

The Marijuana Community at  
St. Olaf College  
-Student Perceptions-  
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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of students' perceptions regarding whether or not a community based on the smoking of marijuana exists at St. Olaf College. It serves as a pilot study that will lead to further investigation into the interactions among members of that community. Through qualitative research we discovered that students do perceive there to be a marijuana smoking community at St. Olaf that exists both while smoking and while not engaging in smoking. We also learned about perceptions of the students making up the community; how they are stereotyped; how the administration is perceived to view this community and marijuana smoking in general; and how accepted marijuana smokers at St. Olaf College actually are.

### Setting

In order to understand the perceptions of the St. Olaf students in our study, it is important to understand the context in which they live, work, and study. Most importantly it is necessary to understand when, where, and how they interact, and how student life relates to the sense of community and the interactions between students.

St. Olaf College is a private institution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, drawing its population of 3,041 students, from forty-eight states, including Alaska and Hawaii, and twenty-three countries. Each student and faculty member weave their respective values, beliefs, and philosophies into the diverse fabric of student life. However, 52.8% of those students are residents of Minnesota and many come from other Midwestern states. St. Olaf is trying to increase its percentage of minority students as well, but currently only 8.2 percent of the students are identified as being minority.

St. Olaf is situated on a large hill overlooking the town of Northfield, Minnesota, which is centered on the Cannon River. The population of Northfield is close to 17,000 people when both colleges, St. Olaf and Carleton, are in session. The town provides shopping opportunities for students as well as a few entertainment options including a small cinema, a bowling alley, cafés and restaurants.

Cornfields surround the college, giving it an isolated feel. However, St. Olaf is situated just forty minutes south of the twin cities of Minneapolis and St.

Paul. Transportation is provided, in the form of coach busses, on weekends. However the majority of students spend very little time in the cities.

Only 140 students live off campus currently, including those who are doing their student teaching. This means that more than 97% of students reside on campus. Living in one of St. Olaf's eleven residence halls, students are usually somewhat segregated by class year. An honor house is another option for groups of students who formulate volunteer projects. Languages houses are for those interested in, or majoring in, a language. They are expected to speak the language at all times in the house.

In the center of campus is Buntrock Commons, which serves as the physical and social crossroads for the St. Olaf campus. It was designed to architecturally and symbolically link the three symbols of St. Olaf College: the institutions of church (Boe Chapel), academic excellence (Rolvaag Library), and community life (Buntrock Commons).

Buntrock Commons houses Stav Hall, the dining facility on campus, where students can eat three meals a day in a large, open hall. They can also purchase gourmet food and drink in The Cage, a café with an intimate yet spacious feel as the tables spill out into one of the Common's hallways. Students, faculty, staff, and visitors can meet there for a cup of coffee or a full meal. It gives students a place to converse, study, and meet in groups, or simply take a break from academics and other pressures. The Lion's Pause is a student run facility in Buntrock Commons that offers entertainment options ranging from board games to pool tables, arcade games, food, and concerts. Buntrock Commons also houses the college bookstore and a small theatre as well as meeting rooms and a faculty lounge.

Academic buildings are located around this center of life at St. Olaf. Many house multiple departments, but they are loosely organized around broader subjects of study. St. Olaf prides itself on its commitment to strong academics, as well as its commitment to fostering the entire person: the mind, body, and spirit. This is based on a mission that includes challenging academics, a faith based community, and a global perspective. St. Olaf strives to provide a community where all students are accepted, and ideas and ideals are respected.

A survey of first year students who entered St. Olaf in the fall of 2000 prepared by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) found that a total of 30.0% of St. Olaf students held the view that marijuana should be legalized. The results varied among gender lines; 33.3% of males favor legalization while only 28.8% of females do. This finding is fairly comparable to other relatively selective educational institutions

that took part in the survey.

### Problem

College life offers a whole new range of possibilities as well as new freedoms for students. It is also a phase in life where students can choose how to define themselves, what kinds of people they want to be friends with, and explore new interests. Through these interests students in college make friends and develop certain communities based around them. One such community that we, from our experience as students, perceived to exist at St. Olaf was based around the smoking of marijuana. We sought to find students in this community and discover all of the intricacies that were a part of it. We wanted to learn about how students started using marijuana, whether it was before or after they arrived at St. Olaf College. We wanted to know how students became a part of this community and the interactions that take place among its members. We felt that this community is one that has been largely ignored in the past, both in research, and by the administration. We hoped to bring light to how and why students became a part of it.

Our research proposal included all of this information as well as a sample consent form and questionnaire. Our proposal was to identify members of this community through snowball sampling and interview twenty of them. The proposal was submitted in mid-March to our professor and subsequently to the Institutional Review Board, the committee that has the responsibility to approve all research designed to incorporate human subjects. Their main responsibility is to guarantee that the benefits of any study will outweigh the risks to both the participants in the study and to the researchers themselves. While many of the other proposals from our class were approved quickly, due to the sensitive topic in our paper it was passed on to a full review by the entire board.

Following their review, during the week of March 31, we were asked to revise the participant consent form in order to incorporate more completely the risks, benefits, and rights that the participants would be facing if they chose to participate in our study. We did this and submitted it to the IRB via e-mail. After turning in this addition we received word that our proposal was in danger of rejection due to the legal implications on the participants, researchers, and the college in acknowledging the illegal activity of smoking marijuana. One member of the IRB suggested that we change the focus of the proposal to the community formed by students who smoke cigarettes. For both the researchers and our professor this was unacceptable because we felt that if there is a community of cigarette smokers, it certainly did not have the same complexities of the marijuana smoking community. The IRB's main concern was that we would be identifying people who illegally smoke marijuana, even

though they would remain completely anonymous in the final paper, legal authorities could subpoena our records and, in turn, prosecute those identified through them.

With the guidance of our professor we arrived at a new proposal in which we would randomly distribute 300-500 open-ended questionnaires through the POs asking students who are marijuana smokers to respond. We were hoping for approximately twenty responses. We would have asked for those students who don't identify themselves as marijuana smokers if they would be willing to be interviewed regarding their perceptions and attitudes about the marijuana smoking community on campus. We hoped that this solution would resolve the risk, recruitment, and privacy issues with which the IRB was concerned.

Once those issues were addressed, the focus of the IRB's concern was switched from the risks to subjects, to the institutional liability of the college. This is something that should have been an issue all along, however it was not brought up till after this second proposal was submitted on April 8th. We were informed that the college lawyer was out of town for the week and couldn't be reached. The IRB concluded, "In the absence of review by the College attorney, students cannot conduct confidential research that elicits information about illegal activities engaged in or observed by their respondents." However they did say that we "may conduct research concerning OPINIONS about the illegal activity or about persons who engage in illegal activities."

While time was running short in the semester, and it didn't appear that any proposal that we submitted on the topic of marijuana smoking, or the community, would be approved, we began contemplating doing research on the IRB process itself. Due to the number of complications that we had already faced with the IRB we decided against that option. However, our professor attended the IRB meeting on April 16th and finally came to a compromise with the IRB. We were informed that we could randomly select twenty students to interview. Without asking or identifying them as marijuana smokers or not, we could ask them questions regarding only their perceptions of the marijuana smoking community. With that news we set off putting together yet another complete proposal for the IRB, as well as a new consent form and interview questions. Once again, we waited for word from the IRB on the status of this new proposal. The IRB felt that the benefit statement in our proposal did not outweigh the risks presented. We, in turn, revised the benefit statement and waited once again. Finally on Monday, April 28th, the final revision of our proposal was declared approved. During this entire process we never spoke clearly with the IRB, or spoke with the directly.

Our original intent was to interview twenty members of the marijuana smoking community in order to gain a greater understanding of their interactions with

each other and their sense of identity as a community. However, our final proposal set out to interview ten male and ten female St. Olaf College juniors and seniors regarding their perceptions of whether marijuana smokers constitute a community. We included whether the students interviewed believe that (1) marijuana smokers on campus view themselves as a community with which they identify; (2) St. Olaf students in general perceive marijuana smokers as a community; and (3) marijuana smoking shapes the social interactions of marijuana smokers.

Obviously, the focus of our research has changed many times, however in a way we still were looking at the same basic idea, the sense of community that is formed among those people who smoke marijuana at St. Olaf College. Due to the illegal nature of its central activity, the community is formed because of the deviance, secrecy, and necessary networks that enable its survival. Georg Simmel, in his work "The Secret and the Secret Society," states, "the first internal relation that is essential to a secret society is the reciprocal confidence of its members"(Simmel 470). It is this confidence among the members, and the trust that builds the community formed by people at St. Olaf College who smoke marijuana.

"A secret society is itself characterized by its secret"(Simmel 483). The secretive nature of marijuana smoking has created a tight-knit community at St. Olaf College that is characterized by the simple fact that its members engage in this secretive, and illegal, activity.

## Method

We randomly selected eighteen male and female students in Ytterboe and Thorson Residence Halls, The Cage, and at Wellstock (an annual outdoor music festival held at St. Olaf). We chose only to interview juniors and seniors because they have been on campus for at least two years and would have a better idea of whether or not marijuana smokers form the community that we hoped to study. We would approach the students at random and ask them their year in school. Juniors or seniors would then be asked whether or not they would be interested in being interviewed for our study. If students said yes we would either schedule an interview time, or interview them on the spot. We then asked the students fifteen questions directed at their perceptions of marijuana use on campus (Appendix A).

The interviewees were also required to sign an informed consent form in which the topic of our study was stated as well as the possible risks and what we were doing to protect our subjects (Appendix B). Since marijuana smoking is an illegal activity the people being interviewed were guaranteed confidentiality and they asked to not give any specific information relating to their own smoking or someone else's marijuana usage.

This study has several possible biases. First, our late IRB approval gave us only two weeks in which to complete our study. This short amount of time allowed us only to interview a limited number of students on campus. Our sample may therefore not be representative of the entire St Olaf campus. Another possible bias could come from the informants themselves. The level of knowledge about marijuana smoking on campus as well as whether or not the informant smokes marijuana could cause the interviewee to give us completely different answers to our questions. Since we do not know the respondent's marijuana background we have no way of knowing whether their information comes from inside information or if it is simply speculation. The third possible bias comes from the researchers. We may already have ideas about what the respondent is going to say or what we want them to say. We may therefore pick up on the information we want to hear and focus only on that. We did everything in our power to combat this last bias but it is impossible for a researcher to remain completely neutral.

## Findings

### Who Smokes Marijuana at St. Olaf?

One of our interests in this study was to find out what students' perceptions were concerning just how many people actually smoke marijuana at St. Olaf College. The students we interviewed obviously had varying amounts of exposure to marijuana at St. Olaf and therefore their ideas of the percentage of students that smoke varied significantly. The majority of the students interviewed divided marijuana users into three categories: those who have used, the occasional user, and the regular user. We found an indirect relationship showing that the number of people who fit into each category decreases as the frequency of use increases.

Estimates on the percentage of people in the "have used" category range from 10% to 60%. Most people defined the "have used" category as someone who has tried smoking or do so once or twice a year. Those in the "occasional user" category have been estimated from 10% to 30%. People in this category are considered to use marijuana a few times a month, generally at parties or other social gatherings. Regular users are defined as those who use every day, or several times a week. The number of regular smokers was estimated to be between 2% and 5% of the St. Olaf student population, roughly 60 to 150 students.

During our interviews students expressed the idea that more St. Olaf students probably smoke than the general population thinks. There are many factors contributing to this idea. The most prevalent is that due to the illegal nature of the activity, it generally has to be done in secrecy. We found that it is mostly done in small groups behind closed doors, according to the interviewees'

perceptions.

One student made the comment that 80% of those who smoke marijuana don't want anyone to know they use. This is due to the negative attitudes towards drug use by some students at St. Olaf. However, this same student feels that marijuana smoking is a much more accepted practice than we think it is. So how widely accepted is the marijuana user?

#### Acceptance of Marijuana Users

"I think they are accepted."

"The majority of the student population accepts it."

"They are usually accepted without any problem"

"I don't run into problems with people who smoke, its not destructive, and it is done behind closed doors."

"They are good people, just like everyone else. It's just a habit that sets them apart."

These quotations represent the perceptions of the majority of the students studied in our research when asked the question, "How accepted do you think marijuana smokers are in the St. Olaf community?" One student said that smoking marijuana is fine as long as the user doesn't abuse the drug. Another student compared smoking marijuana to differences in political views. Not everyone is going to agree with your choices, but in general St. Olaf students will respect your decision and freedom of choice.

Indifference is another attitude towards marijuana smokers that is held by some St. Olaf students. Twelve out of the sixteen people we interviewed felt that as long as they are not directly affected by other students use of marijuana, then they have no problem with it. One student said that this is because marijuana use is not destructive towards others when it is done behind closed doors. Generally it is the smokers prerogative whether they want to smoke or not.

As is any community, there are always people who disagree and are not accepting of others choices. St. Olaf is a college founded in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and therefore some students follow strict moral guidelines. The possession and use of marijuana is illegal in the United States and breaking the law is immoral and looked down upon by the church. Also the use of marijuana is considered destructive towards the user's body and society as a whole.

Not all of those who look down upon marijuana smokers do so because of religious reasons. Some students have had negative experiences with smokers either directly or indirectly. However, the blame is placed on the marijuana smoking. One student said that, "some people see anything bad about a marijuana user as a consequence of the drug, not their natural personality".

## The Administration

“They think it’s pretty much the devil,” said one junior male, and as a senior female said that the St. Olaf administration sees marijuana as “an evil sore that just won’t heal”. These are the most extreme reactions from our interviews, but they characterize the general sentiment of students.

Even though students perceive the views of the administration as so negative towards marijuana use, many of them feel that the administration does little to prevent, or to control, marijuana use on campus. One senior male said that he has never seen or heard anything about marijuana on campus from the administration. Others feel that the administration chooses to ignore the problem because if they don’t admit to it, then they can’t be held responsible. This fact that the administration ignores the issue can be seen in the posters and educational programs sponsored by the college. There are many that relate to drinking and its effects, but none of them include marijuana. One junior male says, “the administration doesn’t like it [marijuana use], but the cost of enforcing it is not worth their time or effort”. He also says that Public Safety can’t stop it. Another student who is aware of Residence Life staff policies said that the staff is trained to smell marijuana, but he has never heard of anyone being confronted about its use. One student feels that the Residence Life staff doesn’t want to know what is going on and takes a “don’t make me bust you” attitude. She feels that this is because they have to deal with it directly where as the administration doesn’t.

This is not to say that the administration does nothing about the marijuana use on campus. Obviously they train the residence life staff for a reason, and when necessary enforce the policies. For example if there is a blatant disregard for the policies or if the smoking is affecting other. Police can also be called in due to the illegal nature and have legal action taken against those in possession of marijuana. One senior remembers an incident a few years ago in which there was a major drug search in one of St. Olaf’s residence halls. According to this student, no drugs were actually found, but they discovered drug paraphernalia. It is specifically stated in the St. Olaf student handbook that “A student who uses or possesses illegal drugs or paraphernalia will be subject to immediate referral to the Counseling Center and may be subject to disciplinary action up to and including dismissal from St. Olaf College.” This senior student said that this search led to a drastic reduction in the number of people dealing marijuana on campus. Even though there was such a drastic reduction, many of the students we interviewed stated that the administration is currently unaware of just how prevalent marijuana is on campus.

Some students feel that not every authority figure on campus is personally concerned with student’s marijuana smoking. According to one student, “some

feel that they have to enforce the policy, but they don't really care themselves". Another student said that he has had professors in class make comments supporting the legalization of marijuana. That student feels that this is because "St. Olaf is a liberal arts school, so people have an open-minded view of the rest of the world".

The most consistent response that we heard throughout our interviews was that the administration is ignorant of the extent of marijuana use on campus. The use that they are aware of is generally ignored. One student sums up the students' perceptions of the administration's views by saying, "I don't think they are very pleased, but considering how many people get away with it I don't think they are overly concerned with it either".

### A Stereotyped Activity

Potheads, stoners, hippies, slackers, and the anti-Oles. All of these are nouns given to us by students when we asked what labels or names they have heard used for marijuana smokers. Potheads and stoners were the most prevalent. These are names given to a small number of people on campus, but how would you recognize these "potheads"? Hair can be a determining factor in students' stereotypes of marijuana users. Common responses included long hair, dreadlocks, shaggy cuts, or just appearing unkempt.

Clothing is another item that can stereotype people as stoners. One student said that they have "a knack for not dressing in the latest fashion, but still socially okay." Another general stereotype of a smoker's clothing is old thrift clothes that don't necessarily match, and are baggy. One student summed up what the stereotype of a marijuana user is by saying they are seen as "crunchy granola, Birkenstock wearing, tie-dyed wearing hippies...generally anything that would identify you as unafraid to try crazy or drastic things, or break social norms".

Just because students have some of these characteristics doesn't mean that they are marijuana smokers. One person we interviewed told us about a girl on campus who has dreadlocks, and because of her hairstyle everyone just assumes that she smokes. Another student said that people mistake him for a marijuana smoker all the time because of his sleepy looking eyes.

Marijuana smokers are also thought by many to be very laid back. They are perceived as outdoorsy and into peace and justice. One student said that those who smoke marijuana don't get uptight with problems in everyday life. They take a much more relaxed approach to getting things done and solving their problems. Many of the students we interviewed in this research had reservations about giving this information on smoker's characteristics because they identified it as wrong to stereotype others. These stereotypes can lead to misconceptions of marijuana users, another factor that we were interested in learning about.

The damaging effects of marijuana are one of the most controversial misconceptions we learned about. Many defended marijuana use by saying that alcohol is worse for you, not just in its effects on your body, but in your behaviors as well. Alcohol affects your motor skill differently. For instance, people don't stumble when they are high. One student said, "There are more deaths from drunk driving than high driving". Other students also shared this opinion with us. Another student said "you cannot overdose or kill yourself with marijuana". Yet another student cited a study proving that marijuana is non-addictive.

There are also students who express concern about the negative effects of marijuana use. One student feels that it "grabs a hold of you a lot more strongly than alcohol ... people who smoke think they are a lot more free than they are". Another student says that people would be surprised at the fact that some marijuana users end up in rehab. Others express concern that marijuana is a gateway drug and can lead to the use of more dangerous narcotics. Other common perceptions incorporate the intelligence level, drive to succeed, and grades of marijuana users. One student cites the fact that due to the admissions requirements and the rigorous academics, any student at St. Olaf College has to have an above an average intelligence. Just like any other group of students at St. Olaf, bound by a common interest, marijuana smokers individually are going to have differing goals. Some may be set high, and some may be set low. Those whom we interviewed didn't attribute low goals to the use of marijuana, or express that there is a larger percent of people with lower goals who smoke marijuana. A student commented that she feels a lot of marijuana smokers have high aspirations and set goals, but the general population doesn't bother to notice. Smokers are also regularly stereotyped as not doing their homework, she said. One student stated that any other outside influences could contribute to not doing homework; it doesn't have to be the marijuana. Yet another student feels that the majority of marijuana smokers at St. Olaf are responsible about their homework and finish it before they engage in smoking marijuana. Many of those we interviewed were concerned with the misconception that marijuana smokers get bad grades.

Even though most of the people we interviewed were so hesitant to stereotype marijuana users, there are some people who try to fit into the stereotype. One person said, "Some people are really proud of the fact that they smoke marijuana". Some of the people who are proud of their smoking purposely try to fit the stereotypical characteristics, so that they will be recognized as a smoker. Another said "there are certain people in the community that make marijuana smoking part of their identity." Many of the people we interviewed expressed the feeling that there is no one typical type of marijuana smoker. They can range from your "crunchy granola

hippie” to your “Abercrombie and Fitch model”. It is the misconceptions that we must be cautious about when talking or thinking about any type of people, including marijuana users. As one student put it, “All marijuana users are pretty different; you shouldn’t put them all into one category. That would be like putting all alcohol users into one category.”

#### Is There a Marijuana Community at St. Olaf?

fourteen out of the sixteen people interviewed in our study said that there is a marijuana smoking community at St. Olaf College. Obviously not all people who smoke marijuana at St. Olaf will be a part of the same community. However, the perception is that the act of marijuana smoking creates a bond among those involved. One student cites the great lengths that students have to go to in order to obtain the drug as one of the reasons for the formation of this community. The actual act of smoking also plays a large part because in general, smokers form a circle and pass the drug around. Each person is responsible for adding marijuana to the group. This student compared this to the act of breaking bread with friends.

“Any time you have a majority of people who do something that is frowned upon, they will join together.” This quotation shows another important aspect of the formation of the marijuana community. Due to the illegal nature of this activity, as well as the potential negative social connotations that go along with drug use, trust becomes a very important aspect. Users would not subject themselves to the consequences of discovery by a large majority, the administration, or legal authorities. Those who smoke would also need an outlet to talk about their experiences, and go to for help, and that trust relationship with someone with whom you have engaged in an illegal activity would surely be important in this instance. “I’m sure people wouldn’t smoke or talk about their smoking with people that they don’t trust,” said one student, “just because of the consequences a breach of trust could result in.”

Trust is not the only thing that results from the illegal nature of marijuana use. Help from others when there is a potential threat of discovery is a very important aspect mentioned by some of those we interviewed. One student felt that, just like any other rule violation at St. Olaf, friends will watch out for each other and try to warn each other when there is a threat. He feels that the double threat of violating school policy, and breaking the law would push the marijuana community into a “greater desire to look out for each other”. There is also a fear attached to the activity, and it cannot be shared with everyone. Students mentioned that it is not the type of thing you could write about in an English paper due to the repercussions that would follow. Although there is a fear that comes along with smoking, there is also an element of excitement with that fear. One student thinks that smokers bond together in

this community because they feel that it is an injustice and they are being persecuted for an act that they see as perfectly acceptable.

Other students felt that the community is formed for more personal reasons, as a way to rebel or to establish identity. One student said “they are rebelling not against authority, but against the stereotypical blonde, Lutheran, Olaf student”. Some saw it as a way to fit in. It is a way to form an automatic common bond. One student said that “you will always have friends when you smoke, you will always have friends to smoke with you”. Another said “if you don’t fit in anywhere, you can get together with smokers and fit”. These comments express the idea that smokers have a certain way of accepting people. That theme was recurrent through many of our interviews. One opinion that was expressed is that smokers, due to their laid-back attitude and open-mindedness, are more accepting than your average non-smoker. Along with this, one student said that “some smokers don’t like each other, but will give each other the time of day simply because they smoked together, or have friends that smoke.”

Of course many of those we interviewed were referring to those who smoke marijuana regularly as those who form the community. Many wanted to point out that not everyone who smokes marijuana is in the community. The occasional smokers will generally be part of other groups who don’t have marijuana smoking as one of their common interests or identifying traits. Along with this idea, it was brought up that not all of the regular smokers form just one community. There are other sub-communities within the marijuana community. One student felt that those people in the marijuana community do not form one distinct group. However, another student noted that if you do smoke marijuana odds are that you will have smoked with every other smoker on campus at least once. This idea can be explained through the comment of one of those interviewed, who said, “There are different atmospheres among different groups of smokers. They don’t hang out with everyone who smokes, but they all network with each other. They share with each other when it is needed.”

### When Does the Community Exist?

The general perceptions tell us the time that the community is most obvious is at the point when the members are engaging in marijuana smoking. They are all participating in one activity and generally they do it together. Due to the fact that smoking is usually done behind closed doors, the members become close and intimate with each other while they are smoking. Through this common interest and through spending time together, friendships are strengthened leading to more interactions outside the realm of smoking.

We asked where the majority of these outside interactions would take place,

and what kinds of common interests marijuana smokers share. One student said that the community exists when the members are not smoking, and when they are in areas where it is inappropriate to smoke, including the main campus, at movies, and in any other public place.

Another finding is that members of the marijuana community do things that all friends do. One student, when asked what kind of common interests marijuana smokers have said, “There is nothing they couldn’t have in common.” Many others shared this idea, but there are a few activities that were cited more often, including Frisbee golf, listening to and talking about music, watching movies, video games, outdoor activities, and campus golf. One activity that prompted mixed ideas was hacky-sac. Some students felt that it was defiantly an activity where many smokers participate, while other felt that it had been in the past, but has become too mainstreamed for the serious smokers. Many people play hacky-sac who are not smokers or part of the marijuana smoking community. This also shows us that we cannot stereotype people as marijuana users simply because of the activities they participate in. These activities that were cited as common interests could be common interests of any other community or group of friends.

One student said that “everything is based around humor” in the marijuana smoking community. The humor comes from many sources. Multi-viewings of movies, as well as quoting them, provide one type of this humor. Watching or listening to stand-up comedy was another source. They are also said to find the humor in everyday situations, especially those around St. Olaf and its students.

A minority of the people we interviewed believed that the community did not exist outside of smoking. However, it is still important to note their beliefs and ideas on the subject. One person thinks that it exists superficially outside of smoking. He thinks that those in the community will say hi when they see each other, but they won’t go out of their way to hang out with each other. Another student said that smokers “become bonded to each other through marijuana smoking, but it’s not always as lovey-dovey as they sometimes think it is.” He also says, “the friendships are not based on anything more than weed.” One student said there is not a community when they are not using drugs. She compares the marijuana community to FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes) here at St. Olaf. “When you are participating, you are in the community, you are set apart, but when you are not in the meetings, there really is no community. It turns into individual people with their individual interests once again.”

Smokers Recognition and Interactions With Each Other  
“There is no way of telling.”

“There is really no way of knowing other than verbal contact. There is some instinctual feeling. Generally you can tell because that person seems more open, liberal, and comfortable with themselves.”

Due to the fact that marijuana smoking is such a stigmatized and hushed activity, not everyone knows who the smokers on campus are. Even smokers have a hard time recognizing other smokers sometimes. If a smoker comes upon another person they suspect smokes there are things that are said to test the waters to see the other person’s position on it. Another student says that “sometimes you have no clue because they don’t want anyone to know that they smoke.”

There is some interaction between smokers simply because of recognition from a party where people were smoking. The fact that students know that the other student smokes helps to form some kind of a common bond. As one student put it, “there is a nod that happens, both literally and figuratively.” Also, it is easy to make friends with these people because there is no icebreaker. The recognition of the other student’s use becomes the icebreaker.

Not every smoker is hard to recognize. “If they smoke, they say it. If they don’t, they say it.” Said one interviewee. One person feels that the people who are talking about marijuana smoking the most are the ones who do it, and there aren’t very many conversations about it with those who don’t smoke. Other students just don’t know what to say and don’t want to appear judgmental. Many of those interviewed felt that those who don’t smoke gossip about it. They say things like “Did you hear that so and so smokes?”, or “I can’t believe he/she came to class stoned.”. Or they are simply wondering if one of the people they see is currently under the influence of marijuana. Those who do smoke talk about things other than marijuana; usually, however when they do talk about it, the topic is generally about the supply of marijuana.

We were also wondering if marijuana users are thought to select roommate who are also marijuana users. We heard different answers, but one fairly consistent result was that marijuana users would select someone who was at least accepting of the practice even if they did not do it themselves. Some may try to select roommates who smoke as well, but it often doesn’t work out because it is often all they will end up doing. One student compared it to people who like to play chess, that’s all they will do if they both like it. Many students will then choose someone who doesn’t smoke but is accepting of it for different reasons. The most commonly stated reason is that it is extremely cold in Minnesota during the winter. Smokers do not want to have to go outside in freezing temperatures simply to get high. Others state that if a person were a regular smoker, it would be something that is very hard to hide from a roommate. This becomes a definite issue for first-year students who

generally don't have the option of choosing who they room with. Besides choosing roommates, smoker's actions are thought to be just like anyone else. People will choose friends for similar interests, not just one interest. So, when smokers are hanging out with other smokers they may be smoking, or they may be doing one of a million other things. It all depends on the people and what they like.

### Summary and Conclusions

Through our interviews we discovered that students do in fact perceive a community based on the smoking of marijuana at St. Olaf. We found that students think that a large percentage of students smoke marijuana. These students can be divided into three categories: have used, occasional user, and regular user. However we also discovered that some students feel that an overwhelming majority of students who do smoke marijuana do not want others to know about it.

Marijuana smoking is widely accepted by students at St. Olaf. Many students express the idea that as long as the smokers are not bothering others it is their own personal choice whether they smoke or not. It is when others' rights are violated that smoking of marijuana becomes a problem. There is a small minority of students who do not accept marijuana users, either for legal, religious, or personal reasons. Some blame the problems associated with marijuana smoking on the drug itself rather than on the person.

The students we interviewed felt the administration saw marijuana smoking on campus as a negative thing, but thought the administration did not see combating the problem as a high priority as they do little to control the use. They do some training of residence life staff and call the police when necessary, but there is not much done to educate the students. Many students also thought the administration is unaware of the extent of marijuana use on campus. One possible explanation is that the school wants to avoid the negative publicity that cracking down on drugs would bring.

People who we interviewed were very reluctant to stereotype people who smoke marijuana, first because there is a feeling that stereotyping is wrong, but mainly because they acknowledge that many different types of people smoke marijuana. But some students were willing to list off some common characteristics of the stereotypical marijuana smoker. These included certain types of clothing and hairstyles, as well as certain personality traits that included a laid-back attitude. However, many people were cautious to note that not everyone who fits into those stereotypes necessarily uses marijuana. Another type of stereotype is that students who smoke marijuana have less intelligence and motivation, as well as fewer goals. Some of the students interviewed clearly expressed the idea that marijuana use is not a

determining factor in these areas. This is backed up by research by Miranne, who discovered that there is no significant relation between marijuana use and achievement orientations, or performance (Miranne 1979). Marijuana smoking was also cited by some interviewees as safer than alcohol consumption, an activity that the St. Olaf administration spends a significantly larger amount of time dealing with.

We also found that smokers are, in a sense, deviant because they are not fitting in to what is seen as the typical St. Olaf student; the preppy, blonde, Lutheran, wealthy Minnesotan. Marijuana smokers who do not fit into this mold can find acceptance with other marijuana smokers who also do not fit into this stereotype. Some of those interviewed felt that the marijuana smokers are not simply being different from the stereotypical St. Olaf student, they are also rebelling.

fourteen out of sixteen of the students that we interviewed believe that there is a distinct community of marijuana smokers on campus. Students perceived that marijuana creates a bond between the smokers. The illegal nature of the activity requires trust, as the threat of discovery could hurt them all. Another reason that the community is formed is that those who smoke will see other people that they don't know smoking at a party and automatically have a something in common, or an ice breaker if they ever meet again.

The marijuana community is seen to exist even when members are not engaged in smoking marijuana. The closeness and acceptance formed in the community while members are engaged in smoking extends to other activities as well. Members of the marijuana community do things that all friends do when they get together, but movie watching, frisbee golf and video game playing are the most popular cited activities that St. Olaf students say marijuana smokers engage in together. A minority of those we interviewed felt that the marijuana community is based on nothing other than smoking marijuana and any interaction outside of smoking together is very superficial.

Recognising other members of the marijuana community is very hard to do. There are all different types of marijuana smokers that each fit into different categories. Some are proud of their marijuana habits and purposely fit the stereotypical mold. However, most students don't recognize smokers for certain until there is a verbal exchange or they view that person smoking marijuana.

Marijuana smokers are thought to choose roommates who are accepting of their marijuana habits. Having another roommate who smokes marijuana as well can be troublesome, though, because they will have a tendency to smoke more often. Marijuana smokers tend to be friends with other smokers because they have bonded over smoking marijuana and they also have many things in common. Leibsohn supports these findings in her research on relationships

between users, and concludes that drug use may be an important determining factor in the choice of new college friends (Leibsohn, 1994).

We found that smokers are in some sense deviant because they go against the stereotypical image of a St. Olaf student. Suchman found that drug use is more likely to be reported by those students who are relatively antagonistic to the educational system and who are dissatisfied with the education they are receiving. Their major finding includes the fact that the more likely a student self image is to be rebellious, cynical, and antiestablishment, the more likely they are to smoke marijuana (suchman, 1968).

### Possible Theoretical Explanations

Edwin H. Sutherland and Donald R. Cressy offer a theoretical explanation termed Differential Association. They view that crime and deviance is a learned behavior, and that people are more likely to learn it from their own intimate associates than from frightening or suspicious outsiders. Through being around these deviant models, people become convinced that their behaviors are acceptable, and will move into these deviant behavior patterns (Adler and Adler 2003). This could be an explanation as to why students form the perceived marijuana community. They feel both close enough to learn behaviors and feel secure and protected among their peers. In our interviews we have learned that marijuana smoking is perceived to be widely acceptable. The people we interviewed also perceived there to be a significant number of marijuana smokers at St. Olaf. The acceptance of this activity and the number of smokers could therefore be correlated according to Sutherland and Cressy's model of Differential Association.

### Recommendations for Future Uses

When we originally set out to study the interactions of the members of the marijuana community we were hoping to get a truly in-depth look at all of factors involved. However, due to the change in our plans beyond our control we were unable to focus on our original interest. Hopefully this paper can act as a pilot study for future research on the marijuana smoking community. Maybe this will enable the IRB to realize that there is actually a marijuana community, and it is an important part of life at St. Olaf to study and to learn more about. Therefore, they may put more effort into understanding the actual legal and ethical ramifications of doing a research proposal like the one we set out to study in the beginning of the semester which will enable more in-depth research. Hopefully, this study might bring light to the fact that there actually is an extensive marijuana smoking community at St. Olaf, not to regulate it or to inhibit it, but to make sure that students are safe and feel accepted and respected among the community which St. Olaf prides itself

on. By understanding the marijuana community and the acceptance found within the larger campus community, we can glean an understanding of why students choose to smoke.

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Appendix A

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your general perception of the extent of marijuana use among students at St. Olaf?
2. How do you feel about students who smoke marijuana?
3. How accepted do you think marijuana smokers are in the St. Olaf community?
4. How do you think the college administration views marijuana smoking by students?
5. Do you think there is a distinct community of students who smoke marijuana on campus? What makes you think there is/ isn't such a community?
6. To what extent do you think marijuana users recognize and interact with each other?
7. To what extent would you say marijuana users make friends and select roommates who are also marijuana users?
8. If you believe there is a marijuana smoking community, how would you describe the sense of community that exists among members on campus? (What sense do they have that they make up a group with a shared identity?)
9. How do you think marijuana users see themselves in comparison with the larger St. Olaf student body?

10. What would you say are the characteristics by which marijuana smokers are recognized (other than direct observation of marijuana use)?

11. Other than obtaining and using marijuana, what other interests and activities do you think marijuana users have in common?

12. What labels or names have you heard used for marijuana smokers?

13. What kind of discussions take place among St. Olaf students about marijuana users on campus?

14. Would you say that there are misconceptions about marijuana smokers among non-smokers? What are some of these misconceptions?

15. In your opinion, to what extent do you think marijuana users make up a community that exists when the members are not engaged in smoking marijuana?

Appendix B

## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a study that I am doing through St. Olaf College. This study will examine students perceptions of the marijuana use at St. Olaf and whether users form a community. We are undertaking this research under the supervision of Professor Carolyn Anderson in the Department of Sociology/Anthropology. Approximately 20 Juniors and Seniors will be participating in this study.

If you decide to participate you will be asked 16 questions and it will take about an hour. The study has small risks, if any. We will not record your name or reveal your identity to anyone, either orally or in written form. You will not be asked about your own or others' marijuana use. Please answer the questions so as not to reveal any specific information regarding your own or others' use of marijuana. We are asking for general impressions and attitudes only. Nobody will be identified in the final research paper by name and your responses will not be used if they can easily distinguish who you are. Please know that your participation in this study is voluntary and you can end your participation at any time with no penalty. You can also decline to answer any question for any reason with no penalty.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact one of the researchers, Rebecca Oestreich at x6646 or oestreich@stolaf.edu, or Marc Hosmer at x2649 or hosmer@stolaf.edu. If you have any questions that I cannot answer you may also contact my instructor, Professor Carolyn Anderson at x3133 or

anderscr@stolaf.edu.

Please sign below if you agree to participate in this study. By signing this you are telling me that you have read the information above and that your questions have been answered. You can have a copy of this form to keep. Please know that you can still withdraw from the study at any time even after you have signed the form.

I have read the information above and my questions about this project have been answered. I consent to participate in this project. I agree not to disclose any individual-level information about the possible drug use of any individual, including myself, in the course of this interview.

Date \_\_/\_\_/\_\_ Signature of participant\_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_/\_\_/\_\_ Signature of researcher\_\_\_\_\_