of

isolating themselves from the rest of the student body. Multicultural students do nothing to discourage white students from eating with them (there are always white friends mixed among the group), yet the space is perceived by many to be exclusively for students of color. Our field notes offer another example of this:

“As I walked into the MACO office with Becky, who I was about to interview, we had to sneak by a white female student standing in the doorway. The student was speaking with a friend inside the office, but was reluctant to enter. Instead, she stood in the doorway, holding the door halfway open. Katie turned to me and said, “Yeah, we find that really interesting, too. When white students come to the office, they never come inside. They always just stand in the doorway. We’re like, ‘It’s okay, you can come in. We won’t hurt you.’”

The above example illustrates the perception of places like the MACO office as being explicitly multicultural. This perception is powerful enough that many white students even feel intimidated entering such spaces. It becomes an ironic reversal of roles, as white students are the ones who, in these brief instances, feel slightly out of place. Entering the room entails relinquishing their usual majority status and putting themselves in an unfamiliar situation.

Besides being sources of social support for students of color, multicultural organizations, in particular, provide necessary opportunities for cultural expression and education. One of the primary functions of multicultural student organizations is to facilitate cultural events. Students see these events as chances to share their stories and their cultures with the wider community, and to overcome the lack of cultural competence among whites. As one student notes:

“My first year I just went [to meetings] because my friends went, but now I see how [multicultural events] can benefit the student body as a whole... I know that most people don’t intend to be racist; they’re just ignorant. They weren’t raised in a diverse environment. That’s why I’m involved in ACA [(Asian Cultures Association)]. I want to raise awareness amongst the student body...”

It’s evident in this excerpt that multicultural events hold serious meaning for many students of color. They are more than just shows. They are opportunities for group members to educate the student body with regard to the group’s history, their cultural practices, and the issues that they face. They also function as attempts to breakdown stereotypes about certain racial or ethnic groups. They are efforts by students of color to make the campus see them in way that they would like to be seen. The fact that they are culturally specific

rather than just “multicultural” adds to the feeling of pride associated with such organizations.

In addition, institutional support of these events provides students with the financial and political capital necessary to briefly transform other parts of campus into multicultural spaces. For example, during Asia Weeks a group of Cambodian Buddhist Monks holds a water blessing in Ytterboe lounge in honor of the Buddhist New Year. During those few hours, the Ytterboe lounge becomes a place of Buddhist celebration. During Viva la Raza Week, Presente often holds a salsa dance in the Pause, filling the space with the sights and sounds of the Latino musical heritage. Through these types of events, multicultural students are able to create familiar spaces on various parts of campus. They become spaces for cultural preservation during a student’s four years at a predominantly white college.

Multicultural organizations and related offices are also sources of empowerment for students of color. They become places to discuss problems and issues, voice concerns, problem-solve, and act in response to these ideas. As one student noted in reference to why she participates in multicultural organizations, “it’s because they’re places where I feel like I can do something about the things that I don’t like here.” Likewise, participation in organizations offers multicultural students skills in leadership and programming. A couple of examples illustrate:

“[Participation in multicultural organizations] gives me confidence that I can do something positive... Before I didn’t really see myself as a leader, but now I can see that I can do it and that I would be good at it.”

“As a freshman I joined HAG [(Hmong Awareness Group)] and took up an officer role. I never exerted myself that way in high school... It was the first time I found a group that I was intimately involved in, and to me it was really exciting. For my first two and a half years at St. Olaf, it was my number one priority. There were times where I skipped class and procrastinated because of a HAG event... because it was like a family – if my family got in trouble, I’d drop everything for them.”

These examples are extremely demonstrative of the importance of multicultural organizations in offering students skills and confidence in leadership and programming. On the other hand, the second excerpt also alludes to the negative side of participation in these organizations.

As discussed above, students of color often feel compelled to participate in multicultural organizations as sources for cultural education and expression, and forums for breaking down stereotypes. Yet, heavy involvement in these

organizations can be detrimental to their educational experience at St. Olaf.

“[Experiences with stereotyping] only affect my academic performance in that they make me feel responsible to be in everything, to represent in every venue. That’s taken time away from school.”

“I tried to start an organization because I wanted to share my culture with other people. But there were only like three of us on campus and it was a ton of work and nobody else ever showed up to the meetings... Eventually I just decided that, you know what?... I’m here to get an education too.”

As shown, being misunderstood makes many students of color feel compelled to participate heavily in multicultural organizations. But having to carry the brunt of the burden for educating their peers on cultural and racial matters can seriously distract from one’s own education.

The second excerpt above also illustrates the frustration caused by the perceived lack of campus interest and involvement in multicultural events. This is a huge issue, particularly amongst the students that plan and facilitate such events. Virtually every student interviewed mentioned the marginalization of multicultural events by the larger St. Olaf community as a source of serious frustration and despair. A few examples of this:

“I was more involved [in multicultural organizations] as a freshman. But after that I stayed away from those groups and events. I feel we were just being stupid. After all that planning we’d get to the event and only see other multicultural students. It seems pointless... Multicultural students outnumber white students at those events... They should outnumber us.”

“I do [feel welcome] sometimes, most of the time. But sometimes I am really disappointed and want to go home. I work on DCC [(Diversity Celebrations Committee)] and I see how people react negatively to multicultural events.”

“[Organizing an event] is a ton of work to merely have it marginalized by students, faculty, and staff! [original emphasis]”

After putting incredible amounts of time into programming, it is overwhelmingly frustrating and deflating for students of color to receive so little recognition for their efforts. They want their hard work to be recognized, and, more importantly, they want people to acknowledge the existence of their organizations and their activities. They want to be noticed. In this way, the lack of attendance by the student body, faculty, and

staff also serves to emphasize multicultural students' isolation and separation from the rest of the student body.

As shown above, some students respond to such lack of interest with despair and resignation. Others, however, try to find ways to welcome white students to multicultural events. A couple interviewees noted:

“I feel that students are trying to publicize events and office activities differently than when I first came here. They are trying to make them more appealing to the masses and those unsure about multicultural events.”

“Sometimes now we don't advertise events as multicultural or associate them with multicultural organizations because we want people to come to them.”

These examples illustrate multicultural students' attempts to welcome the rest of the student body to their events and organizations, places now avoided because of their branding as exclusively multicultural spaces. However, as the second excerpt shows, that may have to come at the expense of recognition for their work. Evidently, for some students of color the desire to share and educate is greater than their need for recognition.

Additionally, a perceived lack of institutional support for diversity programs and events causes some students to question the college's commitment to diversity.

“[Student life for multicultural students could be improved] if there was support for multicultural groups – if there was more funding... There's not enough support behind the groups like SSS. It makes it seem like people don't care enough.”

“[What could be done to attract more students of color to St. Olaf?] That's always been a loaded question... I don't know if the college really wants the benefits from having multicultural students or if they're just trying to fit a quota. I believe if someone wanted something, they'd go in and grab it.”

Thus, it's apparent that some students of color perceive a lack of institutional support for multicultural programs, including recruitment programs. In the same way that a lack of support for athletics would make athletes feel unwelcome at St. Olaf, a perceived lack of support for multiculturalism contributes to feelings of marginalization and isolation amongst students of color.

Another feature of multicultural organizations that can be problematic is the fact that the importance of these organizations can also serve as a source of

division. The split between HAG (Hmong Awareness Group) and ACA (Asian Cultures Association) in recent years is an example of the way in which the diversity within groups and the desire for cultural expression can produce divisions. During our research, we encountered another such example of this in the formation of Karibu. For many, CUBE (Cultural Union for Black Expression) has been the organizational home of Africans and African Americans at St. Olaf. However, recently a group of students within CUBE decided to form an organization exclusively for African cultural expression, which they have called Karibu (the Swahili word for “welcome”). These students, many of whom are recent African immigrants or African international students, didn’t believe that CUBE was sufficiently representing African cultures and issues, and so decided that their interests would be better served in a separate organization. The move has caused a great deal of controversy between individuals in each group and between those who believe that unity is needed to maintain the strength of the organizations.

The CUBE/Karibu split can also be understood as an expression of cultural uniqueness or individuality. The persons forming Karibu wanted to distinguish themselves, their cultural backgrounds, and their interests from those of African Americans. In the same way, members of all multicultural organizations often struggle with their needs for group identification, solidarity, and cultural expression and their need to be perceived as individuals within those groups. Particularly among a student body harboring racial and ethnic stereotypes, many students of color long to be perceived as individuals, rather than merely as members of a given race or ethnicity. A few examples illustrate:

“It’s easy to group multicultural students by ethnicity, and students are scrutinized as a group so highly... [So one of the greatest issues facing multicultural students at St. Olaf] is just wanting to be accepted for who they are.”

“It would be nice if people would realize that multicultural students are just people too.”

Thus, it is fairly evident that many students of color struggle with a need to preserve their racial/ethnic identity and a need to be recognized as an individual.

Students of color go about asserting their individuality in various ways. One way is through participation in other campus organizations. Many of the students we interviewed participate in a wide range of other campus activities, from working on the Manitou Messenger staff, to participating in music

ensembles or athletics, to being involved in volunteer activities or SGA. Participation in these other activities allows multicultural students to express their individual interests in matters outside of the multicultural arena. It also seems to lend a great deal to students' satisfaction with the college and their relationship to the larger student body. Another way of expressing individuality is to discontinue membership in multicultural organizations altogether. Though it seems like fewer choose this option, it is a path that some students of color take in order to be perceived by the larger student body as an individual.

It may be true that participation in multicultural organizations and the establishment of multicultural spaces have some problematic aspects, but it must be acknowledged that, overall, these organizations/spaces play a crucial role in the satisfaction and retention of students of color. At a predominantly white college in the Midwest, it is essential that students of color have organizational outlets for cultural expression and preservation. Similarly, the social and cultural isolation that students of color face is confronted through the establishment of multicultural spaces that foster relationships with other students of color. These organizations and spaces provide students with social, cultural, and academic support, as well as avenues for breaking down stereotypes and sharing group issues, practices, and ideas with the larger student body. Additionally, they contribute in large part to students' satisfaction with the college in that they provide paths for change. Multicultural organizations' truly problematic aspects rest in the fact that they are a large part of the educational burden that multicultural students are expected to take on, and that they are not embraced and supported by the campus community. This disinterest, expressed through lack of attendance at multicultural events, inadequate funding, etc., causes a great deal of frustration among many multicultural students and leads to further feelings of marginalization. In response, many multicultural students and organizations have attempted to reach out to the larger community, but the community has generally not reciprocated. If St. Olaf hopes to make a comfortable home for students of color and reap the benefits of the diversity that it possesses, it will have to confront these issues in the near future.

Institutionalizing Diversity

The information discussed above presents a fairly bleak picture of multiculturalism at St. Olaf. Yet it must be acknowledged that nearly all of the students interviewed are relatively satisfied with their experience on the hill,

and, according to our faculty and staff interviewees, multicultural students' level of satisfaction with the college seems to be slightly better now than in the recent past. This is due in part to the fact that most students of color seem satisfied with the education they are receiving. They are incredibly grateful for the opportunity to receive a college education, they take that opportunity very seriously, and are pleased with the instruction that they are receiving in their classes. The presence of more multicultural organizations and spaces represents another area in which the college seems to be positively progressing – in the institutionalization of diversity.

According to the faculty and staff interviewed, leadership and support for diversity issues has waxed and waned over the years as the school has experienced changes in students, faculty, and administrative personnel. Thus, in recent years proponents have worked to institutionalize diversity at St. Olaf. The following interview excerpts illustrate:

“The community, at various times, shows different levels of commitment to diversity... So some faculty sat down four years ago to create the idea of permanently making diversity a college issue, making it the responsibility of the whole community, the responsibility of all faculty, staff, and students – not just one office. Eida's office [Community Life and Diversity] was part of this initiative. They communicate the diversity message throughout the college, in PR, recruitment, etc.”

“The fact that Eida is working on affirmative action issues and guidelines, like making sure the pool of candidates for faculty and staff positions is diverse, will definitely have a positive impact.”

“The student body tends to think that the MACO office is just a place for multicultural students to hang out... when the truth is that they do a lot in terms of overseeing and coordinating programs to support multicultural students and develop a more positive community climate for them.”

These statements demonstrate not only the need to institutionalize diversity at St. Olaf, but also the perception that things are improving in this aspect of multicultural life. The interests of people of color are becoming more visibly represented in everyday campus business, through the work of established offices rather than that of individual leaders. Also, multicultural student representation is becoming more prevalent in campus organizations such as Student Government, with the creation of a Multicultural Student Senator and the presence of a Diversity Celebrations Committee liaison. These kinds of initiatives are seen as important to not only improving current multicultural

student life, but also to attracting more students of color and creating a more diverse St. Olaf campus in the future.

In addition to the MACO office and multicultural organizations mentioned above, two other important institutional spaces were mentioned in our interviews with students of color – the Diversity Awareness House and the SSS office. The Diversity Awareness House (DA House) is a new initiative, begun last year, in which multicultural students of both sexes are given a permanent honor house space for hosting events, promoting awareness, and establishing a multicultural space that can be utilized twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. As a couple interviewees said:

“The Diversity Awareness House needs to stick around. That way students know they always have a place to go.”

“The Diversity Awareness House, if it’s strengthened, could be an important for improving life for students of color at St. Olaf.”

Multicultural spaces like the MACO and SSS offices and organizational meetings/events can only be utilized during certain times of the day and, generally, not on weekends. Thus, having a stable, accessible space like DA House could be very important in improving campus life for multicultural students on the hill.

Additionally, the SSS office and the programs it provides were cited by nearly every student interviewed as crucially important to their satisfaction with the college. All but two of the students consulted are involved in the SSS program, consistent with the fact that about eighty percent of multicultural students at St. Olaf are first generation college students. Most of those involved had nothing but praise for the program. Here are some of their thoughts:

“Sometimes, because I am an SSS student, people have stereotypes about my intelligence and background, but I am very glad to be a part of it. It’s a great source of support.”

“I support it. I feel like I’m part of a program that recognized the disparities in education as far as demographics and they decided to do something about it.”

“Honestly, at the start of SSS I thought it was pointless because I had taken college courses in high school. But in the program they gave a preview of what classes at Olaf are like. I’m thankful for it. It’s given me options and opportunities to meet new people and to meet faculty and staff to advise me.”

“I’m very grateful for it. It’s a wonderful program. Non-SSS students may not agree, some are really against it. People think it’s only for minorities and they think it’s too “clique-y”, like we need to branch out. It can be hard for multicultural students not in SSS as well.”

People tend to find SSS to be a great source of support, both academically and socially, and the program is important to the satisfaction and retention of students of color at St. Olaf. However, as suggested in the first and last excerpts, participation in SSS can become problematic in terms of the student body’s perception of the program.

“Before SSS I was in Upward Bound, so I was familiar with the program in high school. I feel that the program is helpful, but I keep hearing rumors that SSS is for dumb people... At first I like the program cause I felt that I had potential and they thought I had potential, but now being in it makes me feel not as smart.”

It is widely believed that the student body perceives the program as being for students who aren’t as smart or only for minorities (and thus giving special treatment to students of color). These perceptions can not only damage SSS students’ self image and lead to feelings of inferiority, but also add to students’ feelings of isolation.

By establishing offices and programs that promote diversity and support multicultural students and activities, the interests and needs of students of color become an institutional priority of the college. Multicultural representation in campus business and student life becomes less the responsibility of individual initiative-takers and more the responsibility of established offices and programs. Through their efforts and initiatives, and with the support of the administration, students and faculty of color perceive positive changes taking place in this aspect of campus life. This visible support of the college is crucial in making St. Olaf a welcoming environment for students of color. As long as they believe that positive changes are taking place on their behalf, their hope for the future will supersede their own grievances and frustrations.

What More Needs to Be Done?

Despite the positive changes mentioned above, all of the students and faculty interviewed felt that much more needed to be done in order to make St. Olaf a

community that truly welcomes diversity. One primary suggestion was that St. Olaf consider making curriculum changes. Despite the existence of the MCS-G and MCS-D requirements, most students of color feel that St. Olaf graduates leave the hill with an inadequate understanding of the dynamics of race/ethnic relations in America and the social ecology of the campus.

“St. Olaf should consider changing the GE requirements. It would be beneficial to have to study racial issues and issues of culture in the states, particularly issues in the area – in Northfield and at St. Olaf.”

Several of the students and faculty interviewed echoed this sentiment, and its rationale makes perfect sense. Having such a course would relieve students of color of much of the educational burden that they experience while at St. Olaf. It would also serve to help breakdown stereotypes and remove some of the mutual intimidation and misunderstanding that exists between white students and students of color. This may serve to facilitate more interracial and intercultural relationships at the school.

The idea of such a requirement is reminiscent of the Campus Ecology course being offered this semester by Professor Jim Farrell and student Elise Braaten. The idea behind the course is that most St. Olaf students know very little about the natural ecology of the St. Olaf campus and their impact on the immediate environment. Thus, the course attempts to educate students so that they may act responsibly and be stewards of the land around them. In the same way, few students at St. Olaf understand the social ecology of the campus. They don't think critically about what kinds of ideas, actions, and processes pervade campus interactions and relationships, and they don't see the impact of some of their thoughts and actions on the welfare of the community. Acquiring these skills would not only enable students to become socially conscious members of the St. Olaf community, but would create a greater awareness of their roles as members of the global community as well. Perhaps the greatest focus of students and faculty was the need to for greater efforts to recruit multicultural students.

“We have gone significantly backwards in the area of admissions. We have chosen to focus our recruitment efforts on the Upper-Midwest, particularly the suburbs... We are looking for multicultural students where they don't exist.”

“When I was going to school here [in the 1970s], there were 70-80 African American students on campus. Now there are 35. The number hasn't been that high since.”

“What can be done is to accept students of color. They’re out there, so go get them... If St. Olaf wants to do it, there are qualified students out there who have applied, and some have been denied... They need to go out there and find and recruit the best and brightest students of color.”

Judging by the statements above, it is fairly obvious that students and faculty hold pretty strong opinions about the need to more heavily recruit students of color. The college’s efforts to do so are perceived to have declined in recent years. Also, the idea that the pool of qualified students of color is small and too heavily recruited for St. Olaf to compete is nonsense according to the people we interviewed. Their perception is that the pool of qualified candidates nationwide is sufficiently large, and that many of those candidates would be more than happy to receive the educational opportunity that St. Olaf can offer them. As discussed above, the quality of the St. Olaf education is one of the primary contributing factors to multicultural student’s satisfaction with the college. That opportunity is something that can always be offered, regardless of other problems the campus may face in terms of creating a positive environment for students of color.

Along the same lines, a third major focus of the individuals we interviewed was the need to recruit and retain more faculty and staff of color. According to faculty we interviewed, there is still significant unconscious and/or overt resistance to hiring faculty of color at St. Olaf. Faculty of color are not as highly solicited to apply, and, in some cases, departments have insisted on hiring white candidates, even over candidates of color with better credentials. Yet having faculty of color is very important to many of the students that we interviewed, as they serve as valuable role models, advisors, mentors, and as individuals that can relate to multicultural students’ experience in higher education. The following example illustrates:

“Joan Hepburn is a role model to me cause she sits in a position that I want to be in when I get older. She went to NYU and Brown; I want to go to an Ivy League school for medicine... In the way she speaks, her feedback and her help outside of class, she gives you the respect you deserve. She embodies what other profs should be... And she’s Black! Multicultural! Not of the norm! It’s really great.”

The statement demonstrates the importance of having faculty and staff of color that can serve as role models and mentors to multicultural students. It is also encouraging for students of color to see people of similar racial/ethnic backgrounds in professorial positions. They serve as a tangible reminder to students exposed to messages of inferiority that their racial and/or ethnic

background does not make them less capable or less intelligent.

The presence of more faculty of color also lends to the disintegration of St. Olaf's image as a white college. By having more people of color in positions of authority and administration, spaces like the St. Olaf campus become more race-neutral. In the same way that it would be difficult for a white person to feel at home in an environment governed by people of color, the overwhelmingly white makeup of the administration, faculty, and staff contributes to the feelings of isolation and marginalization of people of color. Having more people of color in administration and faculty positions also ensures that the interests and issues of these individuals are represented in decision-making, curriculum, and other college business. For example:

“When the committee was put together to create the American Conversation, not a single person of color was invited to sit on it. Not one! There are still no faculty of color that participate in that program.”

The fact that people of color have been literally left out of the American Conversation demonstrates the lack of multicultural representation in academic and administrative decision-making, and leads to a greater feeling of marginalization amongst students and faculty of color. Various faculty and students who were interviewed cited this lack of people of color in administration positions as an issue that needs to be addressed in order for St. Olaf to become a more welcoming environment for multicultural students.

In summary, despite the relative satisfaction of most of the students we interviewed and their perception of positive changes in the institutionalization of diversity, the majority of our conversations were focused on things that need to be changed in order for St. Olaf to feel like a second home to students of color. The ideas presented focused essentially on two areas – greater multicultural education and greater student, faculty, and staff representation. If St. Olaf truly desires to live up to its commitment to diversity, these issues must become a bigger part of the campus discourse.

Theoretical Orientations

Investigating race relations at any level is always a complicated task, and the body of work done in the field leaves us with a wealth of theories and conclusions that are beyond the scope of this paper. Yet in conducting our research on the experience of multicultural students and race relations on the St. Olaf campus, we found a few theories to be especially applicable and worth

further investigation.

By far the most useful theoretical paradigm in observing race relations at St. Olaf is that of the politics of space. In their work on the experience of Black students in higher education, Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) discuss the importance of the politics of space in affecting Black students' experiences on predominantly white campuses. They found that feelings of isolation or marginalization are caused by a wide variety of factors, some subtle and some more overt. For example, the absence of faculty and administrators of color, small populations of multicultural students, and a lack of emphasis on multicultural/racial issues in the curriculum are all causal factors. Likewise, subtle or blatant acts of discrimination or stereotyping by students and faculty, whether experienced by individuals themselves or experienced by others and passed on, and exclusion in decision-making processes or student programming considerations, are all reminders to students of color that they just don't belong.

As demonstrated above, these are all issues that are very prevalent on the St. Olaf campus. As two interviewees put it:

“People underestimate the role and pervasiveness of spatial politics in terms of feeling at home in a place... St. Olaf is really a home to mainstream white students. Its legacy and association with a Norwegian Heritage, the names of buildings, etc. are constant reminders that this is a white school... People emphasize the MACO office as if it is sufficient [as a multicultural space], when most of the students on campus can feel at home everywhere else.”

“Students of color must understand that they have the right to be taught at the college, too. It's not just the majority's school, it's their school as well. Once this is figured out, the experience will be way better.”

St. Olaf truly is a “white space,” and students of color feel that in their everyday experiences. If St. Olaf wishes to make the St. Olaf experience as positive as possible for students of color, it must work to make St. Olaf a truly more multicultural space.

The idea of spatial politics is directly related to theories about various levels marginalization. At Week One functions and other campus events, facilitators and speakers often talk about the “average” St. Olaf student – Norwegian, Lutheran, middle-class, heterosexual, likely with blonde hair and blue eyes. These are they types of students that Carolyn Anderson (2001) refers to when she discusses her idea of the St. Olaf “core.” According to Anderson, the further an individual moves away from this core, the greater their feelings of cultural isolation and marginalization. This same idea is resonated by Patricia

Hill Collins, in her theory of intersectionality (Ritzer 2003). Collins' theory, which is an expansion of feminist theory, states that women experience various levels of oppression and marginalization based on their race, educational level, socioeconomic status, etc. Though we did not carry out an investigation of differences in experiences of multicultural students, it is easy to see how these theories may apply to student life at St. Olaf College.

Conclusions & Implications

In conclusion, our research has illustrated the difficulty that students of color at St. Olaf face in trying to be members of the community and trying to receive the best education possible. The overwhelming racial/ethnic homogeneity of the St. Olaf student body and white students' lack of prior interracial and intercultural experience leaves students of color feeling culturally isolated and out of place. This lack of interracial and intercultural experience, combined with socialized stereotypes about people of color in the United States, creates a white student body that is largely ignorant about multicultural issues and incapable of interacting comfortably with people of color. This, in turn, drives many multicultural students to join multicultural organizations in order to share their experiences and educate the larger student body. Involvement in these organizations is also a source of empowerment and social support for many students of color. But the marginalization of these organizations and their events on campus adds to students' feelings of cultural isolation. Additionally, the need to carry the burden of multicultural education hinders multicultural students ability to do what they initially came here for – to receive a good education. Because of the small number of students of color at St. Olaf, carrying this burden also necessitates racial and ethnic tokenism. Students are asked to speak on behalf of, and be representatives of their entire race or ethnicity, a request that is not only unrealistic, but also robs them of their individuality.

Yet the veracity of these issues tends to be disregarded, overlooked, and underestimated by the majority of the student body, faculty, and staff. As shown in previous research, white students at St. Olaf largely think that multicultural issues do not pose a problem at St. Olaf. Claims of harmful stereotyping, discrimination, or racism are all too often dismissed by white students as being misinterpretations, exaggerations, or even outright fabrications of oversensitive individuals or students of color harboring antipathy toward whites. Even professors, many of who are also relatively inexperienced in interracial and intercultural communication, have been known

to discount the difficult experiences of students of color in their classes. If not that, many tend to the other extreme, of being overly sensitive or even apologetic to multicultural students in their classes. More shockingly, several students of color have even experienced white faculty claiming superior knowledge of the multicultural experience in the United States because they've studied it. To these professors, multicultural students' interpretations of their experiences are often denied validation.

As a tight-knit community and an institution of higher learning in the United States, St. Olaf College has the unique opportunity of being able to confront some of these issues. As suggested above, classes on race in education or race relations at St. Olaf could be incorporated into the curriculum and made a requirement. The admissions department could work harder to create a more diverse student body by recruiting from more diverse areas. The administration and academic departments could make more efforts to hire staff and faculty of color and represent multicultural interests in decision-making. More could be done to train current faculty and staff in positive multicultural communication and education. This list is by no means comprehensive. There is a huge body of literature out there that addresses this very issue – how can a predominantly white college make students of color feel more welcome and more at home.

But should this be the goal of increasing diversity at St. Olaf College – to have a token group of multicultural students who “teach us what it is like to be them” and feel welcome doing it? Many of the students we interviewed realized that they didn't feel “different” or “multicultural” until they came to St. Olaf. This is not because their high schools or communities were exceptionally welcoming to people of color, but rather it is because they came from situations where there was no “average” student, whereas the makeup of the “average” St. Olaf student is well known and highly touted. It is the very fact that St. Olaf is so homogeneous that makes it a “white” space. So the question is really this: Is St. Olaf willing to make the changes necessary to create a truly diverse campus on the hill?

St. Olaf is incredibly proud of its Norwegian Lutheran heritage. It has a tradition of being predominantly white, and it seems to have no problem staying that way. It has shown a reluctance to go out of its way to become an exceptionally diverse campus and to hire faculty and staff of color. Our own sociology/anthropology department, which is necessarily dedicated to multicultural thought, has only one faculty member who is not ethnically Caucasian and American. Even the current efforts to institutionalize diversity on the St. Olaf campus could be considered “administrative tokenism.” Is having one more office dedicated to multicultural issues, such as the office of Community Life and Diversity, really going to make St. Olaf a more diverse place, or does it merely serve to represent the interests of a token group of

individuals on campus?

Besides being a historically Norwegian Lutheran college, St. Olaf was also founded on the ideal of service and with the mission of educating first generation college students. At present, however, it seems to be doing a great disservice in that its student composition reflects and perpetuates the racial and ethnic disparities and segregation that exist in the society at large. The new St. Olaf logo flaunts “Ideals to Action.” If racial equality and desegregation is an ideal, then St. Olaf needs to work to put that into action. Likewise, the fact that about 70% of the students in the SSS program are also multicultural students demonstrates the reality that more and more first generation college students are students of color. So in the near future, living up to this aspect of the college’s mission is going to necessitate a more diverse student body. The goal of educating first generation college students is going to be, are perhaps it already is, in conflict with the school’s adherence to its Norwegian Lutheran tradition. It is also in direct conflict with the school’s push to become more and more prestigious in terms of the academic profile of its incoming students. Thus, St. Olaf needs to decide what it values more – its ethnic heritage and its desire to be recognized by national publications as a top-tier school, or its dedication to service. We mustn’t forget that being dedicated to service and educating first-generation college students does not require a negation of academic excellence.

All of these questions aside, the positive impact that the presence of more students of color would have on the St. Olaf student body is immeasurable. When posed the question, “How would the presence of more students of color positively white impacts?,” essentially everyone interviewed stated that such a multicultural presence would significantly effect white students’ level of cultural competency. The United States is becoming a more diverse place everyday, and Latinos are soon to outnumber whites in America. Yet far so many St. Olaf students leave school with their racial and ethnic stereotypes still intact, and having had little to no substantial interaction with students of color. St. Olaf graduates are entering the real world largely still unable to understand and positively engage people who are ethnically and racially different. The school must see to it that they are able to do so. As one interviewee stated: “We are the future that they have to work with.”

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Appendix A: IRB Proposal

On a campus dominated by white students and staff, the experiences of multicultural students will inevitably differ from those of their white peers. Multicultural student life at St. Olaf College has certainly changed as well, as the environment of the St. Olaf campus and the demographics of the multicultural population have shifted over time.

The purpose of this study is to explore whether multicultural students, faculty, and staff view their experience at St. Olaf as positive or negative. We also intend to further our understanding of why they perceive it as such. Not only do we hope to gain insight into the perspectives of current multicultural students, but we also aspire to put their perceptions in a historical context, by drawing on the opinions and feelings of faculty and staff affiliated with the Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach office, Student Support Services program, and multicultural organizations on campus.

Our study will consist of twenty-two interviews, sixteen of which will be conducted with current students, the other six with faculty/staff. All of our student interviewees will be multicultural students, and our sample will be created using snowball sampling. An initial group of multicultural students will be identified by their participation in multicultural organizations and their time spent in the MACO office. Using these individuals as starting points and asking them for the names of other persons they consider to be multicultural students, we will create a list of possible interviewees. From this list, we will then choose 16 students based on their race/ethnicity, gender, and year in school. Ideally, our sample will be equal with regard to gender, as well as the number of Black/African-American, Latino, and Asian/Asian-American interviewees. In terms of year in school, we will attempt to focus our research on freshman and seniors, while including some sophomores and juniors.

Utilizing the Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach Office, Flaten Hall (location of SSS Program), Stav Hall, and multicultural organization meetings (such as Asian Cultural Awareness organization, Hmong Awareness Group, the Cultural Union for Black Expression, Presente, and the Muslim Student Association), our aim will be to act as a complete participant, where the subjects studied will see us only as a participant, not as a researcher.

For faculty and staff, we will seek out six individuals who are identified by multicultural students as friends/mentors of the multicultural student body, heavily involved in multicultural activities, and seriously engaged in multicultural student life. These faculty/staff members need not be multicultural individuals.

All requests for interviews will be conducted in person and interview notes will be recorded in writing. The identity of participants will be assured, as we will not be disclosing names, ethnicity, year in school, or gender; we will use aliases when reporting data to protect the identity and names of participants involved in our study.

We believe that our research will have a minimal negative impact on the subjects involved. Questions may bring up uncomfortable or upsetting thoughts and/or past experiences, but this is a risk in most research projects dealing with human subjects. Also, in some cases we might be asking that subjects share stories revealing intimate or very personal information. Students may choose not to answer any questions. A verbal protocol will be read to each participant before each interview to inform them of the purpose of the study and to reiterate their rights as a research subject. However, as we will be assuring confidentiality in our study, we expect that this will pose no harm to the participants.

The value of this research lies in its potential ability to improve multicultural student life on the St. Olaf campus and, with that, increase cultural diversity, in accordance with the Strategic Plan and mission of the college. We intend to give a copy of our paper to President Thomforde, various Deans of the college, the Board of Regents, and the Admissions Office. Hopefully, these groups will be able to use our research in order to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for multicultural students at St. Olaf.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Student Interview Questions

“The purpose of our study is to gain a better understanding of multicultural student life on campus. We’ll be asking you questions about your experience as a multicultural student at St. Olaf, how you evaluate your experience, and why you evaluate it as such.”

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your year in school?
4. What is your ethnicity?
5. What is your hometown?
6. What high school did you attend?
7. Do you feel that you were a better student in high school or at college?

8. Are you an SSS (Student Support Services) student?
 - a. If so, how do you feel about being an SSS student?
 - b. How do you feel about talking to non-SSS students about SSS?
9. Why did you choose to come to St. Olaf?
10. Did you look at or apply to any other schools? If so, which ones?
11. What academic and social expectations did you have in coming to St. Olaf?
 - a. How do you feel that your expectations have or have not been met?
12. How satisfied are you with your life at St. Olaf?
13. Could you give me some reasons for why you feel that way?
14. Do you generally feel welcome and accepted here? How come?
15. Do you generally feel that you fit in at St. Olaf? How so?
16. What conceptions do you think white students have about students of color at St. Olaf?
17. Have you had experiences with stereotyping at St. Olaf? These experiences may or may not include prejudice or discrimination. Could you explain?
18. How did it affect you? How did you react?
19. Do you feel that it affected your academic performance?
20. Describe who you would consider to be your best friends at St. Olaf? How come?
21. Are more of your friends other multicultural students or white students? How come?
22. How important are these friends in determining your level of satisfaction at St. Olaf?
23. Are there any faculty/staff/other students that you consider to be mentors or role models here?
24. How important are these faculty/staff/other students in determining your level of satisfaction at St. Olaf?
25. Do you feel that professors believe in your ability as a student?
26. Do you feel that other students believe in your ability as a student?
27. What kinds of things stress you out?
28. How do you deal with that stress?
29. To what extent are you involved in multicultural organizations?
 - a. Why, would you say, are you involved these organizations?
 - b. How does involvement in these organizations affect your level of satisfaction at St. Olaf?
30. What should St. Olaf do to attract more students of color?
31. How would the presence of more students of color positively impact white students?
32. What could be done in order to improve student life at St. Olaf for students of color?

Faculty/Staff Interview Questions

“The purpose of our study is to gain a better understanding of multicultural student life on campus. We’ll be asking you questions about your observations and/or experiences as a member of the St. Olaf community, and your opinions regarding how multicultural student life has changed over time.”

1. How long have been affiliated with St. Olaf?
2. In what roles have you served at St. Olaf?
3. How involved do you feel that you have been in multicultural student life at St. Olaf throughout your years here?
4. What observations have you noticed with regard to changes in student life amongst multicultural students over time at St. Olaf?
5. Have multicultural students’ general level of satisfaction with the college changed during your time here?
6. Why do you believe that these changes have taken place?
7. In what ways, do you think, is the St. Olaf experience significantly different for multicultural students and white students?
8. Do you think multicultural students tend to behave differently than white students in a classroom setting? In what ways? How come?
9. Regarding the last two questions, have you observed significant changes in these areas over your time here?
10. How do you think racial/ethnic stereotypes manifest themselves in the classroom at St. Olaf, if at all?
 - a. Has this changed during your time here?
11. What do you think are the biggest issues facing multicultural students at St. Olaf today?
12. What should St. Olaf do to attract more students/staff of color?
13. What should St. Olaf do to improve life at the college for students of color?
14. What misconceptions do you think white students have about students of color?
15. How would the presence of more students of color positively impact white students?

Appendix C: Verbal Protocol

Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in our project for a research methods course required for our major in sociology/ anthropology taught by Professor Carolyn Anderson, who is supervising our project. Our project is about multicultural student life on campus and how it has changed over time. We will be interviewing faculty, as well as multicultural students from all classes and backgrounds. We will be asking you a number of questions about your experience, and the interview will take about an hour. We will be asking faculty about their experiences with multicultural students and their perspectives on how the experiences of multicultural students have changed over the last twenty years. Students will be asked about their experiences as multicultural, their level of satisfaction with the college, experiences of prejudice, how well they feel they fit in, etc. We will write a paper that will be available on the sociology/anthropology department web site, and we may present a summary of our findings at a professional sociology or anthropology conference.

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

We hope the results of our study will contribute to a campus wide discussion of how to increase diversity and make St. Olaf College a more welcoming institution for multicultural students and faculty.

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 us to use your information after the interview, please let us know by April 30, 2004.

Do you have any questions? Thanks again for agreeing to be interviewed. We are anxious to hear your responses to our questions.

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