

One Fish or NO fish?  
The Dating Experience, St. Olaf College Style  
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to come to a better understanding of the various dating experiences and patterns on the campus of St. Olaf College. In addition, a student-defined paradigm of the concept of dating was sought out and compared with definitions from past research. Through qualitative research, patterns, attitudes and behaviors are revealed. Using persons of different ages, gender, and sexual orientation was crucial to the representation of this study. After conducting fifteen interviews, it can be determined that casual dating in the sense of several noncommittal relationships is a rare occurrence at St. Olaf. Students are heavily influenced by the physical proximity and mental framework St. Olaf College creates and seem to defy the larger social context of casual dating on college campuses.

Setting/Community

In order to understand the various dating experiences that will be discussed later in this study, it is crucial to explain the context in which these experiences exist. Collectively, the experiences of each student are affected in one or several factors related to the location and setting of St. Olaf College.

St. Olaf College is a private, Lutheran-affiliated four-year educational institution situated on a massive hill in the midst of dozens of cornfields. Located in Northfield, Minnesota, St. Olaf College is about forty minutes south of Minneapolis and St. Paul, two large metropolitan areas. Northfield has a population close to 15,000 people with both of its colleges, St. Olaf and Carleton College in session. The town offers tiny cafés, coffee shops, grocery stores, and a few bars that students frequent regularly. St. Olaf provides transportation to the Twin Cities through bus shuttle services and college-owned passenger vans. Since St. Olaf College is located on a large hill, the fact that 99% of the student body lives on-campus all four years is not a surprising one. Residential living, which is central to community development in a college setting, is divided into twelve residence halls. Five halls are reserved for first-year students: Kildahl, Ellingson, Hoyme, Kittelsby, and Mohn Halls. The halls are co-ed by floor, and are broken into corridors. Junior counselors, selected members of the junior class, serve as mentors and resources for the new students during their entire first year. Living in the residence halls with the first-year students allows

for the fostering of community growth and helps students adjust to college living.

The upperclassmen have the choice to live in Ytterboe, Mohn, Thorson, Mellby, Larson, Hillboe, and Rand. Upper-class students have a variety of options for living arrangements. Every hall except for Ytterboe offers special living spaces, such as triples or quadruples in addition to singles and doubles. Ytterboe offers students the chance to live in “pods,” which are sets of rooms located around one larger central room. Each room enters into the large living space, so it forms a small community within the larger social context. The upperclassmen halls are also co-ed by floor, but students have a greater variety of options to choose from for living arrangements.

Furthermore, juniors and seniors with motivation to formulate volunteer projects have an option of living in 11 honor houses, which are all part of residence living. Generally, those looking for a more intense experience and who have decided to dedicate more of their time to a specialized project find honor houses to be extremely fulfilling. St. Olaf College also encourages students who are involved in foreign languages to consider living in one of five language houses. One who lives in a language house must speak their respective language at all times, so students are fully immersed in the language.

Also crucial to the community setting is the structure of Buntrock Commons. Finished in November of 1999, the Commons is the largest single gift of a benefactor St. Olaf has ever received. Centrally located on the campus, Buntrock Commons serves as the crux of college life on campus. It architecturally and symbolically links the three symbols of St. Olaf College: the institutions of church, academic excellence, and community life. With glass-lined skyways, the Commons joins Boe Chapel and Rolvaag Library on both sides.

All of the necessary details of college life are centralized in Buntrock Commons. The student cafeteria, Stav Hall, serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner in a ski-resort atmosphere. Students can also purchase gourmet food and drink in the Cage, located on the main floor of the commons. Its open-air and informal atmosphere provides ample space for students to study, converse with friends, professors, parents, or take a break from the business of college schedules. For all purposes of entertainment, the Lion’s Pause presents a wide variety of shows and concerts in a professional venue. Pool tables, a video arcade, and another student lounge complete with a television complement the relaxed atmosphere. Students also have the ability to purchase food and beverages from the Lion’s Kitchen. In addition to the Lion’s Pause, the Viking Theatre is a small movie theater, complete with comfortable chairs and a podium for lectures and speakers.

The student bookstore also complements community at St. Olaf College. Students can purchase everything from textbooks and greeting cards to tampons and granola bars. The commons also serves as the main transportation stop for the buses to the Twin Cities, health clinics in Northfield, grocery stores, and Carleton College. Various services, such as ATM's, laundry card deposit machines, the telecommunications office, the main printing center, and numerous conference and meeting rooms are all located in Buntrock Commons. Therefore, a student does not need to go very far to access any of the daily demands of a college schedule.

Most vital to the community and its relevance in understanding the dating context are the 2,956 individuals that comprise the student body. Students represent all fifty states and twenty-four different countries around the globe. They bring their respective values, beliefs, and philosophies into the diverse fabric of student life. Generally academically driven, students strive to make the most of their education and the financial burden the tuition bill creates. The majority of students who choose St. Olaf College as their destination comprise the highest quarter of their graduating high school classes. With each subsequent year, the incoming classes become brighter and more inquisitive.

For the class of 2005, the average ACT score was 27, along with an average GPA of 3.7.

Part of the mission statement of St. Olaf College sums up the hopes and goals of St. Olaf College in its effort to foster the whole of the individual with community in word and action.

St. Olaf is committed to the thoughtfulness of the liberal arts, and faithfulness to religious traditions. The college is also committed to the cultivation of community. We are mindful of the ways that the extracurricular life of students complements the life of the classroom, and vice versa. The campus culture, therefore, is an essential part of a St. Olaf education, since the values that govern campus life are interwoven with the values that imbue our liberal artistry and religious character. At its best, campus life is thoughtful. At its best, it is spirited as well as spiritual. By living in close proximity with 2500 other young adults, our students take part in a form of experiential education where they are the primary teachers. St. Olaf's campus life is guided by the college, but ultimately it is determined by the students, who each year teach each other--in hundreds of different ways--how to be Oles and responsible adults. This coming of age in community is an essential aim of St. Olaf College. (St. Olaf Mission Statement, website).

Therefore, understanding all of the physical, spiritual, and mental aspects of the different communities on the St. Olaf College campus helps place the numerous

dating experiences into context. His or her environment heavily influences each person, whether or not they choose to acknowledge it directly or indirectly. The social community of St. Olaf serves as a model of how an environment can have influential control over one's overall experience, specifically dating.

### The Problem

The prospect of dating enters every new college student's mind as he or she sets foot on his or her respective campuses, whether a person finds oneself at a large university or a small liberal arts college. Through the media, specifically Hollywood, college is portrayed as the time where freedoms of every nature and flavor run rampant. Free from parental control, students encounter life on their own for generally the first time. Scenes of wild fraternity and sorority parties litter the movie theatres as directors target the large purchasing power of generation X. Movies such as "American Pie II" and "Animal House" instill high and wild standards of the scene that must be experienced for the ultimate satisfaction of college life. Dating is portrayed as a game, where the ultimate goal is to get the other person in bed, or in a current slang term, to "score". Furthermore, many large universities offer somewhat of the experience witnessed in movies. For example, students at James Madison University refer to dating on their campus as 'the game.' Student editor Courtney Crowley of the student newspaper, The Breeze states that within the four levels of dating (hanging out, hooking up, seeing each other, dating and going out), various games are played within the levels. Usually the games revolve around social scenes, such as fraternity or sorority parties or in the classroom. (Crowley). Similarly, the University of Virginia refers to their dating scene as a game, with most of the dating turned into a process of 'hooking up' and hanging out for a couple of days (C. Avery, online).

Yet, when stepping on to the campus of St. Olaf for the first time, a whole new world that seems separate from other realities comes into existence. There seems to be a different type of paradigm at St. Olaf that differs from the greater college and university campus. Over the past three years on this campus, I have encountered a wide array of personal opinions of the frequency and quality of dating experience from friends and acquaintances alike. Almost daily, I hear someone I know complain about how dating does not occur on this campus. And if someone does go out on a date, so much stigma is placed on the potential for something to happen that those involved get frustrated and often give up.

Consequently, my own perspective has served as the impetus for pursuing the constant complaints and voiced frustrations of the dating scene on campus. My first year on campus, I came out as a gay male in the spring. Soon after, I

found myself in my first dating relationship with a male. During the entire beginning stages of the relationship, when we were spending time getting to know each other, friends and acquaintances bombarded me about the status of our relationship. Not quite sure if it was because it was a homosexual relationship, I did not pay much attention to the energy other people were investing into my own private relationship. After I broke off our dating because of my feelings for a woman, I became much more aware of the attention people were placing on my private life. Rumors were circulating, and people I did not know very well were coming up to me with ridiculous stories they heard about my personal life. As a result, I grew extremely hesitant to date on campus again.

Since that relationship, my confusion regarding my sexuality has subsided and I know now that I was too quick in putting a label on myself. Over the past year, I have wanted to pursue possible dating scenarios with numerous women, but hesitated because of the reaction I thought I would receive from the gay community and the community at large. Currently, I am involved with a woman for whom I care deeply. But the process of trying to date this past year and trying to avoid labels while living in the context of the St. Olaf community has been a frustrating process. Often, I have questioned my idea of casual dating, which to me is getting to know people through off-campus endeavors.

Furthermore, I found I was not the only frustrated Ole on campus. The issue of dating became a problem when I started to listen to all the frustration and personal observations of friends and peers on campus. I would constantly hear comments like:

“Oh, people don’t date here at all!”

“People are too busy to date- my boyfriend broke up with me because we weren’t

studying enough!”

“Guys are wimps: they’re too afraid to ask girls out.”

“We don’t have frats (fraternities) or sororities, so there’s no where for people to

really meet.”

The trends and statistics of relationships at St. Olaf are also apparent and scream for attention. For instance, a common archival statistic states that 60% of St. Olaf graduates find their spouse during their four years at St. Olaf. Another alarming trend that is called into question is the prevalence of long-term relationships in the midst of a myriad of single people. All of these comments and cries of giving up made me inquire what it is about St. Olaf that defines dating in such a different behavioral framework than most

other campuses. Students seem to be confident in their academic abilities, but are they anxious when it comes to dating? Evelyn Lesure-Lester conducted a study on the relationship between social assertion and social anxiety in regards to dating competence. In Los Angeles, Ms. Lesure-Lester surveyed 217 men and women 18-22, from five ethnic backgrounds, and various socio-economic statuses. She found a positive relationship between dating competence and social assertion and social anxiety. Individuals who were confident about dating tended to be less socially anxious and more assertive in social situations (319-320). This could point to the level of social anxiety on this campus. People might be anxious when it comes to dating and social situations with people they are attracted to.

Another possible explanation that could be part of the issue is the workload of students at St. Olaf. College is an academically rigorous time, and could also be part of the problem. Cynthia Schiege and her colleagues guided a longitudinal quantitative study on the effects of workload and perception of the work environment in exclusive dating relationships. She observed that those that ended their relationships during the study had different attitudes than those that maintained their relationships. However, at St. Olaf College, the workload is tremendously fuller than the average university student's. However, the question still remains of whether or not it plays an influential role in determining dating patterns and behaviors at St. Olaf College.

Furthermore interesting is the prevalence of anorexia nervosa and bulimia on the campus of St. Olaf, although highly ill reported and discussed. I hypothesized in the beginning stages of formulating the problem of the extent to which eating disorders effect dating habits. Jeffrey Sobal and Mark Bursztn were also interested in the effects of Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa on attitudes and beliefs of dating. Through a quantitative study of 752 university students, they concluded that people with eating disorders had a difficult time dating. If they did date, it would generally include conflict and an overall negative experience. Men offered that they would rather date an anorexic or bulimic girl rather than an obese one, but still recognized the difficulty in the experience. Could this possibly be part of the problem of the supposed little casual dating that occurs?

Another main facet of the problem is discovering the patterns of people's dating habits in the absence of social structures at St. Olaf College that foster the presence of casual dating. Other schools, such as the University of Michigan, have online dating services provided for by the school. A student can enter in personal information and then it will match the student up with the gender of choice, and leaves the responsibility for the person to make the move (U of M, website). In addition, structures such as the fraternities and sororities of schools like James Madison University provide an informal, yet personal

atmosphere for students to constantly meet new people (Crowley). What are the social structures at St. Olaf that foster dating, if any exist, and how do people's perceptions reflect the community in which they live? What is the role of the administrative institution of St. Olaf in aiding the current issue of St. Olaf that is not discussed enough in public?

After having built a foundation of certain questions I was seeking, it was at this point that I felt ready to delve into the process of collecting the experiences of dating within the context of St. Olaf College.

### Methodology

In this particular study, the main objective was to gather a fair representation of the definitions, experiences, and perceptions of St. Olaf college students. I focused on creating a cross-sectional view of St. Olaf including age, gender, and sexual orientation. In addition, I tried to locate individuals who came from different subpopulations at St. Olaf, including various organizations and majors. Since I was questioning whether casual dating occurred, it only made sense to interview a few people in long-term relationships to hear their stories. I came up with an initial list of twenty total subjects, for I knew that due to lurking factors, it was better to aim high and hope for a high response rate. For representation of age, I narrowed my sample population to five each of first-years, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. As far as gender goes, I based the representation off of the male to female ratio. Currently for the academic year of 2001-2002, the college campus male to female ratio is close to 45% male, 55% female. My initial intentions were to gather an equal number of experiences for both men and women.

Furthermore, the sample population of St. Olaf in this study could not be close to complete without understanding the experiences of the gay, lesbian, bisexual students as well. Locating gay men was fairly easy for the researcher, as I am an upperclassman who knows a fair number of gay men from the campus. However, looking for those who identified as lesbian or bisexual proved to be difficult. I was limited by the conservative nature of St. Olaf, where most people who identify as bisexual or lesbian remain discreet and anonymous. Therefore, it was imperative that I asked people I trusted to offer possible names. Once I had some possible leads, I contacted the twenty people I had in mind in person and explained the focus of my research. Each person I approached agreed to be interviewed. Next, I sent out emails to each person and set up interview times with them. Over a period of four weeks in March and April of 2002, I conducted fifteen interviews. My original intention was to interview an equal mix of class year, gender, and sexual orientation. I intended to interview at least one person from each class year who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and then two males and two females from each

class. However, due to time constraints, mixed schedules, and lack of leads I was not able to fulfill my initial goals. Therefore, my final sample of individuals whom I interviewed contained nine women and six men. Of the women, seven of them identified as heterosexual and two identified as bisexual. I ended up with six men who agreed to be interviewed and followed through with their commitment. Of the six, one identified as gay, one identified as bisexual, and four identified as heterosexual. Regarding class year, two males (one gay, one heterosexual) and two females (both heterosexual) agreed to answer the questions. I had two sophomores, a heterosexual male and heterosexual female. As for juniors, a disproportionate number of women were interviewed: four females, one bisexual and three heterosexual. Only one male, who identified as bisexual, decided to be interviewed. Seniors were more equally represented, with two males (both heterosexual) and two females (one bisexual and one heterosexual).

The majority of my interviews were conducted in the vicinity of the Buntrock Commons. Ten of them were interviewed in the Cage, a neutral space where the subjects felt comfortable enough to share their complete thoughts. I also interviewed three individuals in the booths of Stav Hall, which provide a sense of security and confidentiality. Only one was conducted in the residence hall of the interviewee, but it also was the same hall as the researcher. Interestingly, one of the interviews took place on the bus during an organizational trip. All of the subjects were asked explicitly where they would prefer being interviewed, and the majority of them chose the Cage. All of the subjects were briefed at least three or four hours in advance of their interviews as to what the focus of this study was, so they all came at least knowledgeable of what I was aiming towards. Another interesting point to mention is that almost every time I mentioned the topic to a possible subject, the response was always, "Or lack thereof of dating?" with a twinge of sarcasm. These comments only served to raise questions regarding those opinions.

Therefore, I focused mainly on gathering information through the process of interviews. I chose to focus on this method due to its open-ended nature at collecting information and experiences. Each interview consisted of a base set of questions, but in each particular case, the conversation would stem off certain responses the interviewee gave. I tried to allow the participants to guide the interview and not try and worry about where it was going unless it was irrelevant to the focus of this study. Consequently, I ended up collecting a wide array of perceptions and experiences, but had to sort through much of the side notes of their experiences to pull out patterns and behaviors. In addition, the focus of my research most likely suffered because of the lack of control in the direction of the interviews. However, acknowledging that people's experiences and stories do not fit inside boxes allows for a broader range of perceptions and

aids in a more qualitatively accurate and intriguing research.

## Findings

After gathering all the information provided by the participants, it became incredibly difficult to find an efficient way to organize the stories. After careful review of my field notes, the majority of responses seemed to fall within four distinct categories: how people actually meet, what goes on with the dating scene on campus, attitudes regarding casual dating and its existence, and factors of the community that create the cultural norm of dating. Incorporating the experience of all students is crucial to the accuracy of this research. Therefore, as a researcher I tried to gather an equal number of experiences from the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community on campus.

### What is Casual Dating?

In collecting stories and experiences, I promised every person the privacy of their stories. Therefore, I am using pseudonyms for every individual, regardless if they had issues with their privacy or not. The first question I asked every single person in their interview was for them to give me their own personal definition of casual dating so I could recognize whether or not we were on the same level of cultural understanding. Each person said almost the exact thing as the next, only in his or her own words. Sarah said it was going out on a date with a relative stranger for one time somewhere on or off campus, but most likely it would have to be off-campus to be recognized as a date. Brent, a first year, and Bjorn, a senior, agreed with Sarah. They both said a casual date is going out to dinner or a movie with someone for the sole purposes of getting to know someone better. Lucy added that as a first-year student, casual dating is limited to the St. Olaf College campus and the town of Northfield. Rachel added that it is physically going with someone for coffee, a movie, or just some fun and not worrying about getting into a relationship with that person or about how things will end up between the people involved in the date.

Michelle and Meredith had similar ideas about what casual dating involved. Both likened casual dating to a friendship where two people spend time together having fun and hanging out. Michelle added that you can have one friend that you spend the rest of your life with, but you need lots of friends to figure out who you are in relationship to the world around you. All the rest of the individuals expressed similar responses. Also, all agreed that casual dating did not necessarily involve intense levels of physical contact other than kissing and holding hands, if even that.

These personal definitions seemed to agree with the cultural norm of what

constitutes casual dating. Like many of the responses of students, Dr. Sheron Patterson offers a clear definition of casual dating. "If you're in a mode of life or in a social situation where you seek to meet lots of different people and you're not attempting to be in a serious relationship, dating more than one person at a time would be fine," (Editorial 22). Dr. Tiy-E Muhammad agrees. He adds, "Regular or casual dating is just that, casual dating. In this form of dating, you don't owe anything to the other person more than common respect and courtesy." (Ed. 23). He stresses that a person should date many people that will allow a person to have a variety of experiences that are crucial in teaching oneself about one's needs and dislikes in relationships. Both Dr. Patterson and Dr. Tiy-E Muhammad agree that dating many people does not mean jumping in and out of many people's beds. The dates should be clean and fun, they offer. Therefore, the idea of casual dating in a larger context is similar to the concept within the community of St. Olaf College.

### The Initial Swim: How Dating Partners Meet

According to a majority of the individuals I interviewed, meeting potential people for dates or possible relationships starts in the first-year residence halls. Initially, students come to campus and are randomly thrown into a residence hall where they will spend a majority of their hours. Therefore, a person's first encounter with dating starts in the residence halls. This was true for many of the people I interviewed. One sophomore that I interviewed, Josh, said he came to college unattached. However, he began dating a girl he met in his hall two weeks into the school year. After they decided things were not working out for either one of them, Josh met someone else a few weeks later walking out of Buntrock Commons. He caught up with her, struck up a conversation, and then they began to spend more time together. They dated for about two months before breaking things off. Brent, another first year male was interested in two girls, one of which was in his hall. They spent some time watching movies and talking before he worked up the courage to ask her out on a date. In addition, Lucy, a first-year, relayed a couple stories of her dating experience. One guy that was interested in her threw a surprise birthday party for her in her room. They spent some time together before that, but did not have much of a bond.

In a similar manner, a junior student named Michelle who identified as bisexual said she also met her first college-dating partner in her hall. In fact, the girl she started dating was in her own corridor. They spent a fair amount of time together within their residence hall because of convenience and time. Similarly, Jamie, a senior, offered her experience with her residence hall. She

met her first serious boyfriend in her hall on Hall council, and the direction the relationship took was a direct result of their living in the same hall together. Another one of the females I interviewed had a similar dating experience. Until the beginning of this year as a sophomore, Kate had been dating a guy from her hometown. However, she met a guy when she was with her friends at the Pause, and they struck up a connection. She wasn't sure she would see him much, but one day she ran into him in the stairway of her hall, and found out that he lived there. He came to her room, they talked for a long time, and have spent time with each other ever since. Kate even admits that her relationship was very convenient because they both lived in the same hall, because they do not waste their time walking to other places to meet each other. Convenience is not the reason they are together, but may have had a hand in why they started dating in the first place, she confesses.

For the gay community, meeting people is much harder. One first year gay male that I interviewed stated how frustrated he was with the lack of structure for the gay community. Adam had dated once back home whom he had met through a mutual friend, but when he started to talk about dating on campus, he became very flustered. "You spend a lot of time trying to figure out who's gay or not, and even if you did find out who was gay, approaching them is a whole other story." (Interview 2). If one was to find out who was gay, asking that person out is setting oneself up for rejection, humiliation if the person is not really gay or still not comfortable with their sexuality, or possible gossip. He likes a few guys at this point, and his mode of analysis and pursuance is through mutual friends.

Rachel, a senior who identifies as bisexual, relayed similar frustrations. She met her first girlfriend on campus her sophomore year. The girl, who happened to be one of the leaders of the gay community, approached Rachel and asked her out on a date. However, with her second girlfriend, it was very hard to approach her because she was not sure if the girl was attracted to women. In addition, Rachel was not out to her roommate, so she could not bring the girl back to her room to hang out. However, to do something about her frustrations and the feelings of others, she and a group of bisexual women started the Bisexual Women's Group, which met once a week to discuss issues regarding bisexuality and have a place where women felt safe to explore their ideas and discuss with others who shared the same feelings. The attendance was regular with anywhere from five to fifteen women attending. In this manner, these women were provided a way for connecting and meeting potential dating partners, although that was not the original intent of the group.

Concept of Caf Dating

After interviewing all fifteen of the individuals in this ethnography, I noticed that each one of them had mentioned the student cafeteria, Stav Hall, and offered their own disgruntled frustration with what occurs inside the walls of ‘the caf.’”

People on the St. Olaf campus say they have dates with others all the time—men with women, women with women, or larger groups of people together, and even some men with men at times. However, when people are actually meeting one-on-one, calling the breakfast, lunch, or dinner with a certain person a date gives the situation a different connotation. The issue of the cafeteria brought on mixed reactions. One senior male mentioned his frustration with the ‘caf’. Kyle thinks it has a lot of pressure because everyone is watching you, whether it is direct or indirect. His sophomore year, he was in a long-distance relationship with someone from Nebraska. On campus, though, Kyle spent a lot of time in the cafeteria with a close friend who happened to be female. He was very worried about people’s reactions and the possibility of rumors to get back to his girlfriend who lived in Nebraska. Kyle complained that it is very hard to go to dinner with a friend of the opposite sex and not have people question whether or not it constitutes a date. Finally, he had to get to a point where he did what he wanted to do and stopped worrying about what others thought.

Two of the other males expressed their own similar perspectives of the cafeteria. Josh said that during his year of not dating, he just wanted to get to know people on a ‘friends’ basis. Since everybody has to eat dinner, the cafeteria serves as a convenient way to understand people in a familiar setting. He ate his lunches with many girls over the course of the year, and friends would tease him about what ‘the flavor of the week’ was, referring to what girl he was getting to know. Josh agreed that the cafeteria carries some connotations, but he also pointed out the importance of forming one’s own perspective. In the same way, Bjorn expressed going to the ‘caf’ many times with different girls, solely for the purpose of getting to know them personally and because it was convenient.

Interestingly, the cafeteria is used for dating in certain contexts. On one hand, it can be used for the initial meeting time between two people. For example, Lucy relayed her ‘date’ in the cafeteria with someone she barely knew. Before the date, she liked this guy and was interested in getting to know him better. However, after their date occurred, things between them became very awkward and have not returned to normal. He would pass her in the Commons and not acknowledge her presence. Consequently, she feels incredibly awkward whenever they see each other now. Therefore, nothing substantial came out of their date.

On the other hand, it can be used to foster existing relationships. In one

particular case, Kate told of her experience with her current boyfriend. Since they do not see each other very much due to their busy schedules, the two of them often choose to eat meals together in the cafeteria. As a result, they both consider this part of their 'alone time' together. Fortunately, they live in the same hall, but meals are times when they can catch up on the day with each other. In addition, since Kate and her boyfriend do not have much time to go off-campus during the week or even on weekends, the cafeteria serves as their 'dates'.

### One Fish or No Fish?

Out of the fifteen people I interviewed, only five of the individuals were in a relationship of varying definitions at the time I conducted the interviews. Out of the five that were in some type of relationship, four were women dating men and one was a man dating a woman. The rest identified as single. For the purpose of this study, it is interesting to understand the development of the long-term relationships and their personal views on dating, and the experiences of the single individuals I interviewed.

Sarah was the first person I interviewed. She had dated five guys on the St. Olaf campus before her current boyfriend. They have been dating since November of this school year, but on and off since last spring. All of her dating experiences started out as friends first and then progressed. She would not pursue anything with anyone unless she saw potential for something special. Her current boyfriend 'enhances' her being by understanding her 'anal-ness' about doing homework on weekends and her crazy schedule. Sarah does not think casual dating, as termed previously by the researchers and the individual subjects, occurs at St. Olaf because one must see the person they went out with the next day. She thinks consequences exist for dating relative strangers at St. Olaf because of the close proximity in which students live on campus.

Another female perspective on dating at St. Olaf comes from Jamie, a senior who has dated eleven different times with eleven different people. She used to spend her time looking for a long-term relationship but now she thinks it is about going with the flow and seeing what happens with someone. Jamie has had a couple of serious relationships, not including the one she is in currently. According to her opinion, when two people go out, other people and friends make an incredibly huge deal out of it. For instance, her co-workers in her office are always in each other's businesses, and if something happens to one of them, everyone else knows in ten seconds.

A couple of the females I interviewed offered perspectives on their friends or

roommates. Kate talked about her roommate's relationship. Her roommate met a guy who was a senior on her interim abroad trip. Since then, they have spent almost every waking hour with each other. As a testimony to the seriousness of their relationship, they bought a dog together, which lives in her boyfriend's room. Kate thinks they are practically engaged. Similarly, Lucy discussed her corridor that she lives in. A majority of the girls in her corridor are dating, and those who are happen to be dating men off-campus. She said even some of her male friends are dating girls off-campus, mostly from home. Lucy's roommate also serves as another example of a typical dating experience on St. Olaf College. Her roommate and her boyfriend have been together for three years, since their sophomore year of high school. They both chose St. Olaf, not because of each other, but other circumstances. Their relationship has definitely changed since they arrived here in the fall, but the nature of their relationship is as serious as ever, if not more so now.

Out of the men, only one was in a serious relationship. As a first-year, Josh had dated twice in the first three months he was on campus. Then, he vowed to stop dating for one year to figure out what he was really looking for, and what dating really meant to him. He says his hiatus was the best possible thing for him to do. Josh learned a great deal about himself and his needs in the time alone, and reflected on why he wants to be with someone and how to make relationships work. Also, he now strives to say only what he absolutely means and to be clear and direct in his actions and intent.

After his year was finished, Josh was in the process of figuring out what to do with a woman for whom he cared. They were getting to know each other better and he wanted to be sure he was doing the right thing. Central to his being is his faith, and he knows that he and his girlfriend need to be able to click spiritually and be at the same level, as well as in larger social settings. When he did decide to pursue a relationship with this particular girl, he asked himself many questions, like "Could I see myself spending the rest of my life with this girl?" If it isn't going to lead anywhere, Josh maintains, it is not worth pursuing.

One of the junior females I talked with voiced her frustration about the dating scene on campus. Kirstin came to school here originally as a first-year, and spent a year and a half at St. Olaf College before transferring to a large university. Then, she came back because she missed her friends and the atmosphere at St. Olaf. Unfortunately, Kirstin recognizes it did not come without any consequences. At the large university, she had joined a sorority and found the dating scene to be fun and exciting. Kirstin had dates almost every single weekend she was living there. However, when she came back to St. Olaf, her looking for a date was interpreted on this campus as being boy-crazy, even though she is trying to recreate the experience of a large university.

Kirstin has since gone on a few dates, but with little success of fun. She found the men weird and did not know what to expect with them. Kirstin worries that people think badly of her because she makes dating a priority as part of her college experience. She thinks people constantly pry each other for personal information, and therefore any sense of privacy or anonymity is not an option on this campus.

### Fish of Other Tails, Colors-The GLBT Dating Experience

Out of the fifteen interviews, four of the people identified as gay or bisexual. I interviewed two bisexual women, one bisexual male and one gay male. Each of their experiences adds a rich qualitative layer to the context of this research, and it is with their representation that my research attains a greater sense of reliability and accuracy.

The dating experience among the gay community on campus varies with the comfort level of each individual. As Andrew described, he had to go back in the closet because he was afraid of what some of his friends might think. He would like to date, but does not want to play the 'guessing game' of trying to figure out who is gay or not, because even if he figured out who was gay, he still would not want to date them because they were not comfortable with themselves. Andrew also voiced his frustration with the lack of structure for any support or people to talk to. He feels GLOW, the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender advocacy group on campus is not very visible and he cannot really talk to his straight friends about some of his thoughts. Andrew doesn't care if people question his sexuality because he knows everyone does, but he tries not to pay attention or act as if he cares, which deep down inside he does care.

One of the most fascinating experiences I encountered was that of Michelle, a junior female. She started to date a girl in her first-year corridor, and they dated for around a year. But it was very difficult to date in her first-year hall, or on this campus in general because no personal space exists for anyone. Michelle stressed that everyone is in everyone else's business. For instance, the entire hall knew about her relationship with her girlfriend before she had a chance to say anything. She also has encountered several conservative questions on this campus, like "What's it like to be gay?" She answers them, "It's just like being you," meaning that no difference exists. Michelle also has encountered people's thoughts that since she is a lesbian, that she must have all this 'gay sex' all the time. She thinks people want to put her in a box here on campus, and since she thinks no one fits in a box, it is very difficult for her to live with. She is currently dating a guy right now, which has created some questions from friends and acquaintances

regarding her sexuality. The general response was surprise from everyone, even her parents. Her mom asked her, "So what are you?" as if she needed to defend her reasons for dating a person who happened to be male. People want her to give an answer on who she is more attracted to, men or women, as in a ratio or something of that sort. Michelle feels no one fits inside an invisible social box and sexuality is something to be celebrated privately with someone we love.

Michelle thinks the dating scene on campus is hard to handle because everyone is in each other's business. Since people question her dating a man, they exude certain expectations of a gay person and how one is supposed to act, who they are supposed to date and how physical one is supposed to be with others. She senses that it is very hard to meet others who are gay because there is nowhere to meet and hang out. Similarly to the first-year male, she agrees that GLOW is not a comfortable group to be a part of. She feels like GLOW is a false support network, where people sit around talking about gay men who have crushes on other gay men on campus, and the same for women. She sees the need for something more inclusive and a more active voice on campus.

Similarly, another female, Rachel, has expressed experiences that parallel those of Jenelle. As a sophomore, she started dating a senior female who was a very active member of the gay community at St. Olaf. They would spend a majority of their time together off-campus because Rachel did not feel comfortable being in an open relationship with another woman on campus. Her roommate never knew that she was bisexual, so she never brought her girlfriend back to her room. She also worried about acquaintances' reactions to her situation with a girl. Rachel did however, feel safe in her girlfriend's pod in Ytterboe because all the girls living there either identified as lesbian, bisexual, or had no issues with sexuality. She also dated another female her junior year, and the situation with taking their relationship off-campus was also true.

Her senior year, Rachel met an older man at a club, and they started dating. Her friends were okay with it and did not question, but others had their doubts and concerns. Some expressed to her that they thought she was just in a phase, or she was denying who she really was, and some were just shocked. Rachel also expressed her frustrations with the difference in the relationships. She would never bring her girlfriend to hang out with her friends because she did not want it to be awkward. However, when she was dating a guy, they spent time with both her and his friends for a majority of the time.

With the gay community, Rachel expressed, people are much more discreet. Dating occurs behind closed doors or off-campus. She shared that it is rare for a same-sex relationship to be open on the St. Olaf campus, especially for women. Rachel also said that it is relatively easier for gay men because men are generally more out than women. However, there are more gay people

on this campus than most people visibly see, she offered. For instance, last year, she started a bisexual women's group with some other friends that met once a week to discuss issues related to ideas and thoughts they were processing. It served as a way to bounce ideas off of each other, and created open dialogue about a topic that is not talked about very much. Dating did not result from the group, but if it did happen, it was considered okay.

According to Peter, a junior who identifies as bisexual, the gay community is not inclusive and supportive at all. Rather, he says, lots of backstabbing, talking behind each other's backs, and forcing people to make crucial decisions about themselves are just a few of the horrific activities that have occurred in his experience. He has had a few experiences with both men and women on campus, but with the men, he would not label it 'dating'. Agreeing with the rest of the individuals I spoke with, Peter says that everyone has to know each other's personal lives, many times at the expense of integrity and dignity. In his own experience on campus, Peter was cornered in his own room by two members of the gay community in order for him to share an encounter he had with another person. They tried to force him to say that he was gay. Therefore, Peter remains extremely frustrated, and tries very hard now to live a private life.

#### A Fish's Perspective of the Swimming Conditions

When asked about the factors of the community that hinder casual dating, every single person I interviewed responded with varying degrees of emotion, ranging from passion to frustration to even hopelessness. I always received the feeling that the topic of dating and relationships was an issue that carried a sense of negativity and was discussed frequently by everyone. First, the majority of the interviewees would adamantly declare that casual dating did not occur at St. Olaf. Then, they would always offer their perspective of what kinds of dating do occur at St. Olaf. Consequently, all of the responses seemed to fit a general pattern. Those that thought casual dating did not occur on campus would automatically give the answer that it was due to the fact that St. Olaf is a small college and if one goes out on a date with someone, they have to see them the next day. Sarah said that as a result, there is no sense of closure or moving on after a date because you must deal with that person after the actual date if things do not work out.

Almost everyone discussed the kind of dating they did witness at St. Olaf. Kate, Kirstin, Holly, Jamie, Kyle, and Meredith all agree that two types of relationships are dominant at St. Olaf. Kate puts it best for all those who agree. On one hand, there are those relationships that are taken for granted and no time is spent nurturing the growth with the other person. On the other hand, there are those relationships where the two involved see nothing but the other

person. Both are extremely unhealthy, but are definitely dominant at St. Olaf. Another type of dating that occurs, which Jamie and Holly both see, are the relationships where it is purely based on physical attraction and physical contact with no mental or emotional connection.

The academic focus of the college plays a large part in the lack of casual dating on this campus, and even in existing relationships. Kyle has had other priorities his entire time at St. Olaf, and they have focused mainly around his schoolwork and earning the grades to get him into graduate school. The work ethic and rigorous class loads are main influences in the dating scene on campus, according to Kate. Even though she has a boyfriend, they hardly see each other. They often spend the little time they have together doing homework. She says her situation is not a rare occurrence among her friends. Furthermore, Lucy adds that the time people spend doing homework, going to classes, volunteering, and participating in extra-curricular activities leaves little time to do anything else, let alone date someone.

Since St. Olaf College is a religiously affiliated, Josh and Lucy suggested that this factor of the community might hinder the prevalence of casual dating. Lucy put it best when she discussed the implications of attending a school rooted in religion. St. Olaf College offers numerous Christian activities for students to participate in. A rough estimate by a Fellowship of Christian Athletes coordinator set the number of participants in some type of activity at 1,000, or approximately a third of the student body population. If that is the case, then the focus of dating as searching for a life mate is something shared by many people on this campus. From his own experience, Josh personifies this particular attitude on dating. After his hiatus, he realized the importance of dating as seeking someone that one could possibly spend the rest of one's life with, built on the foundation of their faith lives and sharing a life and love together.

Another huge factor for influence was the community's focus on building strong life-lasting friendships. Bjorn thinks that people spend most of the little free time they do have on hanging out with friends and having random fun, rather than spending time working on serious relationships. Most people, consequently, choose to spend those few nights with friends instead of pursuing something else. Interestingly for Lucy, her male and female friends do not hang out in the same group of friends, so she is torn between the two groups on the weekends. Rachel agrees with both Bjorn and Lucy. She says that when someone makes the decision to date at St. Olaf, they are making the decision to spend less time with friends. "But it is all about how you look at your time and what's important to the individual", Bjorn says. Also, Rachel mentioned that among her friends, they become jealous of friends that are dating people. Therefore, their behavior discourages them from even considering

dating. People's circles of friends serve as suppressors for any possible casual dating experience by commanding the majority of the time of those who wish to otherwise date.

Bjorn added two very interesting possible factors that contribute to the lack of casual dating. First, he mentioned that he thinks St. Olaf College, both the student body and the education, creates a deeper sense of respect and integrity in how to handle relationships and women, specifically. Among his closest friends, derogatory comments directed towards women are not thrown around in everyday conversation. If one of his male friends wants to talk about a girl, they tend to talk one on one with respect for the girl and the situation. This is true among younger men on campus, such as Brent and his friends. They have started a group called the Forlorn club that serves as a transitional group for men who are getting out of relationships or looking to start one. They talk on an informal basis about the frustrations of dating, and discuss women with respect.

The other factor that Bjorn discussed was the level of independence women attain at St. Olaf College. Most of the girls he knows have the mindset that they have to be single for the first year or so after graduation. They also maintain a sense of independence on campus, and demand much more than women in relationships, according to Bjorn. He says that men do not understand why women want to wait until their late twenties or early thirties to get married. Men on campus are much more ready and open for long-term relationships than women, he thinks.

#### The IDEAL Fish-Conclusions

Within the findings, several patterns of interesting data appear. First, students tend to agree passionately that casual dating does not occur as it does on large universities with social structures to foster that particular type of dating. 'Dating' in the sense of going out to movies, dinner, getting off-campus and going somewhere, tends to happen more frequently in the context of an existing relationship. People can casually date, but it must be an active participation on the part of both individuals involved. Actions must be clear and direct with both parties in order to realize what they are doing. In addition, the majority of students participate in passive-aggressive behavior in regards to dating. On one hand, the discourse and time spent thinking and discussing dating and relationships are incredible. However, little effort is taken to do something about the discourse.

Furthermore, a variety of factors stemming from the community at St. Olaf College play their distinctive roles in forming the overall cultural definition of dating and the social and cultural norms. The physical space of the campus, with most of the student body living on campus and spending a majority of

their time in the central location of Buntrock, aids in forming a community where everyone sees each other on a frequent basis. As a result, people must deal with the consequences of seeing someone they go out on a date with because 99% of the student body lives on campus all four years.

The focus of friends within St. Olaf is also a major contributor to the lack of dating in a casual sense. Since much of the time students have is spent on academics and extra-curricular activities, little free time exists. The campus focuses on trying to build strong, life-long friendships to take beyond college. Therefore, if someone were to start dating outside the friend group, they might be looked down upon because the energy and time that would normally have been spent on the friends is shifted now to the significant other. Therefore, time and all its consequences are the major factors of the type of dating at St. Olaf College. Students are drawn to St. Olaf because of its rigorous academic life and its challenges to the individual to think for him or herself. Classes and labs are quite demanding not to mention all the outside lectures, conferences, and speakers, groups and organizations sponsor to supplement the overall educational experience. As a result, people treat their academics as a full time job on top of their other outside activities. In turn, the more time is used on educational activities, the less it can be used for social purposes. In addition, the time spent with friends is accumulated until no energy and time exists to pursue possible relationships.

Conclusively, I found that no actual social structures are in place at St. Olaf College to foster casual dating. The structures that are in place, such as music and athletic organizations instead give room for long-term relationships to prosper because the commitment of time and energy to a certain extra-curricular activity together allows for two individuals to spend more time together and bond. Both of these structures are featured by shared interests and environments, which only serve to create stronger ties between people. Residential living also serves as a tool for building relationships and not dating casually due mainly to the fact that one most likely has to see the other individual on a regular basis and can have no closure.

Furthermore, sexual orientation does have an effect on the dating experience at St. Olaf. Those who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual have a harder time meeting possible individuals to date and are more prone to gossip and rumors than heterosexuals. However, the casual dating scene for both is almost completely nonexistent. For bisexual women, it was much easier for them to date men than women on campus, but in exclusive manners rather than casual dating. As for bisexual and gay men, dating does not come easy. The relative size of the gay community is so small that it only serves as a deterrent to date on campus, which makes dating casually pointless.

## Possible Theoretical Explanations

Michel Foucault's discussion on commentary and discourse offer a framework in which to carry the entirety of the dating experiences at St. Olaf. In his famous book, *Archeology of Knowledge*, he discusses the formation of discourse. Foucault begins by saying that everything with the same label is not the same thing and that the difference between differently labeled things may be a habit of thought. The problem with the habit of thought in place is that within our own language community, we fail to see the way in which we have allowed ourselves to talk about things in arbitrary language practices. Therefore, they have become second nature to us. Without suspecting anything, Foucault argues, humans group distinguishable objects into unities and therefore create our objects. The unity of discourse that is created is "the interplay of rules that define the transformation of these objects" into somewhat of a set of rules (Foucault 33), which ultimately is the discourse in practice. In his thoughts on commentary, he believes that it is discourse that paraphrases and explicates the surface meaning of a text. Comments that are based on our suspicions that are given to us from a source other than the author, such as dating scenarios, are weak and very dependent on the meaning available to the one composing the commentary (*Archeology of Knowledge*). Understanding dating at St. Olaf means comprehending the process in which the community enters to create the discourse in practice. Casual dating does not carry the same labels for every person within the community, along with the numerous other levels of dating on campus. The habit of thought at St. Olaf is one of negativity and frustration with the lack of casual dating and seemingly high prevalence of serious relationships. Yet the student body and the institution as a whole has failed to publicly and collectively acknowledge the way in which dating is discussed and approached. The set of rules that apply to dating are extremely relative to each individual on the campus of St. Olaf College. Therefore, the entire institution, including the administrative sector, does not focus on the discourse of dating. In turn, the set of rules remains in the hands of students, who flounder in thought and action because the practice of dating has not set of rules or criteria in which to follow. The way people discuss dating and comment on it is the way in which it is practiced. Therefore, if discussion focuses on how dating never happens, then it will not occur on a general whole. Other schools, such as James Madison University and the University of Virginia, have talked about it openly and with the administrations of the respective universities. Even the college of Bob Jones University that banned interracial dating on its campus up until 1999 and now requires permission slips from parents whose children want to date other races, has talked about the issue and discussed its stance (Piatt, online). Even though the position is highly controversial, the set of rules within the discourse is clear and

at least offers a chance for change in the future.

As food for discussion, I envision this study to be used as a tool for putting legitimacy to a large cultural issue at St. Olaf College. Furthermore, I would love to form a panel for discussion on the topic of dating at St. Olaf, and encourage people of all ages, races and ethnicities, and sexual orientations to come and express their frustration and hopelessness or happiness with the dating scene on campus. I would greatly enjoy hearing more opinions on what happens at St. Olaf, and to hear about all the stories and experiences I did not represent in this particular study. In addition, it would be encouraging if people read this ethnography and walked away thinking about their own experiences and questioning whether I am close to being accurate or not. This is a study of people's perceptions and experiences, and therefore I know that I am not covering everyone I ought to. However, if I could present my findings to a greater population of St. Olaf or maybe another small, liberal arts college in the Midwest to see if my findings hold true for other colleges besides St. Olaf, then I would be able to determine whether or not this is a particular phenomenon or a growing pattern.

I would suggest that further research be conducted on the attitudes of seniors as they graduate from college, and how their views of dating and relationships are affected short and long-term. I would also suggest, even for myself, to conduct more research with this particular study on the nature of sexual intimacy within the context of a relationship here at St. Olaf. Speaking from experience and the findings I have, I would venture to hypothesize that the prevalence of premarital sex is much lower than that of a larger university setting.

## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

These questions served as a base for conducting each interview. Not all of the questions were asked during each of the fifteen interviews. However, I used these as reference points if the conversation needed some help going somewhere.

Have you ever dated on campus?

If so, what do you consider a date?

How many times have you dated?

What are you looking for when you go out?

Do your motives change? If so, how and why?

What is it like to ask someone out on a date?

If it is (easy/hard), why do you think that is?

Who's responsible for asking someone out, the guy or the girl?

What do you look for in a prospective date?  
What motivates you to ask in the first place?  
Is there peer pressure to ask someone out?  
Did you date your first year?  
If so, for how long?  
Do you feel more open toward each other or closed off?  
Do you tend to date strangers or friends? Why?  
Where do you go to meet people?  
Can you tell me a general scenario at the bar and how people pick each other up?  
Is it generally the man's responsibility or the woman's?  
Give an example of how you would ask someone out on a date.  
Do you think dates happen very often on this campus? Why or why not?

Specifically for gay/lesbian/bisexuals

Have you ever dated on campus?  
If so, was it hard to be open to the St. Olaf community in your relationship?  
Did people treat you differently while you dated?  
Is it more common to date off-campus relationships?  
Where do you go to meet people?  
How do you find support for dating on campus?  
Do you receive support through the gay community on campus?  
If you have never dated on campus, can you explain your reasons why?  
Do people question your sexuality or motives?  
Do you care if people question?  
Is it difficult to pursue love interests on campus? Why or why not?

Specifically for Bisexuals

Have you dated both men and women on campus?  
Was it difficult for your partner when you told him/her that you are bisexual?  
What do you think people's misconceptions of bisexuality are?  
Do you think that the misconceptions feed into the difficulty of dating on campus?

## Appendix B

The following paragraph is the release consent form for the information gathered during the interview process. Each individual filled in their name and penned their signature, symbolizing their release of information for the purpose of this particular study.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, am participating in the research of the dating experience on St. Olaf College. I understand that anything I say might be used for the purpose of this particular study. In addition, I understand that everything I say is completely confidential and my name will not be published in the final form of the research. For the betterment of St. Olaf College and the overall experience, I promise to give honest and accurate information to the researcher.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

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St. Olaf College Mission Statement

<http://www.stolaf.edu/church/identity/liberalarts.html>

Friend Finder Service

<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~cweeks/techcom450/contact.htm>

<http://www.pub.umich.edu/garg/honorsdating.html>