

## Interracial Interaction at St. Olaf: Friendship Groups

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### Executive Summary:

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### Setting

St. Olaf College; the sample population was St. Olaf students who identify with an interracial group of friends. The interview subjects were five white, two black, one Hmong American, one adopted Korean American, and one Filipino American.

### Problem

St. Olaf seems to be pretty segregated along racial lines, and white students who come from homogenously white environments are ignorant about different ethnicities and cultures. I wanted to examine the experiences and opinions of white students and students of color who socialized in an interracial group, and see if their social ties had any significant influence from previous interracial contact.

### Methodology

I interviewed ten students about their experiences and opinions; some aspects of participant observation were also utilized.

### Observations

- Students with interracial groups of friends have these ties through MACO

organizations, and SSS involvement, along with other social networks.

- Students with interracial groups of friends tend to have had substantial interaction with other racial groups prior to coming to college
- These students, although coming from distinct backgrounds, have generally similar outlooks in terms of race relations on campus, regardless of their race.
- The students interviewed expressed a need for more interaction among the majority white population and the students of color.

### Synopsis

Every student comes to college with distinct experiences that inform their social decisions. Students who choose to interact among groups of diverse people have a general awareness and sensitivity to ethnic and cultural differences, and they view the overall climate for diversity at St. Olaf to be lacking in many senses.

### Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the experiences, opinions, and perceptions of St. Olaf students who identify with an interracial group of friends. I interviewed ten students: five whites, two African Americans, one Hmong American, one adopted Korean-American, and one Filipino-American. My intention was to find out whether these students' current social ties had significant influence from prior interracial contact, and if students from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds tended to share similar values and beliefs about race relations here on campus. Some of the most salient points/findings were: in most cases, prior contact with diverse groups of people through racially integrated schools, camps or programs, or close relationships with people of other races, significantly influenced some subjects' contemporary social ties and attitudes here at St. Olaf. Important, however, is the difficulty of the non-relativity of experience of white students, and students of color—the proportionally small population of racial minorities at St. Olaf disposes these students to interact with the white majority on a daily basis, while white students overall seem to interact more purposefully with students of color. Overall, the students interviewed perceived St. Olaf as segregated, but occurring only as casual, situational networks of friends—particularly through the MACO organizations and Student Support Services—and did not present itself as an issue of personal significance.

### The Sociological Problem:

As the focus of this paper has much to do with individuals' background and experience as it shapes their identity, collective identity and experience, and how both relate and inform each other, I feel that it is only appropriate to open with a statement of my own past experiences, how they shape my identity, and my reasons for conducting this research.

I am a white (of German, English, Norwegian, and Swiss descent), middle-class woman who grew up in urban Minneapolis. My neighborhood, although the dynamics of its population have changed much over the years, consists of predominantly white, middle-class families, elderly people, and young gay couples/families. To the south of me is one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Minneapolis, with huge estates and mainly white faces. Just to the north, only a few blocks' walk, is a predominantly low-income black and Hmong community, where until only recently existed one of Mpls.'s largest subsidized housing projects. I attended the Mpls. public schools for all of my education preceding college. My high school was in a mostly black and Latino, lower income neighborhood, and was said to be one of the most diverse high schools in the state. I rode the school bus during all of my years in school, and was usually one of a few white kids on the bus, especially in high school. Through all of my years in school I was exposed to vast differences in ethnicity and culture, and stark contrasts in economic class of my peers, and even teachers. After picking me up in my neighborhood, my school bus would pick up Hmong kids from the projects over north, go downtown and pick up kids from the homeless shelters, pick up Muslim girls wearing chadors on the east side, and then proceed into the Phillips neighborhood in south Mpls., to pick up kids, mostly black, from one of the most economically and socially devastated areas of the Twin Cities. Many of my close friends growing up in school were black or Asian.

When applying to private liberal arts colleges in my senior year of High School I knew that wherever I went I would not find a school nearly as diverse as the schools I had been attending my whole life. I entered St. Olaf jaded and skeptical. Like some of my interview subjects said of their own experience when coming to Olaf, I experienced culture shock. I had never known personally anyone from outside of the inner city, and I can say with honesty now that I was judgmental of people from the suburbs, and came with a lot of stereotypes ingrained in me of what suburban and small town people were like. I scoffed at how Olaf claimed to be a "diverse campus", and was

continually frustrated and offended by the ignorant opinions of the other white students around me, who came from relatively homogenous environments with regard to race and class. I labeled people “racist” because they didn’t have the experience I had my whole life with people of other races. Although I can say now that my initial attitude toward the majority of St. Olaf students was immature, and that my horizons have been broadened significantly in regard to the majority of white American life, which is not in the inner-city, the fact of the matter is that people who live in a racially segregated society are not likely to overcome the stereotype-influenced attitudes and behaviors that accompany interracial interaction.

In retrospect of my pre-college education, I find that one of the things I value most is the education I received in tolerance and acceptance of differences, and the everyday interaction with diverse people as my peers. Yes, this may sound a bit sappy, but I’ve only come to recognize this after knowing and interacting with white peers in college who have had little to no experience interacting with people of different ethnicities or cultures, which naturally tends to be accompanied by fear, indifference, misunderstanding, disdain, and sometimes hate. This worries me.

In an age where the racial/ethnic make-up of our country is continually becoming more and more diverse, issues of race relations and multicultural awareness are becoming more relevant and immediate on a national scale. According to the 2001 U.S. Census Bureau, 29% of all Americans considered themselves to belong to racial and ethnic minorities, and population projections indicate that by the year 2015 one third of America’s population will be comprised of racial/ethnic minorities, and by 2050, nearly half the population (47%) (Wang, et al. 2003). Also, in recent years the idea of multiculturalism has been the subject of much debate, especially on college campuses (Martínez Alemán 2003). Because our nation is still very much segregated demographically by race/ethnicity and class, the increased integration of colleges and universities, markedly by affirmative action initiatives, has been seen as a positive means to foster cross-cultural acceptance, resolve racial animosity, and prepare students to be effective citizens in an increasingly multicultural society. “America’s liberal arts colleges are ground zero for demonstrating the assertion that liberal education can meet the challenges of multiculturalism and engender pluralistic community” (Martínez Alemán 2003).

One cannot speak of the racial dimensions of a social structure or institution without examining the racial attitudes of the people that act within it. Coming from a grassroots, or bottom-up viewpoint, in order to successfully change the face of society, in particular its tendencies toward racial animosity, the attitudes

of the people within it, especially those who are or will be in decision-making positions, must be addressed, and changed. Attitudes of hostility and indifference, or empathy and understanding, result from the interplay of previous experience and instilled beliefs and viewpoints. Following this, a student who comes from an all white town and who has had limited, if any, interaction with people of different races or cultures, may not be aware of the relative situations that his minority counterparts live within, and may avoid or simply be disinterested in interacting with people of color based on his previous assumptions, which are not supported by previous experience, and therefore can very easily be wrong or misled. On the other hand, a student who comes from an area that is more racially integrated, or has had positive interactions or personal relationships with racially diverse people, may be more open to socializing with diverse groups of people at college, because their previous experience has influenced their viewpoint on people of different races/ethnicities.

This hypothesis is informed significantly from Allport's "Contact Theory", which he developed in 1954, when it was believed that racism and racial tensions were derived from irrational beliefs and attitudes, and the only way he saw to alleviate racial inequalities was increased contact between racial groups (Emerson, et. al. 2002). By having people interact on a continued basis, they would then come to the realization that their racial attitudes were irrational, and in theory this would then modify their beliefs and subsequent behaviors in relation to other races/ethnicities. Studies have shown that prior contact in interracial institutional settings, such as schools, increases the probability that people will interact similarly with others in an interracial environment, and that they also will have preference for an interracial environment (Emerson, et al. 2002). This has been called the "status-quo bias": the theory that people tend to choose settings that they have chosen (or been assigned to) previously. Central to Allport's theory was his specification of critical situational conditions for intergroup contact to successfully reduce prejudiced attitudes. These are equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authority, law, or custom (Pettigrew 1998). It is especially important that all groups of people expect and receive equal status, in terms of the situation that is to be studied. A study of the interracial interactions in a workplace where people of all one race are employed by a few of a different race might bring about negative results. A study involving students in a school, on the other hand, would work on the assumption that all students hold equal status. An interracial group that has common goals through an active, goal-oriented effort of all the individuals is prime for positive interracial interaction; athletic teams, for instance, have been shown to alleviate prejudice. Intergroup competition has been shown to be detrimental to alleviating prejudices; thus,

cooperation between groups is most ideal, and studies, done especially in schools, provide strong evidence (Pettigrew 1998). The support of authority, law, or custom is important because contact that receives legitimate social sanction, that is within a broader norm of acceptance, is likely to be more accepted and result in more positive effects.

Using a direct application of contact theory, Emerson et al. (2002)

hypothesized that from a national sample, people's reported prior racial contact would have a significant effect on the racial diversity of their contemporary social ties. The study expresses the importance of multiracial social ties as "bridging capital" for the parties involved to ease relations between groups of which they are affiliated. The results of their findings clearly supported this hypothesis, stating that those who had prior interracial contact in schools and neighborhoods were more likely as adults to have more racially diverse social groups/friend circles, and also were more likely to attend multiracial religious congregations, and to be interracially married. These findings applied separately to whites, blacks, and Latinos, but curiously not for Asians, and noted also was the difference in interracial contact between whites from urban areas (more) and suburban/rural areas (less). These conclusions strongly support the extension of contact theory, noting that even limited prior contact appeared to have positive effects.

Contact theory is within the broader paradigm of symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism is an approach that was introduced by Georg Simmel. Simmel wrote about the "web of group affiliations", where he sought to understand the interactions that took place between small groups of people, sometimes as small as groups of only two or three (Babbie 2004). Charles Horton Cooley introduced the idea of the "primary group", or a close-knit group of friends or family that one acquires a sense of belonging from. Also related to this is George Herbert Mead's concept of the "generalized other". Not to be confused with generalizations in the form of stereotypes, but the individual internalization of the outlooks or general attitudes of a recognized community or collectivity, and to understand the context that it exists in, is what the "generalized other" entails. Along with connecting the symbols associated with a certain community to this "generalized other" understanding, one can be led to a more empathetic outlook towards people who are different from them (Babbie 2004).

These theoretical influences are related to how I reframed the sociological problem as my research progressed. Words like "race", "ethnicity", "culture", and "class" I have found at times to be fuzzy and inadequate measurements of individual and collective experience. Through the process of learning about my interview subjects' family, school, and residential backgrounds, I have come to understand that many factors outside of "race" — which is a flat and unvarying

concept—contribute to people’s identity and group affiliations, such as geography, local culture, and simply personality, preferences, and interests.

#### The Setting/Community:

St. Olaf College is a four-year liberal arts institution of higher education affiliated with the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America), which was founded in 1875 by Norwegians. It is situated on a picturesque hillside named “Manitou Heights” just on the edge of Northfield, Minnesota, a town of about 17,000 people including the populations of the college, and Carleton College which is on the other side of town. St. Olaf offers Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Music degrees, in a setting that stresses liberal education rooted in the Gospel with a global perspective.

Community at St. Olaf is also strongly emphasized in all aspects of campus life, and the curriculum. This is reflected in the fact that nearly all students live on campus in dormitories or honor houses. The majority of students eat with full meal plans in a cafeteria and socialize and move through a campus commons building that were specifically designed and built to function as community-fostering spaces. In addition to a daily chapel service, once a week there is a one-hour “community time” set aside when there are no classes scheduled, and lectures, organizational meetings, and other programs occur, in addition to students socializing and participating in group activities.

St. Olaf is a “dry-campus”, meaning that it prohibits the consumption of alcohol on any college-owned property, or during any college-sponsored event.

Because the focus of this study is student interactions and dynamics of multicultural awareness, I will describe as comprehensively as I can the demographics of the student population, and the institutional orientations of the college toward racial and multicultural affairs as they relate to the research.

The total number of St. Olaf undergraduate students for the current ’03-’04 academic school year is 2994: 1762 women and 1232 men. Of these students, 34 are “black (non-Hispanic)”, 116 “Asian or Pacific Islander”, 44 “Hispanic”, 5 “American Indian or Alaskan Native”, 40 “Nonresident alien (international students)”, 2,578 “white, non-Hispanic”, and 117 “Race/ethnicity unknown”. The percentages of students by their home geographic region was documented for the ’02-’03 academic year as 76.1% coming from the Upper Midwest, 52.9% coming from Minnesota alone, and the remaining 23.8% consisting of small percentages from the West, East, and Central USA, and Foreign Citizens. For the ’03-’04 year, 96% of students lived in college-owned housing, with the remaining 4% commuting from off campus. The student-faculty ratio of the college is 11.8 to 1, where a small classroom environment

and individual attention is emphasized. 2094 full-time students applied for financial aid in 2003, and of these, 1843 received financial aid. The average student age at St. Olaf is 20 (all information from “Institutional Research and Planning”, <http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/irp>).

The administration of St. Olaf goes to great lengths in providing a broad range of services for the fostering and maintenance of non-discrimination, multicultural awareness, diversity education, and support for ensuring the success of underrepresented groups. In President Thomforde’s five-year “strategic plan” for carrying out and augmenting St. Olaf’s mission as a school, he addresses specifically the processes the college will undergo to maintain an ethic of progressive inclusion and support for diverse students and faculty. Particularly:

St. Olaf should seek to enroll a diverse student body which reflects society in the following ways:

St. Olaf should continue to define diversity broadly, including not only race/ethnicity, but also socioeconomic background, family educational background, geographical residence, sexual preference, religious diversity and physical disabilities. Students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds (including international backgrounds) should make up no less than 15% of the total student body and should be matched by a similar makeup in the St. Olaf faculty and staff. St. Olaf should continue to strengthen its commitment to first generation students, and to insure that students from all socio-economic backgrounds are represented in the student body. Our recruiting focus should remain focused regionally with selected market areas chosen for natural connections to St. Olaf (alumni presence / church presence / diversity).

#### Specific Recommendations Regarding Diversity:

St. Olaf should develop a diversity recruitment effort focused on new immigrant populations (such as the Hmong-American or Somali). Such a program should seek to become the "college of choice" for that immigrant group, with a goal of enrolling 50 students/year. (First draft of President Thomford’s “strategic plan”, Nov. 2002, <http://www.stolaf.edu/president/strategicplan/draft1.html>).

The Administrative/professional Handbook for St. Olaf states the College’s policy of non-discrimination of its employees, and its compliance with equal employment opportunity affirmative action laws. The college employs an “equal opportunity coordinator” who is responsible for overseeing the college’s compliance with state and federal equal opportunity laws to which the college



is subject (Administrative/professional Handbook—policies and procedures, [www.stolaf.edu/services/hr/ap/ap-policies\\_procedures.html](http://www.stolaf.edu/services/hr/ap/ap-policies_procedures.html)). The student handbook states the college's non-discrimination policy toward students: St. Olaf College admits students of any race, color, creed, national and ethnic origin to all rights, privileges, programs and activities generally accorded or made available to students. It does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, creed, national and ethnic origin, sex, age, religion, disability, marital status, status with respect to public assistance or sexual orientation in administration of its educational policies, financial aid program, athletics and all other programs ([www.stolaf.edu/stulife/the\\_book/general/discrimination.html](http://www.stolaf.edu/stulife/the_book/general/discrimination.html)).

In June of 2000, St. Olaf established the Office of Community Life and Diversity. This facet of the administration involves itself in “fostering and nurturing a campus ethos that invites, values and affirms diversity, and promotes a healthy quality of ‘life in community’” ([www.stolaf.edu/community](http://www.stolaf.edu/community)). Part of this mission is the offering of Diversity Education, overseen by the recently created Faculty Diversity Education Coordinator who assists academic departments in developing multicultural courses, and bringing speakers and lecture series to campus that address diversity and multicultural issues. The diversity education initiative of the Office of Community Life and Diversity seeks to forge an increased awareness and embracing of different perspectives and backgrounds on the part of Olaf students. Stated in particular on its web-page: One of the most effective ways to embrace diversity is to understand and address the biases inherent in any campus community. The first step in that process is to educate the members of the community on identifying these often subconscious biases and their possible impact on other members of the community ([www.stolaf.edu/community/education/index.html](http://www.stolaf.edu/community/education/index.html)).

Also there is the office of Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach (MACO). “St. Olaf College recognizes the need to provide through various services and programs specifically designed to support students from culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds, who may at times experience a sense of isolation” ([www.stolaf.edu/community/MACO](http://www.stolaf.edu/community/MACO)). MACO serves as a support network for these students through making textbooks more available, offering a loan service, career and graduate opportunity information, counseling and advising, and providing a liaison for the greater community population, in addition to heightening the awareness on campus of diverse groups. The MACO office is also the administrative support for the various student cultural awareness organizations, such as the Asian Awareness Association (AAA), CUBE—Cultural Union for Black Expression, Karibu—a new African culture

org., the Hmong Awareness Group (HAG), Presente—the Latino culture club, Gospel Club, Talking Circle—an American Indian cultures club, Harambe—the umbrella organization for all represented multicultural orgs, and the Diversity Celebrations Committee (DCC), which is a facet of Olaf’s Student Government Association and sponsors events and programs for students encouraging the awareness of diversity.

With such a large amount of diversity and multicultural-oriented programming here at such a small Midwestern, Lutheran College, is St. Olaf’s student population affected significantly? Are students aware of the diversity the college strives so much to promote? Is the college’s heightened sensitivity to diverse groups actually reflected in the choices of students on campus, or does this better serve the publicity of the college to the outside world?

#### Methodology:

My research data relies primarily on the self-reporting of ten individuals whom I interviewed. I wanted to find students who considered themselves a part of an interracial group of friends, and who socialized regularly with a diverse group of people. My original intention was to interview and compare the responses of equal amounts of white students and students of color who interacted regularly with people of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, and who had virtually no interaction with diverse groups; in four respective categories. The simple fact of the small minority student ratio in the overall student population of St. Olaf proved to be the most difficult aspect of the study. Because minority students here are living in an essentially “white world”, it would be extremely difficult to find students of color who have no interaction at all with the white population. So I chose to focus only on interracial groups of friends.

My method of recruitment for interview subjects was primarily done by “snowball sampling”, with some aspects of quota sampling as well. Snowball sampling is a method of research subject recruitment where “the researcher collects data on the few members of the target population he or she can locate, then asks those individuals to provide the information needed to locate other members of that population whom they happen to know. ‘Snowball’ refers to the process of accumulation as each located subject suggests other subjects” (Babbie 2004). I started with friends, people I have known through classes, and acquaintances that I know to be involved in multicultural organizations and that socialize with ethnically mixed groups of people. I approached these people in person, and set up interviews that took place usually in their or my dorm room,

in the library or student commons, in a place that was quiet and free of noise or distractions (usually!). I asked them fairly open-ended questions, and encouraged them to discuss whatever came to mind throughout the interview, and to be as honest and open about their opinions as possible. At the conclusion of an interview (\*see Appendix A) lasting at least an hour (depending on how much or little each subject wanted to discuss), and sometimes as long as two hours, I would ask the subject if they could refer anyone they knew who fit the profile I was looking for. Generally I received a pretty substantial list, which I then would email, stating who gave me their name, and what my project was about, asking them if they would be interested in participating. This method worked especially well for my interest in studying students who were friends with each other, and I ended up with a group of subjects who mostly were more or less from the same group of mutually acquainted people. In some ways, however, this might have been a fault in that I might have received a different perspective on the data had I sought out students who were affiliated with separate groups of friends. Again, the issue of the small minority population comes into play. For the most part, which will be discussed further in the research findings, most of the students on campus who are identified as “multicultural minorities” know and interact with each other regularly. The task of finding students from the white majority who are affiliated with the minority population was almost more difficult.

I wanted to interview equal amounts of representatives from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and proportional amounts of men and women as well. Time restraints, inability to locate and contact the right people, and uninterested prospects proved to weaken my data in regards to this. I chose to interview five white students and five “students of color”. As odd as it seems to lump together people from a broad range of ethnicities and cultures, the demographic proportions of St. Olaf made this necessary. I interviewed half white students because the interaction of the white population with racial minorities is at the heart of the problem, and their responses of experiences were crucial to supporting my hypothesis rooted in contact theory. After conducting at least half the interviews I began quota sampling, that is, seeking out specific types of people in order to achieve equal amounts of whites, “of color”, men, and women. I did this following the snowball routine of asking interview subjects to refer me to certain people (“hey, I need a white guy.”). I’m not sure if more or less purposeful quota recruitment would have had an effect on my data. Again, time restraints, and inability to contact the “right” people made me disposed to simply take the interview subjects that were willing to participate, despite their busy schedules. In some ways, the group of subjects I attained was ideal in that because of their eagerness to participate they were probably more likely to have meaningful and insightful

things to say about the issue. I interviewed many students who were highly involved in multicultural orgs, or were spoken of as “opinionated” about race-relations issues. On the other hand, my data might have been different had I sought out more students who were less involved. At such a small school, however, the proportions of “students of color” that I was able to find in some ways were representative of the population (more Asian-Americans than African-Americans). I regret to not have interviewed any Latino students. I chose not to interview any international students, since domestic interracial contact is the issue I am more interested in.

A difficult aspect of my data collection was the generalizability of my interview questions for each interviewee coming from such distinct backgrounds. For example, asking a Korean-American who is adopted by a white family, “how many people do you talk to on a regular basis that are of a different ethnic/racial background than your own?” seems a bit strange. I found that my interview questions, which had to be the same for all participants, seemed to speak somewhat more to the white experience at St. Olaf. Because the category “students of color” embraces a much more diverse range of people than “white students”, and that many “students of color” do spend a lot of time together, I found that questions such as, “how would you feel in a situation when you are among a group of people who all are of a different ethnic/racial group than your own?” and “have you had many experiences like this?” carried different meanings for different interview subjects. Many times, especially for my minority student interviewees, I would have to explain questions like these more in terms of “all white groups” to get the type of response I was looking for. As the research progressed, I became aware of many aspects of my methodology that worked well for obtaining the views and insights of some subjects, and not as well for others. But this of course is due again to the demographic distribution of students, and how it affects student interaction, as well as the regional and historical demographics of where each interview subject came from.

Although my research relied mainly on interviews, some aspects of participant observation lent some interesting perspectives to inform my analysis. I attended a weekly meeting of the Diversity Awareness House—a student honor house on campus, and went to the “Ole Idol” competition—a campus spin-off of the “American Idol” TV Show, which had a very racially diverse group of contestants and judges. Also, casual observation of friendly interactions, comments made from outsiders, and a general sensitivity to the “racial climate” of the college campus helped inform and enrich my research intentions. However, more participant observation might have been fruitful for understanding first-hand the interactions that go on in the interracial groups of friends that I interviewed. Interviewees tend to answer questions at times by

giving the “right answers”, or in the interest of being politically correct, which is a natural phenomenon in all self-reporting methods of obtaining information. Overall, I believe that my methodology was successful in exploring the attitudes and views of students affiliated with interracial social groups.

#### Findings:

The students I talked to all had such a tangible understanding and awareness of how race affected their lives, and all had incredible insight into the racial dynamics of the St. Olaf community, and the other communities that they are a part of. Clearly, this topic is on a lot of people’s minds. I wanted their words to guide this section of the paper as much as possible. People’s experiences shape who they are, and everyone I talked to came from such different places, but came to Olaf with an openness to new people and things, ready to be challenged by new experiences.

#### Interracial ties on Campus

“I think it took a while to understand how well I can relate to people of different races.”

“I’m at a crucial point in my life where I’ve shifted from having mainly white friends to friends of color...I feel like I’m accepted more with my friends of color.”

“Those who have the same background as me are 3rd generation Oles, and most of them bore the hell out of me.”

Everyone I interviewed described their group of friends as very racially diverse, and said that on average they spent time on a daily basis with at least five or more, and as many as ten to fifteen people who were of a different race than themselves. Several of the women I talked to are best friends who go out clubbing on the weekends together. A few of them dated interracially. One woman has a lot of racially diverse friends from being involved in athletics, and a few mentioned racially mixed intramural sports teams that they participate in. The biggest tie to diverse groups is students’ involvement in the MACO organizations. Most are members of at least one or two groups, and even as many as four or five, or all of them. Many students spend time hanging out with friends in the MACO office, where there is a close, friendly atmosphere for people to play games, do their homework, or just talk.

Six of the ten students are members of the Student Support Services (SSS)

program. SSS is a student retention program sponsored by St. Olaf College with support from the U.S. Department of Education, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and the Hearst Endowment ([www.stolaf.edu/services/sss](http://www.stolaf.edu/services/sss)). St. Olaf receives funding to provide services to as many as one hundred eligible students per year who come from low-income backgrounds, and are first-generation college students. SSS includes academic advising and job referral, calculator and laptop rental, cultural events and leadership activities, financial aid workshops, graduate school preparation, internship and scholarship opportunities, and supplemental instruction.

A significant aspect of SSS is its “Summer Bridge Program” (formally called PEP), where eligible students spend five weeks of the summer preceding their first year at Olaf in an intensive orientation to the college, including a full-credit biology lab, writing and study skills classes, work-study, and opportunity to meet professors and get a jump start on the academic year. The Summer Bridge Program also takes students on a camping trip, outings to the Twin Cities, a talent show, and other social activities for integrating the group and developing ties that will last after classes officially start ([www.stolaf.edu/services/sss/bridge.html](http://www.stolaf.edu/services/sss/bridge.html)). The SSS group is very racially and ethnically diverse, with students coming from urban as well as rural areas from all over the US. Many people told me that the Summer Bridge Program was the basis of their first friendships in college, and since, the SSS group has become very close-knit, often referred to as a family.

The SSS program is one of the federally sponsored TRiO Programs, established by congress and funded under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965. TRiO Programs (so-called because there were originally just three) were designed to help low-income Americans enter college, graduate, and secure economic and social success. “While student financial aid programs help students overcome financial barriers to higher education, TRiO programs help students overcome class, social and cultural barriers to higher education” ([www.trioprogams.org/abouttrio.html](http://www.trioprogams.org/abouttrio.html)). Upward Bound, Gear Up, and Educational Talent Search (ETS), are TRiO programs that serve kids from grades six through twelve who need extra assistance and access to resources in order to prepare for application to college. Student Support Services is for students already enrolled in baccalaureate degree programs, but need the extra assistance to ensure graduation. As mandated by Congress, two-thirds of the students served by TRiO must come from families with incomes under \$24,000, where neither parent graduated from college. TRiO programs also serve disabled students looking for higher education opportunities. Over 2,600 TRiO Programs in the US currently serve nearly 872,000 low-income Americans. Thirty-seven percent of TRiO students are Whites, 36% are African-Americans, 19% are Hispanics, 4% are Native Americans, and 4% are

Asian-Americans ([www.trioprograms.org/abouttrio.html](http://www.trioprograms.org/abouttrio.html)).

Many of the SSS students who I interviewed were also involved with the Upward Bound/ETS programs—which have offices here on campus—by mentoring high school and middle school students from Minneapolis and St. Paul, and working at summer programs. The kids who come to Olaf for these opportunities are also very racially diverse. Upper-classmen SSS students have first-year mentees, whom they help adjust to college life and form bonds with over the year.

Three of the women I interviewed live in the “Diversity Awareness House”, a college-owned honor house. Six women were granted the house after submitting a proposal for a year-long project that includes hosting cultural events and parties, and making the campus more aware of diverse cultures.

The issue of race among friends

“There is more caution in an interracial group when talking about race...I want to pick my words wisely.”

“Students of color are more candid or honest about their feelings toward racial issues.”

For the most part, everyone I interviewed feel very comfortable when in a mixed-race group, but when the issue of race comes into the conversation, there sometimes is hesitation and uncertainty. White students seem to be a bit more aware and apologetic about themselves when race is being talked about within a group of minority students. Many mentioned their awareness of “white privilege”, and know that when they come into a group of non-whites, their position in society allows them to be less seen and questioned. “Whites have the unfair advantage of navigating both worlds”. People tend to prefer to keep the conversation neutral unless they are with others they know especially well. Many of the minority students are more likely to get into discussions about racial issues with their friends, and have very strong political opinions that they are not afraid to express when among a familiar group. But when in an all-white situation, such as in class, they tend to be more self-conscious and reserved.

“There are some people I know who are not fans of me because I’m white. There still are people who don’t think I should be there.”

“There definitely was a point when I was questioning my place...whether I belonged”.

Because there is a very close-knit group of friends who are students of color on campus, many who came from parts of the country where they were not in the minority, the few white students who have become part of the group feel at times out of place, or stigmatized for being white. One such student told me about how her friends sometimes say “oh, your not white!” to her, meant as a compliment. When she roomed with a Hmong friend freshman year, she was considered Hmong, and when she had a black roommate and a black boyfriend, she was black. She sees her friends’ well-intentioned inclusion, but feels at times uncomfortable because for her, they are generalizing the white mentality by assuming that to be white is undesirable for her, and it makes her feel guilty of her race. Another white interviewee said she gets stigmatized for being “the rich white girl” in the group.

“The white kids who hang with the minority students came to college with more experience. They’re not as bashful and self-hating, and they have a sense of humor.”

“I get made fun of because I’m white...people say I’m stealing black men.”

“Because I’m Quaker I get a lot of comments about the underground railroad.”

In mixed-race company, some of the students said they feel perfectly comfortable joking around and being sarcastic about race. Saying things such as, “oh, the waiter is taking a long time because you’re black”, are only viewed as endearing comments made among friends with mutually understood dispositions. Another example is of a friend of mine—white, who has a Vietnamese girlfriend—saying of another Asian acquaintance that his house was “starting to smell like an Asian house”.

At the Ole Idol competition the judges made many light-hearted references to the race of the contestants, and themselves. These comments were accepted and encouraged by the audience because of the humor and teasing involved, and it definitely made the atmosphere fun and open, and full of positive racial interaction. One black contestant moved out of the spotlight while performing, and was ridiculed by the judges—“black men should never go into the dark of the stage, nobody can see you there!” It became a running joke of the show, with other black performers edging out of the spotlight, and the judges frantically waving them back in.

The Hmong student I interviewed said that she felt more comfortable hanging out and joking around with other Hmong because they can relate more in terms



of their families and culture. With her Hmong friends she doesn't have to worry about being politically correct, or cautious about the mentioning of racial or cultural things; they all have similar experience, and can be light-hearted about it. I suspect this is the case for other groups, especially those ethnic groups that are more recent immigrants to the U.S., and are less assimilated into the mainstream American culture.

Overall, the level of comfort and closeness between the people in interracial groups has a significant effect on how they deal with differences, and I got the impression that economic and cultural differences tended to be more sensitive topics, and created more of a division than simply racial appearances.

Pre-college interracial experience: a broad range of factors.

“My parents always taught me that people are people.”

“I didn't know that people purposely cut their hair into mullets until I came to Olaf.”

Because all the students I interviewed came to college with such unique and diverse experiences, it is hard to present any clear commonalities among them that would be evidence for their choosing to be among racially diverse people while at St. Olaf. It is hard also to make these connections for the experience of the students of color, who at St. Olaf are a small minority, and therefore aren't as purposefully choosing to interact with white students; it is more by default. In general, the white students came from pretty homogenously white environments, while the students of color were among more diverse populations growing up.

“I had one good black friend in grade school”.

Of the white students, most described their Neighborhood as “a bunch of white people”, and in most cases, their interactions with different ethnic or racial groups as “almost non-existent”, or “next to nothing”. The white students came from white suburbs or small towns, and described other towns nearby, usually lower income, that were populated with Mexican/Latino immigrants and some blacks. Kids from these other towns sometimes attended their schools, and these people tended to be the basis of their first knowledge of other ethnic groups. One white student said that she knew about Hmong culture well in high school from hearing the stories of kids' families crossing the Mehcong River in refuge. She also tutored Mexican students in her school that didn't speak English, and was influenced significantly from her track coach who was Jamaican, and her Spanish teacher who was from Mexico City. Educational shows on television, or other media portrayals of blacks and other ethnic

groups, had significant influence on many of the white students who didn't have many daily interactions with different people.

One white student who lived in a mostly white, upper-middle class town, would take the bus into the city to walk around and explore what was "more colorful and exciting". He spent time in lower-income neighborhoods where he was usually the only white face, and would get stares and confused looks from the people around him. "Some neighborhoods get classified as 'bad' just because the people who live there are poor. I realized that early on." He also had a summer job once as an ice cream truck driver, where he would drive through a huge variety of neighborhoods, poor black neighborhoods and Native American reservations, and he described this as an eye-opening experience in terms of his awareness of his own race. "I felt like an exploiter".

One of the white students participated in the TRiO program in middle school and high school, which exposed her to students of color from outside of her mostly white small town. She went on summer programs offered through TRiO and met some of her best friends who have different racial backgrounds. She said that she feels she has more in common with her friends of color because she has had similar struggles and experiences from being from a low-income family. "I've had the experience of being in the position of being a minority".

"I was probably the first black friend of a lot of white kids."

A handful of the minority students grew up in large urban settings, and went to very ethnically mixed schools. They interacted daily with a wide range of people, but at the same time tended to have a close circle of friends who were of their same ethnicity. In coming to college, these students sought out friends who were from the same type of neighborhood, people they could relate to.

One black student had a significant amount of interracial friends before coming to college. He described to me his experiences when going over to Hmong, Indian, or Latino friends houses and really taking in first-hand aspects of their culture or religion. When he went to white friends' houses, however, he was always the one who felt like the 'cultural experience'. "I was the one always being 'questioned' in a white house—my friends' parents asking me, 'what are your plans [for after high school]?"

One of my black interviewees grew up in a predominantly black, upper-middle class small town in California. She went to an all black and Latino Christian private school where there were mostly white teachers. Her town was "no different from any white small town", and she told me that "Black people all look the same in Cali. It's frustrating to be around such a homogenous group". She told me about times when her school and other Christian schools from white towns would have "speech meets", a sort of literary conference. "I

didn't feel like I had to prove myself until I was in a group of mostly whites."

The adopted Korean student I interviewed had a very different experience growing up than the others. "I consider myself as part of the white American culture". Growing up in a small rural town, he was one of the only "different" faces in the crowd. He described his hometown as "a very racist community", and told me that even his dad is racist toward blacks and Latinos. "I didn't know a thing about my own culture." It wasn't until second grade that he knew he was different from the other kids, and by eighth grade his friends and classmates would make a point of singling him out; his nickname was "yahi" (from the movie, "The Karate Kid"), and kids would make comments such as, "I'll kick your ass back to Korea". He said that these sorts of things didn't bother him, that it was all just in fun, and that he never really felt threatened. But in the summer of 11th grade he went on a "science imposition" program for minority students, which was his "first heavy dose of different race exposure". "Instantly", he said, "it was the first time I actually felt very comfortable".

Influence of racial stereotypes

"I was very ignorant of everything. I categorized and stereotyped people".

"My Grandma would talk about white people negatively. She called them the 'blue-eyed devil'".

"I didn't know what Somalians were. When I encountered my first Somalian, a girl in my 5th grade class, I said to her, 'you're black, but you're not black!' She said, 'does it matter?'"

"In white people's houses the heat is always on low."

"I thought white people were getting divorced all the time. I thought that white men always cheated on their wives."

"I thought before that white people were always either really, really rich, or really, really poor, with no teeth. White 'middle-class' people were rich, but without the big chandelier."

It was especially intriguing to hear people talk about the politically incorrect ideas and assumptions about other people that surrounded them before coming to college. Interestingly, the students of color were much more candid and descriptive of their previous perceptions of white people than were the whites

of different racial groups. Most white students said that they were ignorant of different cultures and ethnicities, and some played into stereotypes that were abundant in their communities. Things like, Asians are always the smart kids, blacks all listen to hip-hop, and that blacks and Latinos are all poor, were some of the general assumptions that many of the white students had before becoming better friends with racially different people. Others told me that they always felt that they had an open mind, and were taught to accept everyone, regardless of differences. Most students thought before coming to college in clear-cut racial terms about people's identity: there was black, white, Asian, and Latino; different "ethnicities" usually were not something they were taught. Generally, the concern for political correctness seemed to be ingrained on the white side, while the students of color felt less obligated to always portray whites in a good light.

Is St. Olaf segregated?

"Sometimes I don't think people have open minds."

"I don't think there is any one person to blame".

"Sometimes I feel like it really is, but...there is this group of people of color that looks like a group...they just tend to be noticeable to other students."

"A lot of people think that there is a segregation issue—I don't".

"By nature it's segregated. People tend to stick with what's familiar to them. People make it more of an issue when it's about looks."

"Yes [it's segregated]. In a sense that people hang out with people they know from activities".

Everyone agreed that St. Olaf appeared to be a segregated community, but in general, it didn't seem to pose significant problems. Segregation does not occur from students feeling like they are being excluded from the mainstream Olaf community, or that they feel less freedom on campus than the majority of students. Segregation, according to the interviewees, is merely situational, and more related to interests and activities that people participate in.

One student mentioned the "segregation of place" on campus. She said that the places on campus where people tend to hang out or just pass through have an effect on what kind of people they encounter day to day. The Cage (a café and coffee shop), Fireside (a large living room area near the post office boxes),

and the plaza outside of the student center all tend to have their regular folks who spend a lot of time there. The MACO office is where most of the students of color, and their white friends, prefer to hang out. Because it is an enclosed room within the student center, off to the side of the main flow of passing students, those students who spend time there are not as visible to the majority as those who spend time in more trafficked parts of campus.

### Comfort Zones

“There’s a willingness [to interact across racial lines], but a lack of motivation.”

“There is fear involved, misunderstanding, caution...white students sometimes feel intimidated by a group of students who aren’t white. They see a group of students of color together, not a group of friends together.”

“It has to do with the type of environment people grew up in. There isn’t a black or white answer to it.”

“A lot of people of color are bored with all the other Oles. They seek each other out because they have a similar rapport.”

While discussing the reasons why St. Olaf might be racially segregated, the people I interviewed seem to unite in a chorus of the phrase, “comfort zones”. Basically, people just do what they’re comfortable with. The unfortunate thing is that because the overwhelming majority of whites at St. Olaf have come from pretty homogenously white communities, their lack of experience with interacting with different racial groups has made them wary of people who are different.

One student thought that the white oles, or white people in general, tend to be more reserved, repress their emotions, and become uncomfortable in the presence of flamboyant, eccentric, or very animated individuals. Not to say that this describes all people of color, but the feeling that this student got was that the oles of color tend to come from communities, and parts of the country outside of the Midwest, where laughing loud, expressing attitude and sarcasm, and “generally loving life” were accepted as the norm. When entering the white, Lutheran, “Minnesota nice” culture of St. Olaf, many of the students of color probably felt culture shock, and found more comfort when interacting with others who came from similar environments. I myself have become very aware of this discrepancy in general demeanor between people from the suburban/rural Midwest, and those from urban areas and other parts of the country, like California or the East Coast. Coming from an urban area within the Midwest, I feel accustomed to both sides; the way I comport myself with

my white extended family is culturally very different than when I am among my friends in the city. I often feel a sort of cultural disconnect with many Midwestern ones as well, where my sarcasm or sense of humor is misunderstood.

### Caf Table

“It’s not like we choose to sit together because we’re minorities.”

“You see the jocks sitting together and they all look alike.”

“If the football team wore their uniforms all the time we’d know their table in the cafeteria. We just can’t take our uniforms off.”

Everyone mentioned the fact that there is a visibly “minority” table at every meal in the cafeteria, and this seemed to be where the idea of campus segregation is most manifested. The students said they get the feeling that “the table” is an issue blown out of proportion by people outside of the group who think that the students of color purposely segregate themselves. This is not the case at all. Because there is a table of mixed-race friends who eat meals together does not mean that they are the only students of color on campus, or that there is a designated table where all students of color eat. The table that many people make reference to simply is a very visible group within a giant room full of other tables filled with groups of people who look the same as each other.

### Factors other than race

There definitely is a sense of unity among students of color that people discussed, and it is seen by the way everyone seems to know everyone, even if there are smaller, close-knit groups of friends that spend more time with each other. This sense of unity seemed to be more important to people than worrying about appearing like a segregated group to other students.

When I began my research I thought that the issue of segregation was going to be a topic of much greater concern, and found that everyone, maybe more so in the students of color, felt like “segregation” was more on the minds of the white majority, who are thinking too much in terms of race and not in terms of the regular social processes that form everybody’s groups of friends. Whites have the luxury of never having to consider their own race as a factor when they decide to spend time with other whites whom they share things in common. The white students who are part of an interracial group of friends are there because they share the same interests, and enjoy doing the same things. “It’s all about having a similar set of things to talk about.” Culture, past experiences, and general modes of thinking are what draw people together, just as anyone else. “If I had the Korean culture, I’d probably hang out with

more Asians.”

Also, many students of color happen to know each other from their involvement in Student Support Services. The Summer Bridge Program tends to form clicks of people even before they officially start college, and like any other social click, it is hard to break in or out of those bonds. This social segregation isn't all that different from athletic teams, or first-year roommates, where people form bonds with others as a result of circumstance or their joining of clubs or organizations.

### Interaction with the Majority

“If I didn't know who you are now, I would not be saying all this!”

Although many minority students don't feel badly about being seen as a segregated group by the white majority, everyone had an opinion about what they think of students of color, and how the whites who don't have any friends of color tend to interact with diverse people. There were a wide variety of opinions on whether race relations in this regard are positive or negative. Most students of color who I interviewed exercise some level of caution around white ones who they didn't know, and everyone described how the white majority was characterized by ignorance about diverse cultures and ethnicities. The white interviewees all spoke with similar regard to these issues, and definitely separated themselves from the majority mentality.

“I don't want to be asked questions, I just want to have a normal conversation...”

“In an all white environment, I have to make them feel comfortable. I have to speak their lingo...it gets annoying, always explaining myself...I've become a teacher.”

“If I'm talking to a white person I don't know, I think of my race in the back of my head.”

Many spoke of the “educating” that they have to do when in a group of whites who are ignorant of nonwhite people. White students at Olaf have the ability to not interact with the students of color if they don't want to. Students of color are forced to interact with white students on a daily basis whether they want to or not. This seems like a pretty negative way of looking at things, but many of the students of color that I interviewed expressed their annoyance with people who make their “otherness” more apparent than usual. They feel like they have to constantly explain themselves to students who may have an honest intention of wanting to interact, but are ignorant of their own mindset that is closed within a white world. This obviously comes up more often when the subject of conversation has some sort of racial tone.

A black student told me about how she feels uncomfortable when among white

women who to her, exemplify “the standard of beauty”. “To be in the realm of what is beautiful you have to be white. Everything else is ‘exotic’”. She says now she is pretty used to being among mostly white people, but it is times like these when she is made aware of her color, and it can sometimes lead to her feeling negative about herself.

“So many people here are from the suburbs. They haven’t had substantial interactions with people of other races...maybe they’ve ordered food from them.”

Some spoke of blatant racism, although rare, that they see and experience on campus. Some students who seem to completely avoid any interaction with diverse groups probably have come from areas where they have never been challenged to think about issues of race, and people other than those who look like themselves simply are not considered in their world. “Black people are like a glitch in their system.” Underlying this lack of racial awareness is probably also a big fear of people who are different. Everyone I talked to however didn’t seem to think that this is necessarily the mentality of the majority of students; ignorance better explains peoples’ mindsets.

“People call me an ‘ally’ for minority students [because I’m white]”.

The white students I talked to seemed to recognize that they have the ability to exist in both worlds on campus. They have better insight into any problems they see happening with their friends of color than other white ones would, and understand how white privilege plays into their lives and the lives of the other whites on campus. “I have a certain amount of power, you have a certain amount of power, because we’re white. We can choose to use it or choose to ignore it”.

“People that do want to have an interaction are thinking about it too much.”

“We shouldn’t have to branch out to give white people a ‘minority experience’”.

Although everyone I talked to were very positive about stimulating more interaction with the majority community, they also commented on the strangeness of purposefully “seeking out” people of other races to be friends with to this end. “I wouldn’t want someone to get to know me just cause I’m black.” This is an obvious dilemma. People want to see change, but never want to have to make sacrifices, especially of their own relationships. Because the students of color here at Olaf are such a small minority, their sense of unity is very important to them, and it seems like efforts to “branch out” into the mainstream undermines this.

There are times when some students of color felt like race is more of a fad for



those who try too hard to interact. “I listen to your music, I’m down too”. One of my black subjects relayed an instance during his first year when he felt that some white students would want to hang out with him only because he was black. Friendships based on superficial desires, like only wanting to be seen with a colorful group, don’t last in the long run, and neither did his; he now only says an occasional “hi” to these people.

### Classroom Situations

“People don’t talk in general terms in a class because they are worried that it will be stereotyped as their whole race.”

“In class, people make reference to their culture as an excuse for expressing their opinions as an individual...it’s a way of defending themselves and their culture by saying, ‘this is all we know’. It’s a lot easier for [the majority population] to swallow than if someone said [for example], ‘I was taught to be sexist’”.

“I was afraid to speak up in a class about Hmong culture—saying Hmong people are like this or that—I might provide the wrong info.”

Uncomfortable situations with the majority white population are most felt in the classroom, especially when the class is about the history, culture, or social issues of certain groups that students are a part of themselves. They often feel a sort of “tokenism” happening; if they are the only student of color in a class, then they are expected to provide their point of view, which may then be taken as a statement of the views of their entire race. Again, the presence of white privilege is felt. Students of color are the “different ones” in a class, and the idea that this diversity contributes to everybody’s learning experience is good, but puts a certain amount of pressure on these students.

One student said that he experienced discrimination from a professor who ignored him, and told him he was disruptive in the class. He usually thinks that resorting to race as the issue in interactions like these is an easy excuse, and he sees people doing this sometimes too often, abusing the issue of racism. But in this particular case, he didn’t know what else to think. “I was in dismay”.

I found a study linked to the St. Olaf website entitled, “Racial and Ethnic Diversity at St. Olaf in the 1990s”, which gave the summaries of some quantitative surveys distributed to students from outside agencies, such as the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), the UCLA Department of Higher Education’s annual survey of college freshmen (CIRP) and the Teagle survey. The study summarized St. Olaf student’s responses to questions about

diversity on campus in relation to other “peer” college’s responses. I thought it would be interesting to compare these survey data (which are not as reliable because of low participation rates) to what students have told me themselves. Some of the more noteworthy points of the study were: “Students and Faculty alike appreciate the potential value that a diverse faculty and student body will contribute to the overall educational experience at St Olaf.”

“Many students come to St. Olaf from white, suburban areas where they have had some but not a great deal of opportunity for personal interaction with persons of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. When they arrive at St. Olaf, they are typically a curious and intelligent lot, open to engagement with a diversity of students and subject matter. Many, especially women students, have as a personal priority the promotion of racial and ethnic understanding.”

“Incoming Oles want to experience multicultural events.”

“As St. Olaf students matriculate and graduate, they compare well with students from other colleges in acknowledging that their college experience has ‘enhanced their ability to relate’ to persons of different religious, ethnic, and racial backgrounds.”

“St. Olaf seniors tend not to be satisfied with the campus climate for minorities...They also point out that the diversity of the student body (actual numbers) is less than it should be.”

“St. Olaf fosters a strong sense of community, but that sense of ‘belonging’ is not as widely shared by minority students as by non-minority. Subsequent to arriving here, the expectations of minority students regarding the college’s commitment to diversity are not being met.”

“Most members of the St. Olaf community believe that they personally and others at St. Olaf are making substantial efforts to improve the climate for diversity at St. Olaf, but that, as a community, we need to be doing more.” ([www.stolaf.edu/offices/irp/StO/students/diversity/diversity.html](http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/irp/StO/students/diversity/diversity.html)).

#### Suggestions for Change

“What are we willing to give up in order to have diversity?”

“It starts with the individual.”

“I am getting to know people outside of the group...I see more of that this year.”

“More and more I’ve noticed how non-confrontational St. Olaf students are. This keeps us from learning about things we normally would be exposed to.”

“We can’t sit here and say oh, the white people don’t talk to us, well, we’re not talking to them either.”

Communication was the most important thing that people mentioned to help bridge the gap of interaction between students of color and the white majority. There have been a few open racial dialogue meetings during community time this year, but many said that not many people showed up from outside of the regular group. People having an open dialogue where they are not afraid to make themselves vulnerable, and ask questions, and get to know other people’s points of view, should be what college is all about. Students at Olaf are always ready to challenge themselves academically in the classroom, but they don’t seem to challenge themselves when it comes to social interaction that they may initially be uncomfortable with. “White students shouldn’t apologize for not knowing, and then back away—that should make you obligated to learn”.

The white interviewees were especially aware of this in their other white friends. Many expressed regret that they didn’t challenge themselves in this way sooner. “I’ve talked about the weather too much.”

“People in college need to wise up a little bit and learn some life skills.”

St. Olaf seems to be so committed to creating community among the students, but the real effort needs to come from us. When we go out into the real world there isn’t going to be planned activities to try to get us to interact with each other. People that never learn how to engage interest or empathy for those who are different in college, probably will never put themselves in challenging positions in the future. Whites who exist in a separate world from everyone else will just keep on separating themselves more as they grow older. How to make the students who are afraid to interact aware of this is hard to answer. It really just depends on the values of each person, and what kind of background they have.

More white student involvement in MACO orgs and celebrations should be encouraged. These are resources for everyone! Almost all of the interviewees stated the fact that when there is a cultural event planned by one of the MACO orgs, only the multicultural students already involved in the org attend, while the white majority tends to observe from a distance. An issue that came up constantly was that when organizations were making posters to advertise speakers, dances, or other events open to the whole student body, they would

decide not to put “sponsored by DCC” or “Harambe” anywhere on the poster because this might deter students from attending. “People usually think, ‘oh, its for multicultural students’”. Those who are involved in the MACO orgs want to get outsiders to come to the events they plan, but there tends to be a mentality in the majority population that whites aren’t invited.

### Changes in the Administration

Some students expressed serious changes that could be made on the college’s Administration’s part. Getting more students of color to attend would be the most influential change in interracial interaction on campus. Right now, the college only recruits minorities from fixed “sister school” relationships that it has in other states. By broadening the recruitment efforts to different areas of the country, particularly the midwestern inner-city, and offering more scholarships to more students who come from low-income families, the student body will become more diverse, and it will increase and encourage more interaction. Some students mentioned that the college should place more emphasis on domestic recruiting to obtain their diversity quotas, rather than trying so hard to get international students to come here. One of them said there are more African immigrants in Minnesota colleges than midwestern blacks, and the “intervention” with more black Americans should be more important.

“Its f\*cking America, there doesn’t need to be an office of multiculturality.”

This was probably the strongest and most fervent view towards Olaf’s initiatives for multiculturalism. The point being made is that the focus on multiculturalism in the administration can be seen as segmenting people, a way of “driving home that [these students] are different”, when American society as a whole is, and should be defined as, the blending and interaction of different cultures. The administration’s definition of “multicultural” only extends to ethnic minorities, which for most people translates to “nonwhite American”. Isn’t all of America in some sense multicultural? When we look at history, many people who now would be placed under the classification of “white” were in the past treated similarly as who we now call “multicultural”. Is there really a need to create these divisions? By breaking down our definition of multicultural, and understanding how it is implied in a broader societal sense, it becomes easier for white people to add themselves into the equation instead of concentrating on the “otherness” of nonwhite folks.

“If this campus wasn’t a dry campus, it would be a lot easier to interact.”

Only one student addressed St. Olaf’s alcohol policy and its implications for interracial interaction. With a lack of public spaces on campus for socializing and drinking, students who choose to drink must do it secretly, in their dorm rooms with small groups of people. Students are unlikely to break out of familiar groups and have casual social interactions with new people, because inviting someone into their bedroom to have drinks requires a lot of trust.

## Other Conclusions

While reflecting on the insights of all the people whose voices highlight this paper, I am left with a feeling of encouragement and excitement over the prospect of the increased dialogue I hope my project has stimulated. However, there are still many challenges to the improvement of race relations here on campus, and in society at large. Coming from a white perspective, I am worried about the prevalence of white ignorance within our campus community, and if St. Olaf really is the diverse community that it claims to be, then it should be reflected not only in numbers but also in the attitudes of the people acting within it.

One of the most important things I found is that when considering “race”, the term can be completely transparent, or be the central issue in interactions among people coming from different backgrounds. I found that while listening to what all the students had to say about their experiences, my standing on the phenomenon of “race” oscillated back and forth between thinking that race is everything and race is completely obsolete. It all truly depends on who is interacting, and where they are coming from. Race, being a completely human-contrived concept of no biological significance, needs to be broken down and understood with a sensitivity to our history of interaction between differently colored people. The collective experience of each group of people can never be summed up in a color, but in the cultural and social dynamics that have shaped the individuals’ lives within that group, and with those around them. I admit that before talking with all of these people, my ideas about racial experience, especially that of the students of color, were a bit ignorant in some ways. I admit that I assumed the experience of the black students was going to be synonymous. In my search for students of color, I subconsciously thought that finding one black “voice”, or one Asian “voice” was going to provide all the answers to what entirely was the “black/Asian experience” at St. Olaf. This I have learned, is not how people here think about their lives.

People who have close contact with people from different backgrounds, which are more accurately described as economic status, ethnic culture, and

regional background, are more likely to choose more diverse settings in the future, and value the diversity of the people around them. This is the case with students at St. Olaf who have interracial groups of friends. Their awareness of the racial dynamics around them is more finely tuned, and they have the ability to recognize and respect the humanity of everyone they come into contact with, which is the bottom line when it comes to interacting across socially designed barriers.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How many people do you talk to on a regular basis that are of a different

ethnic/ racial background than your own? Of the people you have mentioned, what is the nature of your relationship to them?

2. Tell me about your interactions with people of different ethnic/ racial groups prior to coming to St. Olaf?
3. Describe to me your knowledge or understanding of different racial groups prior to coming to St. Olaf.
4. Do you feel like overall the St. Olaf student body is segregated? If so, what causes this?
5. How would you feel in a situation when you are among a group of people who all are of a different ethnic/racial group than your own? Have you had many experiences like this?
6. How would you describe your feelings when communicating with people from different racial/ethnic backgrounds? (In comparison with those of the same background as you).
7. What race-related issues on campus do you think need to be addressed?
8. What is your perception of students' willingness to interact across racial lines here at Olaf? For: --White students? --Students of color?
9. Describe what you think might be some of the ways the campus could become more integrated. What are some of the difficulties or obstacles for integration?
10. What is your understanding of affirmative action? What do you think the goals of affirmative action are? What is your personal stance on affirmative



action? What outcomes do you think it would have for race relations on college campuses?

#### Appendix B: Verbal project information protocol

Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in my project for a research methods course required for my major in sociology/ anthropology taught by Professor Carolyn Anderson, who is supervising my project. My project is about interracial friendship groups at St. Olaf, and I will be interviewing junior and senior students about their perceptions of race relations on campus. I will be asking you a number of questions, and the interview will take about an hour. I will write a paper that will be available on the sociology/ anthropology department web site, and may present a summary of my findings at a professional sociology or anthropology conference.

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

I hope the results of my study will contribute to further campus discussion of and openness toward racial and ethnic differences, and stimulate positive race relations.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decline to respond to specific questions, or you can stop the interview at any point. If you change your mind about allowing me to use your information after the interview, please let me know by April 30, 2004.

Do you have any questions? Thanks again for agreeing to be interviewed. I am anxious to hear your responses to my questions.

#### Appendix C:

#### Ethics Review Application for Research with Human Subjects

#### Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to evaluate student perceptions of race relations on campus. I intend to interview students from a diverse range of racial/ethnic

backgrounds, in particular those who identify with an interracial group of friends. I'd like to find out whether or not students at St. Olaf think that race relations are an important issue, and if this is reflected at all in their choices of whom to socialize with. I do not expect any negative impact on the people involved in this research. All interviews will be confidential. My hope is that students will respond frankly, honestly, and in depth about their feelings and opinions, and if to this end what is recorded may reflect negatively on the subject, then their identity will not be disclosed in my paper.

4)

Subjects will be contacted most likely by email, or in person on an informal basis. I will ask their permission to participate in an informal interview where I will be asking questions related to race relations on campus, and their own experiences with them. I will also state that they do not necessarily have to answer all the questions if they for whatever reason do not want to, and that they can remain anonymous in my paper if they wish.

11)

I believe that if I find the right people to participate in this study, I will engage the participants in honest and open conversations about issues relating to race and ethnicity on the college campus, and they will be open and enthusiastic to share their experiences and opinions, hopefully not being concerned with the "cost" on them from the 1/2 hour to 1 hour interview. I want to find subjects (not necessarily ALL) that are interested in this topic, and want to state their views, and are ready and willing to spend some time talking about it. I hope that these interviews will stimulate more open discussion among the participants and their friends about race relations on campus, therefore the value of this research for the participants will be to increase awareness on campus of certain issues.