

The Culture of Off-Campus Events

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Ethnographic Research Methods 373A

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Abstract

St. Olaf College prohibits drinking on-campus for a variety of academic, safety, and community reasons. As a result of this policy, many students choose to drink off-campus at parties hosted by peers and/or venues in the Northfield area. Off-campus drinking has debatable disadvantages and advantages for the St. Olaf and larger community. Our goal was to better understand why St. Olaf students attend off-campus events. We accomplished our project goal by: making four unobtrusive observations at off-campus events, holding two focus groups, and distributing an online questionnaire made available to the entire St. Olaf student body.

Through our research we were able to gain a better understanding of how the individual and groups of St. Olaf students interact in an off-campus setting. By understanding how students interact, we gained insight regarding the St. Olaf community within the larger society. In addition to the answers the students provided during the focus groups and online questionnaire, we also learned that many

St. Olaf students are for the most part very willing to discuss topics that can often be both controversial in nature and sometimes uncomfortable.

Setting

Our study took place in Northfield, Minnesota which is home to 19,413 residents ("About Northfield 2008") and approximately 5000 college students. The town is known for "cows, colleges and contentment" according to several signs scattered around the outskirts of town. Northfield is home to Carleton College and St. Olaf College, both undergraduate liberal arts schools. According to the St. Olaf website, there are 3,040 students currently enrolled at St. Olaf College representing 43 states and 19 foreign countries ("About St. Olaf" 2008).

Our study took place out and about in Northfield at various off-campus events during the second semester of St. Olaf's 2007-2008 academic year. All of the events were held at night, usually lasting until the wee hours of the morning. We attended off-campus events at: The Northfield Ballroom, Froggy Bottoms River Pub, an off-campus house, and The Field House.

Instead of making a broad generalization about the setting at each of these locations, we will describe each location individually. A common characteristic of these events was that they were marketed towards college students through the use of various advertising techniques. Whether it was posters and/or fliers at the location or on-campus, a "Facebook group" (see Appendix I), or word-of-mouth, all of these events were hoping to draw in a large student population. Most events were geared towards St. Olaf students, but there were also events at local Northfield bars that were for the larger college community. Another common characteristic was that alcohol was available at all of these events. Students were able to gain admittance to these events if they were 18 years old. Alcohol was being served at venues holding a liquor license to those in the 21+ age group.

Problem

According to a number of studies, there are a multitude of factors influencing a college student's decision to attend off-campus events and/or to drink alcohol. The quality of relationships among peer groups is one such factor influencing personal alcohol use, "stable, intimate and supportive peer relationships appear to influence the potency of social reinforcement, modeling and social cognitions on personal alcohol use" (Bosari 2006). Peer pressure is another element of these relationships which can weigh heavily on individuals. One study found that those students who make a conscious effort to limit their drinking in order to avoid any negative influences "drank substantially below what they perceived to be normative for their gender, suggesting that they were the most able to resist peer pressure" (Crawford 2004). In contrast, those students who felt that they drank closest to what they considered to be normal, were individuals with a family history of alcohol abuse and who also had a high degree of self-consciousness.

Another important consideration impacting whether or not students decide to partake in off-campus festivities is their participation in collegiate sports. A study done by James Brenner and Kathleen Swanik found that drinking five or more alcoholic beverages in the past two weeks was reportedly higher among team sport athletes than those students participating in individual sports (2007). Another examination of the collegiate drinking culture found that students who feel *controlled*, defined as "a chronic orientation toward pressures and experiencing a lack of choice in one's behavior" (Neighbors 2004), use drinking as a means to regulate affect (enhancement and coping motives) and social approval (social rewards and conformity motives).

These resources provide some useful insight regarding general factors influencing a student's decision to drink, but are not specific enough to be applied to a campus like St. Olaf College. All of the aforementioned studies took place at large, public colleges or universities who did not prohibit

the use of alcohol on-campus. The setting at St. Olaf College is very different regarding almost all aspects related to setting.

According to the St. Olaf student handbook ("The Book"), St. Olaf is a "dry" campus in order to: a) enhance the atmosphere for study, learning, growth, work and wellness; b) support members of the community affected by or concerned with the abuse of alcohol and illicit drugs; c) respect the decisions of those who choose not to use alcohol or illicit drugs; and d) promote a caring environment ("Policy on Alcohol and Illicit Drugs" 2008).

The policy goes on to state that "the possession, distribution or consumption of alcoholic beverages is prohibited on the St. Olaf campus...anyone violating college policy regarding alcohol...will be subject to disciplinary action". Action taken against a student in violation of the drinking policy can be at one of three levels (Level I, II, and III), which increase in severity. Students found to have committed "less serious violations" (Level I) in the words of the college, can expect to find themselves purchasing and completing a computer-based educational program with the possibility of having to attend an alcohol information session, extending an apology to affected persons, drafting a behavioral contract and/or other sanctions. Repeat offenders or "more serious first-time violations" (Level II) can receive a referral to the Wellness Center on-campus, confidential notification of parents, academic advisor, athletic coach, co-curricular programs director or others as appropriate, possible residence hall probation, and/or other sanctions as appropriate. For the "most serious violations" (Level III), one can expect to be referred to the dean of students' office, be referred for alcohol screening or assessment, be placed on residence hall probation, have their on-campus housing reassigned or cancelled, have to pay monetary fines, and/or experience other sanctions.

Regardless of how students perceive the on-campus alcohol policy and possible punishments, drinking does take place both on- and off-campus. According to the basic assumptions of social capital theory as outlined by John Field, "social networks are a valuable asset'. Interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric. A sense of belonging and the concrete experience of social networks can... bring great benefits to people" (Smith 2008). Applying this theory to our research, one can attempt to understand the way in which a college community both on- and off-campus can be created both through social networks. A sense of belonging to the St. Olaf and larger communities can therefore be of great benefit to students. This theory can help us to understand why students attend off-campus events, whether it be in hopes of social networking, creating meaningful relationships or simply getting off-campus.

Each student ultimately decides whether or not to attend an off-campus event. This decision is shaped by their own social valuation of off-campus events. Whether or not students choose to participate, most students are aware that drinking does take place on- and off-campus through interactions whether in the form of a private conversation, rumor, word-of-mouth, etc. Students are able to decide for themselves whether they will attend on- and off-campus events and if the situation presents itself as such, they may or may not choose to drink alcohol.

Without the threat of violating policy, St. Olaf students do drink off-campus regardless of college policy on-campus. Many students venture out into Northfield as they are invited to off-campus events at houses and other venues. Again, whether or not students choose to drink alcohol is determined at the individual level. Other factors may also affect the individuals' decision to drink such as the personal relationships with peers, event location, the "type" of people believed to be attending the event, and other perceived notions. Students may choose to attend these events in order to socialize, network, get off the campus, etc.

A better understanding of off-campus events is needed in order to more fully understand the St. Olaf College community and its role within larger communities like the town of Northfield, and

eventually the greater society. As John Field understood the social world, one is able to greatly benefit from a sense of belonging in the community. St. Olaf provides us with an excellent on-campus community during the academic work week but what does it have to offer during the weekends and outside the realm of studying? The opinion of students regarding off-campus events is bound to waiver for reasons that are specific to the individual. Understanding the reasons why students attend off-campus events will help us to understand the St. Olaf student population as being a heterogeneous group of individuals whose lives have intersected because of a shared interest in attaining higher education. Each Ole brings with them their own meanings as they move into their first-year dorm during Week One. Therefore, the St. Olaf community both on- and off-campus becomes dynamic in nature as each year brings a new group of students to interact on the hill.

Methodology

Our research began by finding an issue that was relevant to the student body at St. Olaf College. Next, we found previous research regarding college students and partying. This was done to obtain a greater understanding about the current issues related to college students and alcohol.

In addition to doing a short review of current literature, we decided that the best way to understand the issues regarding alcohol as defined by St. Olaf students was to talk to the students themselves. In order to do this we decided to invite the entire population of St. Olaf students (via e-mail) to participate in a questionnaire (see Appendix II) we created by using the college's "Feedback Form Creator." This questionnaire was designed to give us a better idea of how St. Olaf students viewed off-campus partying. We also asked basic questions to help us understand any common characteristics among students who choose to attend or not attend an off-campus event. The questionnaire also served as a better understanding of what different St. Olaf student's lifestyles were like at home and at school.

We held two focus groups with five other St. Olaf students who we asked to participate by way of convenience sampling. We hoped to understand some of the details and experiences that could not be measured with the online questionnaire. The focus groups were scheduled for thirty minutes each and were held in private rooms in Buntrock Commons on-campus.

The majority of our research was done through unobtrusive observations. We researched several off-campus events which we know as students ourselves, tend to be geared towards and attended by primarily St. Olaf students, and sometimes Carleton students. This is not to say that people from the Northfield community cannot attend the events, however we eventually discovered that almost all of the advertising for events at the Northfield Ballroom and the Grand are located exclusively on St. Olaf campus or via Facebook networks representing a St. Olaf student majority. All of the events were hosted off of St. Olaf campus and did not interfere with St. Olaf's drinking policy. This is not to say that all students consuming alcohol were of legal drinking age, but this was not of interest to our research.

At each of the events we looked for specific elements of the event: *location* – majority/minority of attendees (dance floor, bar, seating areas, peripheral areas), any change in location over time or between genders; *atmosphere* – lighting, music (volume, genre, operator), theme (decorations, adherence by attendees) and, number of event staff present; *activities* – majority/minority of attendees (dancing, socializing, buying drinks, playing pool/other arcade games), any change in activities over time and between gender (see Appendix II).

While actually observing the events, we looked for characteristics both about the setting and the group as a whole (due to privacy concerns, we chose not to focus on any individual interactions). We chose to focus on the location of the partygoers as well as the activities in which they were engaging. We also focused on details related to the atmosphere of the setting such as music and

lighting. By focusing on both we hoped to acquire knowledge about how the overall setting of an event can affect the behaviors of larger groups.

One weakness of our methodology was the choice not to take notes at the events. We had hoped it would allow us to make more unobtrusive (as perceived by the attendees) and therefore slightly more integrative observations. Although this technique did achieve our desired goal, we found that we lacked specific details at the end of the night (most events were held from 10-1 a.m.) as most of the events had large attendance rates and a lot of activities and movement. It also would have helped to have another pair of eyes at the events. The venues were often too large to make overall observations in that we could not piece together the complete picture from every angle. This limited our generalizability to a certain degree because we certainly could not make sweeping statements about the entire group of 600 people as there were too many large sub-groups for two people to observe.

The strength of our research comes from our unobtrusive observation. We studied several very different settings that provided information that can now be generalized to many off-campus events. We also found a means of obtaining feedback quickly and efficiently through the "Feedback Form Creator." This gave us extra time to make a larger variety of event observations.

After taking into account the sensitive nature of our research topic and after receiving advice from the project's IRB contact, we decided not to observe and report one-on-one interactions and conversations. Although this would have yielded more detailed results that would have more accurately described how the individual student acted and ascribed meaning towards various things (students, alcohol, behavior, etc.), it would have greatly endangered the privacy of those observed individuals.

With additional time it would have been helpful to view more events at the same locations for comparison. By only doing research during spring semester we are not able to generalize our findings for the entire school year. Off-campus events during fall semester and interim may have different dynamics than those during spring.

We are very confident that our research methods were unobtrusive, as our presence in no way changed the dynamic of the event. As students, we were able to move through these settings while attracting no more attention than if we would have been there under different pretenses – we were just another couple of Oles they may or may not have recognized amongst the crowd. As stated previously, we were able to collect a large amount of data from the St. Olaf student population by way of our online questionnaire. Although statistically significant data was in no way a central goal of our research, it does let us look into quite a large sample population at St. Olaf, allowing us to more strongly support our findings made at the focus groups or at the off-campus event observation.

Findings

- **Unobtrusive Event Observations**

The criteria for the event observations were based upon a list of specific objectives (see Appendix II). The following is a list of off-campus locations which hosted various events that we were able to observe; each individual event is described in further detail below, in the following order: the Northfield Ballroom, Froggy Bottoms River Pub, an off-campus house, and The Field House.

- ***The Northfield Ballroom (NB)***

Previously called The American Legion, this location is commonly used for college parties, especially for St. Olaf students. However, this location is also available for many other events, so the

occurrence rate of an event hosted here is about once a month. The Northfield Ballroom is located just less than two miles away from campus, an affordable taxi ride away. The building has only one level with two bars, two sets of men and women bathrooms, game-area, stage, dance-floor, several seating areas (booths, barstools, circular and rectangular tables), and a coat-check.

- **Atmosphere**

One of the most prominent features of the NB was the dance-floor, which took up much of the main room and was very much the center of the building. The interior layout of this venue was rather crowded, with the dance floor being the only open area. It was separated from the other rooms by waist-high dividing walls. The actual dance floor is made of small, slick, wood tiles. The stage was about three-feet higher than the dance floor and extended across its entire width.

The stage was the most prominent feature of the venue, able to be seen from almost all angles of the main room, even by people walking through the front doors. The DJ had two large tables for all of his equipment and speakers flanking both sides of the stage. There were dark curtains acting as a backdrop to the stage. There was a second, smaller room adjacent to the stage. The room was connected to the rest of the building and had a slightly larger bar with far fewer seating areas. In addition, this room contained a popcorn machine, two plasma TVs at the bar, a pool table, darts and several arcade games. The game area was located at the far, opposite end of the bar and was partitioned off by another dividing wall that enclosed about 3/4 th of the game areas width.

The lighting in the NB's main room was not consistent throughout; rather there were definite areas with different types and intensities of lighting. The only area without lighting was the dance floor. Otherwise, all areas were characterized by distinct lighting, which contributed to a unique atmosphere in each of these areas. The main doors and carpeted pathway leading around the dance floor and to the bar were the areas with most light in the main room. This pathway was a source of transit (heavily trafficked for its' size) for many attendees as it led both to the bar and exit, as well as the coat-check, bathrooms and water fountain. Flexible rope-lighting marked this pathway and looped around the lattices of a decorative archway, serving as the first visible dance floor entrance when entering the building through the main doors. Waist-high dividing walls flanked the archway, marking the end of light and the beginning of the dance floor. The first seven feet of the dance floor included approximately ten round tables with chairs for seating. The light in and around the main room's bar had a softer, yellow-tint which gave attendees the appearance of a soft-glow and also seemed to create a more relaxed atmosphere. The other bar was also well lit, but had starker fluorescent lighting that made the room appear cold and unappealing.

Students chose the music beforehand on a Facebook page created specifically for this event. Students were invited to make requests on the page's "wall". There were several large speakers visible on stage. A table with a computer sat behind several speakers. The people who operated the computer varied as did the number of people behind the table and onstage. At some points there would be as many as four people behind the table. At other times there were as few as one. The genre of the music was limited to mainly modern hip-hop and rap as well as electronic/dance music. The volume of the music was consistently loud and at times made conversations and interactions complicated. The music contributed to the upbeat atmosphere and did succeed in getting a lot of people from both genders onto the dance floor from approximately 11 p.m. until 1 a.m. However, the music also alienated some of the students in terms of having to physically relocate in hopes of having a conversation.

- **Attendee Location(s)**

The event began at 9:00 p.m. but students did not start to steadily file in until around 10:15 p.m. Upon arrival, students would wait in line to pay for their wristband and once admitted, would go in one of a number of different directions. At the beginning of the night when not a lot of students were on the dance floor, most male students would immediately make their way to the bar upon

entrance, while female students would make their way to the bathroom, the coat-check, or to a seating area near the bar and the majority of male students. One evident gender difference between students was that considerably more female students were wearing jackets than were males. In addition, students tended to migrate in gendered groups. Once approximately twenty students had made their way onto the dance floor progressively more students would follow. For around fifteen minutes the dance floor was composed of entirely females but a larger group of males soon joined. Towards the middle of the evening when there was still a relatively long entrance line, students would head directly to the bar or to the dance floor. Very few students used the coat-check at this point in the evening, while the bathrooms and drinking fountain on the way to the bar acted as congregating areas which in turn, made the flow of traffic along the pathway and in and around the bar very congested. About 30% of male students could be found on the dance floor by the end of the evening, while the remaining 70% were congregating around one of the two bars or in the main seating area. Very few female students could be found in the seating areas or at the bar, but often would purchase something and not linger to talk for too long before heading back out to the dance floor.

At 1:00 a.m. bright, fluorescent lights came on signifying the end of the event. After finishing drinks, some students clumped back into gendered groups, while others waited outside for rides. The bathrooms and coat-check became busier towards the end of the night, leaving very few people who needed to collect their coats at closing. By 1:10 a.m., everyone was waiting outside and the number of people waiting for rides had considerably decreased.

- **Attendee Activities**

At the beginning of the night, activities were limited to socializing primarily at the main bar and later at the seating area next to the bar. Some male students made their way to the second room and one group started a game of pool while others filled the bar stools close to the plasma TV. The female students tended to move between different seating areas, the pathway to the bar, and in and around the bathroom. As soon as more female students arrived, a good 50% of female attendees could be found on the dance floor at any given moment. Other female students continued to walk around the venue, going in between the two rooms more frequently than the males. Some females grouped together and found a table to sit at, while others dispersed among groups of male students. Interestingly enough, there were very few male students who walked around in groups of less than four, while females were equally distributed among groups of two-five students. Many female students walked around in pairs and it was very uncommon to see male or female students walking around by themselves.

- ***Froggy Bottoms River Pub***

Commonly known as "Froggy's," this small Irish bar is located in the heart of downtown Northfield overlooking the Cannon River. Froggy's is located just over 1.5 miles from St. Olaf Campus. Froggy's hosts a number of weekly activities such as karaoke night every Saturday and what has informally been deemed (even by the owners) as "college night" every Wednesday.

Froggy's consisted of two different bars, one main bar and another secondary bar. The second was only opened for busy nights. Walking into the front door one would immediately be directed down a small spiral staircase. At the bottom of the stairs, the room opened into the main bar area. The actual bar was to the right and there was seating along the left-hand wall. There was a very small stage in the far left corner. This stage was only raised off the floor a few inches. The second bar was almost hidden as one had to follow a narrow hallway behind the main bar. This smaller room was arranged similarly to the main bar with seating on the left side against the wall. Both bars granted access to a small, outside balcony overlooking the river. The balcony was well lit and equipped with heat lamps for use during the winter months and chilly evenings.

- **Atmosphere**

The lighting at Froggy's was fairly consistent. The entire bar was very small so all areas had rather uniform lighting. The main bar area was not extremely well lit but also not extremely dark as one could easily see the entire main room. The hallway that connected the bars was a little brighter making it easier to see. The second bar was well lit by warm lighting that appeared slightly yellow. With colorful decorative string-lights, the balcony was transformed into one of the brightest areas within the venue. The fire-lamps also emitted warm air, giving the balcony a very personable, inviting atmosphere.

On the night of our observation, karaoke was being performed on the small stage. This was run by one man who was in charge of operating the machine that produced the music. Those who wished to sing karaoke submitted their names and were called to the stage when it was their turn to perform. The music varied greatly in regards to genre, as selections were based upon each individual's taste and preference.

- **Off-Campus House**

Although this event was located within walking distance of St. Olaf campus, it is still considered to be off-campus as it is not on St. Olaf grounds nor is it an honor house. The event was hosted in a two-story house with a large two-car garage. On the upstairs level there was a kitchen, a living room, and several bedrooms as well as a bathroom and place for laundry. The kitchen was separated from the living room by a small island. The upper-level's floor plan was very open and one could see almost the entire room from any angle. The bottom level was much smaller and had a noticeably cold tile-floor. Although this area was small, it had access to the garage which opened the space up considerably for movement in and out of the house.

- **Atmosphere**

This entire party was very well lit. The only place where there was not enough light was down the upstairs hallway, leading toward the bedrooms. One could travel throughout the house without noticing any evident inconsistencies in the overall bright, warm lighting at this event. The upstairs living room, kitchen, and garage offered natural and artificial, warm lighting which created a fun, up-beat atmosphere further mimicked by other elements that contributed to the feeling created within the event. However, the street which the house was on had very poor lighting due to the fact that there were almost no functioning street lamps near the house. In turn, this made the front yard, driveway, and sidewalk up to the house almost impossible to navigate.

The theme of the party was a "redneck hoedown", encouraging country attire. The most popular forms of dress among both males and females were cowboy boots and hats, while others wore plaid or flannel cut-off t-shirts, jean cut-offs shorts or skirts. The music played during the event was mainly well-known, country music. This music was chosen by the party-goers. An iPod was placed next to a stereo in the upstairs living room. On several occasions people would choose a song and add it to the party's play list. Often times song choices were not consistent with the theme. When the song was not consistent with theme, one of the party's hosts would regain control of the iPod and continue to play more country-appropriate song choices.

- **The Field House**

Formerly known as Quad's this recently refurbished, sports-themed bar is a favorite among St. Olaf students on Wednesday nights. After changing hands and being out of commission for some time, slowly but surely die-hard Quad's fans are establishing a new-found love for The Field House this semester. The bar is located in a strip mall in downtown Northfield, just one mile outside of campus.

The Field House was only one-level with one large corner bar. The venue was newly renovated this year, so some of the work still appeared unfinished. The unfinished décor detracted only minimally from the overall atmosphere. Large plasma-TVs hung from the bar area as a few older men sat

around the bar and watched the latest Wild Game at the beginning of the night when few college students were in attendance. The bar had brand new pool tables, a digital jukebox, and several arcade games. In order to reach the door from the one and only entrance, people had to walk between one of two rows, which were structurally constructed by three rows of booths, two of which were connected to the outer walls and the other in the middle of the seating area nearest the entrance. The pathway to the bar had a slight incline with one very small flight of stairs which acted as a pseudo-line of division between the "upper" and "lower levels" of the bar (there was hardly any difference in elevation between the two floors). Even though the incline was small, it allowed people on the "upper level" to see who was entering the bar. There was also a wheelchair ramp and a waist-high railing between the two levels. Several high-top, rectangular and circular booths lined the wall and the railing (which ran approximately one half of the bar width) of the "upper level". There were also five tables just a stone's throw away from the bar at a regular height with very comfortable, swiveling chairs. Beyond the tables and past the bar, there was an area with two pool tables and evenly-distributed arcade games around the perimeter of the two surrounding walls. Past the game area was a hallway leading to the bathrooms.

- **Atmosphere**

The lighting at The Field House was very bright, adding warmth to the atmosphere. Stained-glass fixtures hung above each individual booth. The bar used ceiling lights to illuminate the immediate bar area, encompassing the surrounding barstools. Light and color were also provided by the new arcade games and jukebox that were often flashing an array of different colors. There were no windows inside the bar except for the glass doors and one large pane-glass window. The bar was also quite a distance from the front doors, so there was a very minimal amount of natural light coming into the bar, but the event was also at night. The hallway in the back of the venue leading to the bathrooms was the only lighting that was slightly dimmer than in the rest of the bar. It was not all that noticeable but after the bar got busier and the line for the bathroom got longer, more time was spent in the hallway by all. After waiting in line for five minutes and allowing my eyes to adjust, the fluorescent lighting in the bathroom seemed glaring.

Before the bar became busy with St. Olaf students, no music was playing and only the sound from the arcade games and sports commentary on TV could be heard in the background of conversation. When the bar was bustling, one of the bartenders turned on the digital jukebox and turned up the volume until you could barely hear the person next to you. The jukebox allowed anyone and everyone to add songs to a cumulative playlist. This created a diverse genre of well-liked songs that most everyone seemed to enjoy. Usually, if there was one song that you disliked, you only needed to wait a matter of minutes to switch to a completely different musical genre or even time period. The volume stayed consistently loud throughout the night, even making it difficult for the bartenders to take orders. There was no theme for this particular event because it is more or less a weekly happening.

The only employees at The Field House were bartenders. There was one male and one female bartender waiting on possibly 100+ customers. Understandably so, it took a good 15-20 minutes to even get a glass of water from the bar. Although the bartenders were in very high demand they were in high-spirits and kept on working as efficiently as possible. There was no one checking IDs or charging an entrance fee at the door, nor were there any security guards inside the bar. On this particular night, the lack of security became problematic because a fight broke out and until the cops could arrive, customers at the bar had to break it up.

- **Attendee Location(s)**

Due to the small size of the bar and the fact that there was only one bar, there was virtually no difference in the location of the students overall. Minor details changed throughout the night regarding the use of the bathroom and the amount and frequency of people going outside to have a cigarette. At the beginning of the night there was a pretty equal distribution of males and females

using the bathroom, but as the night progressed and the pitchers of beers were being sloshed around, the males were the ones who composed at least seven out ten people waiting in line a good majority of the time. However, there were not nearly as many females at this venue as there were at other venues. Female students tended to stay together in larger groups in the seating areas on the "upper level" surrounding the bar area. In contrast, several larger groups of male students claimed tables for the night and used it more or less as a "home-base" in that they returned to the table intermittently throughout the night to chat with whoever was currently sitting there (from their group). From "home-base" they branched out and spoke with other students. At the beginning of the night, these were mostly males but as the night progressed females were added to the social-mix. At the end of the night, most everyone returned to the groups they had arrived with and made their way out of the bar and into a car or taxi. Some of the party-goers started to walk further into downtown Northfield. My guess would be that they could have been walking home or to get food at a gas station or a nearby late-night restaurant (Domino's Pizza and Erbert's and Gerbert's are located within walking distance of The Field House and are open past bar close).

- **Attendee Activities**

At the beginning of the night there were only about ten students at The Field House. These students congregated towards the back of the venue and played pool. Around 10:30 p.m. more students arrived and the amount of noise increased exponentially as innumerable conversations took place all at once. The Field House did offer several forms of entertainment which some groups utilized at points, but the use of these were mainly limited to the beginning of the evening. The layout of The Field House was a bit cramped as tables and chairs were located very close to one another. As the night progressed the students became heavily concentrated on the "upper level" near the bar. This in-turn drastically reduced the amount of space available for walking, sitting, or anything else. The volume of the music was increased by the bartenders as the night progressed. The vast majority of people there were from St. Olaf College but there were also a few groups of younger people from Northfield in attendance. Most students sat at tables and only visited the bar when they needed a refill, whereas the groups of people from town tended to remain at and around the bar area all night. The room was definitely segregated until around 11:30 p.m. when many people moved outside to smoke cigarettes, make phone calls, or carry out a conversation. This movement of people created an intermingling of the different groups.

- **Online Questionnaire**

We distributed our question via e-mail to the entire St. Olaf student population on April 23, 2008, available to students until May 10. We received 830 sets of responses or roughly 27% of the current student body. The actual number of responses varied per question, as all questions were voluntary. This was an unexpected response rate and provided more valuable information than we had first expected. Therefore, we chose to include basic statistics as well a sampling of responses to our open-ended questions.

Of those students sampled, approximately 90% currently lived on-campus. Around 89% of students reported feeling that they fit in at St. Olaf College while nearly 71% reported feeling that they fit in at off-campus events (see Appendix IV). We also asked students how often they felt in control of their life. Nearly 30% of students felt that they "always" had control over their life, while approximately 54% felt that they "often" had control over their life. Approximately 55% of students had attended a Northfield Ballroom/Grand/off-campus event to date (to see all responses please see Appendix V)

When asked why they decided to attend these events, the majority of students stated that "their friends were going" while other common responses were that they "like to dance," "wanted to drink," and that they "liked the theme of the event." One student stated that, "like all Grands, it was packed full of people, especially toward the end of the night. The vast majority, though not all of them, were drunk. I went because I hadn't been off-campus in a while and was getting stir crazy.

Plus, I love dancing and drinking.” Others chose to attend even though they did not drink, “I went because my friends were going and there was nothing going on around campus that was a better alternative. It was fun because lots of our classmates were there. I did not consume ANY alcohol, because I don't drink.” Yet another student chose not to drink at off-campus events and stated that “I attended the Grand once earlier this year because I enjoy dancing. It should be noted that I don't particularly like the Grand, it was just the only place to go that weekend. I don't drink there though.”

- **Focus Groups**
 - **Focus Group I**

Four male students attended the first focus group. We began by thanking them for participating. The students were asked to talk about why they attended off-campus events. One student quickly responded that it was because “nothing else was going on.” Others agreed with this statement and elaborated by stating the school does not provide enough variety of on-campus events, nor do most of the events that they do have spark their interest. Others simply stated that it was because “that’s where everyone else was going.” All of them said that they had heard about the parties through Facebook (see Appendix II) or from friends. The final question asked them to discuss and make a list of all the positives and negatives related to The Northfield Ballroom/Grand/off-campus parties. Results are displayed below:

Positives	Negatives
If of legal drinking age, the student cannot get in trouble with Public Safety	Transportation issues
Sale of alcohol	Cost and lack of money
Can be extremely fun	Can get in trouble with the police
Change of setting	

Focus Group II

Three female students and two male students participated in our second focus group. The protocol was exactly the same as the first focus group. When asked why students attended off-campus events, one student replied that “there is nothing else to do here on the weekends especially,” while another student responded that “I don’t want to get in trouble on-campus for things that are totally legal off-campus.” All the students in the group nodded in agreement after this second comment was made. When asked to make a list of positive and negative aspects of off-campus events, they created the following list:

Positives	Negatives
“Legal” fun – can’t get in trouble with Public Safety and/or the administration	Can get in trouble with police
Change of setting and pace	Alcohol is expensive at most events
Lots of students attend – great for socializing	

Summary

All of the off-campus events we observed were heavily concentrated with fellow St. Olaf students. The Northfield Ballroom’s large venue offered two bars, a dance floor, loud music, and various

seating areas utilized for socializing and drinking. Events held at The Northfield Ballroom, Grand, and off-campus houses were for the most part limited to weekends. Froggy Bottoms River Pub was a favorite for students looking to get off the campus especially on Thursday nights. The Field House offered loud music and a newly renovated interior which has once again become a favorite amongst students on Wednesday nights.

Our online questionnaire and focus groups conveyed one central student perspective: students attend off-campus events because St. Olaf does not provide adequate alternatives. Drinking did not seem to be a major determinate for students in terms of deciding whether or not to attend an off-campus event. Aside from having nothing else to do, most students attended these off-campus events because their friends were going.

Conclusions

Why do St. Olaf students attend off-campus events? Overall, St. Olaf students were ready and willing to answer this question. The prohibition of alcohol on St. Olaf campus did not seem to prevent people from contributing to our study. The majority of students reported going off campus in order to socialize and simply because there was nothing else to do on-campus. For some students, drinking was not a meaningful activity in their lifestyle but this did not mean that they could not have fun at such events. Activities like dancing served as useful alternatives that were well-liked by most all students.

Both focus groups supported the notion that people go to off-campus parties in order to socialize. Students learned through their own experience and interaction with friends that on-campus events were not very fun nor did they spark interest within the student body majority. Therefore, off-campus events have become a place where groups of friends can get together and have fun, regardless if that involves drinking. Students learn about these events through word-of-mouth and also through the use of Facebook, which has become a useful communication tool for the organization of off-campus events.

The atmosphere at these events was often crowded, loud, and poorly lit and it could be argued that this prohibited socialization. However, this did not seem to discourage students from using these events as a way to get off-campus and be around their friends. St. Olaf students place meaning on the community of students around them on-campus and seem to yearn for more opportunities to socialize amongst each other off-campus. Lack of options on-campus was a common frustration for most students. However, these events allowed St. Olaf students to extend the reach of their social networks into the greater community. In turn, students not only feel a sense of belonging to the campus but also to the larger Northfield area.

One common occurrence we noticed at The Northfield Ballroom was that students who were 21 years old would pass their wristbands to other students who did not have a wristband. These wristbands were used to keep track of those who were 21 years old and were therefore of legal age to drink alcohol. Even when caught drinking without a wristband there was no punishment other than losing the drink to a security guard. This led us to believe that part of the appeal at this particular venue was that it was a relatively safe environment, which benefited some students. One could drink underage without serious legal consequence.

As a result of one "failed" observation at J. Grundy's Reub 'N' Stein, we were able to notice another interesting element of off-campus events. Although there were no students present at this location on the night we had wanted to make observations, we did notice that there were a good deal of older men at the bar. Upon chatting with some of these men we were informed that because The American Legion changed hands and had now become The Northfield Ballroom, retired veterans no longer had a place to socialize with their friends. This displacement was not blamed on college students but was argued to be an affect of the increased interest in hosting larger events that would

bring in more money. The veterans reported feeling "at home" when they were at The American Legion because they were able to establish a social network through shared experiences. When that was stripped away from them, they no longer felt as strong a sense of belonging to the community.

Overall, the larger Northfield community seems to provide a safe, fun array of events for St. Olaf students that allow them to "fit in" outside of campus. In hopes of socializing, students are able to venture out into the community through their attendance at these events. The community has come to accept and encourage this by creating special nights for students at local bars once a week and by hosting large-scale events at least once a month. A sense of belonging is created and St. Olaf students feel at home both on- and off-campus.

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