

The Political Climate of St. Olaf College

Monika Hartsel and Jaclyn Miller

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Abstract

In this project we investigated students' perceptions of the political climate on the St. Olaf campus. We set out to discover whether there is any weight to the claim that St. Olaf is a "liberal" campus that alienates conservatives and attempted to find out if students think that St. Olaf exudes one particular political and/or social ideology more than another. It was our hope to discover whether St. Olaf students and professors are respectful of the right of students to express varying political opinions. In order to do this, we conducted interviews with a sample of students from across the political spectrum as well as several representatives from the College Republicans and the College Democrats. We also distributed short questionnaires that were used as both a recruitment tool and as general background data for our study. We hoped to discern how perceptions and/or stereotypes about political values shape social and academic interactions on campus and we found that though there may be conflicting ideologies and sometimes these conflicts can cause students of certain persuasions to feel uncomfortable, most students do not feel completely ostracized from the St. Olaf community.

Summary

- Set up the analytical framework (Foucault, Derrida, symbolic interactionism etc.) for analyzing how students perceive of the political climate of St. Olaf College
- Define the terms "liberal" and "conservative"
- Investigate where participants feel they fall on the St. Olaf political spectrum
- Analyze participant experiences with political bias and/or discrimination in the classroom setting
- Analyze participant experiences with political bias and/or discrimination in an informal social setting and among peers
- Compare and contrast student perceptions of political organizations on campus (College Democrats and College Republicans)
- Explore the conjunction between religion and politics at St. Olaf

Abstract

In this project we investigated students' perceptions of the political climate on the St. Olaf campus. We set out to discover whether there is any weight to the claim that St. Olaf is a "liberal" campus that alienates conservatives and attempted to find out if students think that St. Olaf exudes one particular political and/or social ideology more than another. It was our hope to discover whether St. Olaf students and professors are respectful of the right of students to express varying political opinions. In order to do this, we conducted interviews with a sample of students from across the political spectrum as well as several representatives from the College Republicans and the College Democrats. We also distributed short questionnaires that were used as both a recruitment tool and as general background data for our study. We hoped to discern how perceptions and/or stereotypes about political values shape social and academic interactions on campus and we found that though there may be conflicting ideologies and sometimes these conflicts can cause students of certain persuasions to feel uncomfortable, most students do not feel completely ostracized from the St. Olaf community.

Setting

St. Olaf College is a liberal arts institution located in Northfield, Minnesota, the small, scenic town of "cows, colleges and contentment." It was founded by Lutheran-Norwegian immigrants in 1874 and prides itself on its commitment to its unique heritage. According to a portion of the St. Olaf homepage that specifically targets prospective students, " St. Olaf College is a nationally ranked residential liberal arts college affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America." The student body is comprised of 3,040 students from 19 countries and 43 states. Although St. Olaf welcomes and values diversity, only 8% of the current students are racial or ethnic minorities and a large percentage, 41%, identify as Lutheran. Due to the fact that 96% of the students reside on campus, there are many opportunities for conversation and debate on a variety of topics ranging from sustainability, to faith, to academics, to politics.

There are several key points in the mission of the college that we found to be particularly relevant to our study. First, the institution dedicates itself to the practice of sustainable living as demonstrated by its commitment to renewable energy sources, sustainable food services, and "green" architecture. These factors contribute to the overarching theme of environmental awareness and activism that is pervasive on the St. Olaf campus. The college also encourages its students to develop a broader world-view and become active and concerned members of the increasingly globalized international community. Therefore, it is not surprising that St. Olaf ranks number one among liberal arts colleges in the number of students who study abroad and 78% of students will have studied off-campus before they graduate. Finally, St. Olaf places great emphasis on community and inclusiveness. According to Loren Pope, author of *Colleges That Change Lives*, St. Olaf is "Camelot...a place of friendliness and trust as well as of high expectations." For example, as any tour guide is sure to mention ad nauseam, the atmosphere of trust is so pervasive that P.O. boxes do not require locks and students may comfortably deposit their belongings in public spaces without fear of theft.

Problem

There is one kind of diversity that is actually central to both a liberal education and a flourishing free society. That's intellectual diversity: the diversity of ideas, of philosophical perspectives, of ways of looking at and understanding the world. Unfortunately, the last place to look for this kind of diversity is at American colleges and universities. Today, you can generally find a wider spectrum of opinion in any bowling alley or fast-food restaurant than in the faculty lounges of a typical American university. [Kersten, 2003: 79]

The above quote is typical of conservative columnist Katherine Kersten, who commonly complains about what she sees as a lack of ideological diversity on college campus. She has written several articles specifically targeting St. Olaf College, its professors, and its exclusive promotion of "liberal" issues in events such as the Nobel Peace Prize Forum, which she so endearingly labels the "Nobel Peace-Nik Prize." According to Kersten, liberal arts institutions have become increasingly antagonistic towards more conservative students and faculty and therefore do not live up to their claim to embrace open discourse and diversity. While institutions of higher education welcome diversity along the lines of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation etc., they are not so eager to consider conservative views that run counter to the liberal monopoly on higher education. Kersten provides several examples of what she considers "ideological high-handedness."

When I visited the campus last spring, many students were simmering about incidents of blatant faculty bias. Some complained indignantly that St. Olaf's president, Christopher Thomforde, had sat with anti-war students who were blocking access to the cafeteria to protest the Iraq War. Other students fumed that their choir director began rehearsal every day with a diatribe against President George Bush. The students hesitated to object because they feared the director would penalize them when they auditioned for a more senior choir. [Kersten 2003]

It is with Katherine Kersten's harsh criticisms ringing in our ears that we set out to discover for ourselves how students feel about their freedom to express contrary socio-political views and how they gauge the overall political "climate" of the St. Olaf campus.

We ourselves have heard conservative students complain that they feel like a political minority and are uncomfortable expressing their views on a campus that seems, in their opinion, to be overwhelmingly liberal. One incident of note occurred last year when an entire issue of the conservative newspaper, *The Counterweight*, was stolen from the public distribution locations and disposed of, ensuring that no one was able to read the viewpoints expressed in the new edition. This type of destructive behavior is not characteristic of the student body and certainly not in accordance with the ideals of the college. Even though the act was probably committed by only one or two disrespectful students and therefore does not necessarily represent the attitudes of the majority of students, it is still troubling that such a thing would happen. Is Katherine Kersten right? Is St. Olaf an environment that frowns upon intellectual diversity?

Despite Kersten's conviction that institutions of higher education are inherently liberal and chronically intolerant of conservative views, Jeremy Smith has an entirely different opinion. In his article *Faculty, Students, and Political Engagement*, Smith (1997) maintains that "the situation is clear: conservative academics, at the behest of corporate power and the religious Right, have consciously organized to narrow the parameters of campus debate and limit access to education" (136). According to Smith, higher education is actually under attack by the "right-wing juggernaut" determined to limit access to colleges and universities to affluent white males while restricting "new student populations" such as women, blacks and Hispanics (132). Right-wing think tanks push "curricula based on 'Western' values" and discredit discussions of issues presumed to be more liberal in nature such as social justice and environmentalism (131). We do not know what Mr. Smith would say specifically about St. Olaf, however, from reading his work we can surmise that he would not only disagree with Ms. Kersten's observations, but might even claim that St. Olaf has been co-opted by a conservative administration.

Though Smith, like Kersten, is very biased, we can see some truth to his arguments in our everyday interactions at St. Olaf. We have heard several students remark that they consider St. Olaf to be more conservative than they would like, especially in light of their own ideologies and outside experiences. A situation akin to the Counterweight "scandal" occurred this fall when the rainbow colored gay pride flag was ripped down and stolen from an Honor House on St. Olaf Avenue that is home to the Gender and Sexuality Center. Once again we asked ourselves why these discriminatory and hateful acts occur on a supposedly inclusive and welcoming campus.

Having examined these two opposing viewpoints, where does St. Olaf *really* fit on the conservative-liberal spectrum? Before we could start answering this question we had to define what the ambiguous and multi-faceted terms "liberal" and "conservative" mean to us. It is our opinion that politics is not limited to a discussion of economics or the amount of governmental control. Rather, social ideologies and religious beliefs inform how one thinks about the term "politics" and whether the individual places him or herself into the "liberal" or "conservative" category. For instance, often those who identify as fundamentalist Christians tend to align themselves with the conservative movement due to the fact that they have strong moral convictions about certain issues based on their religious beliefs.

We used Michel Foucault's theory of discourse as the primary framework for our analysis. Foucault asserts that there is a "web of prohibition" that defines the boundaries of acceptable discourse, that is, what can and cannot be said and that "where the danger spots are most numerous are those dealing with politics and sexuality" (1972: 216). In his opinion, every person understands the rules of exclusion and knows that in any given social situation there are norms governing appropriate topics of conversation (216). One place where discourse is particularly prevalent and where these norms may therefore be challenged is within the realm of higher education. Education is the principal means of gaining access to a variety of discourses; however, "we all know that in its distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it" (Foucault, 1972: 227).

In other words, the hegemonic discourse in an educational system tends to control and limit the expression of other more marginalized viewpoints. By belittling dissenting opinions, those who currently dominate the discourse sustain their monopoly on the discussion and set the parameters for conversation according to their own objectives. In terms of our study, Foucault's theory of discourse helps us to understand how the perceived atmosphere of St. Olaf affects students' comfort level in expressing their own beliefs, especially if these beliefs are in contrast to the dominant discourse. Students and faculty alike perpetuate the belief that St. Olaf College is liberal in nature, whether it is true or not, when they accept the dominant discourse's allegations as truth.

Similarly, Derrida's commentary on hierarchy in higher education serves as a secondary means of analysis. In *Postmodernism and Higher Education*, Harland Bloland summarizes Derrida's theory in this way: "It is to point out the hidden contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambiguities within academia, to show just how much hierarchy is based on what look like arbitrary exclusions, and to illuminate how much they serve to put other ideas and people on the margin or exclude them entirely" (1995: 527). We came to discover, as Derrida suggests, that most of the exclusions in the political discourse of St. Olaf College are "hidden," especially to those who are in the top tiers of the hierarchy and are unaffected by marginalization. In addition, theories of symbolic interactionism, specifically Goffman's idea of dramaturgy, helps us to understand how political discourse influences and is shaped by social interactions on the St. Olaf campus. The sociological concept of "definition of the situation" is the basis of any social interaction; first the parties involved define the parameters of acceptable social interaction and then act in a way that fits in with these self-defined norms. At St. Olaf, the way in which students and faculty define the political atmosphere of campus shapes the way they interact with others thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the college takes on the very characteristics that these individuals have projected onto it.

Methodology

In order to collect the information necessary to investigate perceptions of the political climate at St. Olaf, we recruited students representing a variety of political opinions, class years and genders

using a short questionnaire that doubled as an invitation. We randomly placed the questionnaires in 600 campus P.O. boxes and after one week we had received 117. Of the respondents, 70 identified as liberal, 27 as moderate, 15 as conservative, and 6 as other, and among these, 17 people agreed to participate in an interview. We also attempted to recruit volunteers at the College Democrats and College Republicans meetings in order to find participants who are involved in partisan politics. When we went to the College Republicans meeting and explained our project one member smiled knowingly and commented on the fact that we must be having trouble finding conservatives to interview: "That's why you came here, right?" she remarked. It is true that we had difficulty locating enough conservative students to interview overall, but in terms of the two organizations, we had more volunteers from the College Republicans than the College Democrats. In the end, we interviewed a total of 19 individuals: nine mostly liberal, three mostly moderate, five mostly conservative, and two libertarian; four were members of College Republicans and one was a member of College Democrats. Though we would have liked to have an even number of students representing each category, it was not a surprise that we did not find more conservatives willing to participate given the data from the returned questionnaires that indicated a higher population of liberal students.

The following data was compiled using the information provided by the questionnaires. Because this is not primarily a quantitative study and thus we did not spend time gathering extensive and exhaustive data sets, we recognize that this data is not necessarily an accurate representation of the views of the entire student body. However, it does provide us with a snapshot of the political climate on the St. Olaf campus and can be used as a foundation for our qualitative observations.

	Campus liberal	Campus moderate	Campus conservative	
Liberal	44	26	0	
Moderate	20	5	2	
Conservative	10	5	0	
Other	5	1	0	

The interviews themselves were arranged via e-mail and were conducted in a neutral, on-campus space with a confidentiality level that the interviewee was comfortable with. These one-on-one interviews consisted of a series of questions that we divided into six basic categories: general views and perceptions, formal classroom setting, informal peer interactions, political organizations, religion, and press. The interviews lasted anywhere from 30 to 50 minutes depending on the depth of the responses. Though we began by adhering rigidly to the pre-determined questions, as time went on our interviewing styles became more fluid and we even added supplemental questions to add depth to our findings.

There were several challenges in our methodology that we had to overcome. For instance, though we chose the majority of interview participants from randomly distributed questionnaires/invitations, we were not able to recruit a sufficient number of volunteers in this manner. Thus, we were compelled to choose some participants based on personal contacts because we thought that they would be able to contribute valuable insight on the issues we were investigating. In this sense, our collection methods could be considered biased even though we tried to recruit a diverse array of students. In addition, due to unforeseen complications and logistical constraints, we were not able to entertain a live audience at either the College Democrats or College Republicans meetings and therefore had to rely on e-mail and word-of-mouth. Since we only interviewed 19 out of 3,040 St. Olaf students it would be folly to suggest that our findings can perfectly represent the views every individual on campus. However, we can generalize our findings enough to say that we have captured a marginally accurate picture of one aspect of life on the Hill. Our detailed questions ensured that we were able to glean in-depth responses that well addressed our research objectives and helped us to form some understanding of how politics inform social and academic interactions at St. Olaf.

Findings

Defining Terms

The terms "liberal" and "conservative" are loaded words that are commonly used with little thought of the full complexity of their meaning. Both terms can encompass a wide range of perceptions and invoke different images and stereotypes depending on the individual and his or her experiences. When we asked students how they define "liberal" and "conservative" and what sort of issues or people they normally associate with the respective political category, we discovered several things. First, many students cite common stereotypes associated with the terms. When asked about liberals, "hippies" was the first thing that popped into the mind of Ricky, a moderate to conservative male, and "white southerners" came to his mind when it came to conservatives. A conservative female jokingly mentioned undereducated "red-necks" when asked about her perceptions of conservatives. Although both students' answers are playful, the fact that they even mentioned them indicates that these stereotypes are strong enough to be one of the first things that students think of. The idea of conservatives as being undereducated and anti-intellectual could also have social-class connotations which could further marginalize conservative St. Olaf students. Because higher education is commonly associated with liberal ideologies and more affluent classes, the stereotype that conservatives are uneducated and low class makes it even harder for conservatives to find a place in campus cultures like St. Olaf; it is a double strike against them.

In the liberal category, there are numerous reoccurring themes in the students' responses. A majority of respondents cited environmentalism as a key liberal issue and also commonly mentioned gay rights, gun control, social justice and diversity. In general, both conservative and liberal students seemed to associate liberals with more compassionate, caring, and peaceful attitudes. Ricky claims that liberals are more interested in "helping those in the most need" and Erica, a liberal female, asserts liberals are more likely to care for poor and underprivileged, particularly women and minorities. Similarly, Stuart, a liberal, needed only one sentence to express his view: "Liberals are more concerned for equal social rights, while conservatives are concerned for the few over the many." Some respondents also considered liberals to have activist tendencies. A moderate female said that liberals are "more outspoken and passionate" about issues that they care about while Roger, a liberal, attests that conservatives "want to let things go at their own pace, while liberals jump right in and take action to make sure that rights are upheld." Of course, due to the fact that most of these responses come from liberal students, they are likely to be biased.

When defining conservative, one of the reoccurring themes revolved around the economy. Many students indicated that conservatives want lower taxes and less governmental control over the economy but more control over social issues i.e. restricting marriage to heterosexual couples and making abortion illegal. Traditional values and religion also dominated the discussion of the term conservative. Tom, a conservative, explains that conservatives are "more set in tradition and things that are considered comfortable and habitual." In accordance, Josh, a libertarian, says that conservatives try to keep things "how they're supposed to be," that is, in line with traditional values which are often religious in nature. Many students, both liberal and conservative, equated conservative religious beliefs with conservative political opinions.

Fitting in on the Campus Political Spectrum

To begin assessing how students perceive of the political climate at St. Olaf, we asked participants which category best describes their political views: liberal, moderate, conservative, or other, and whether they think these political views place them in the majority or minority of St. Olaf students. Every student who identified as conservative, as well as one student who identified as a radical liberal, indicated that they believe they are in the minority while the rest of the self-identified liberal student claimed the opposite. One moderate also put herself in the minority, although she attributed this to the fact that she feels less knowledgeable about politics than the majority of students. These answers suggest to us that it is a fairly common perception that the majority of the student body is comprised of liberals.

Similarly, participants almost unanimously agree that the campus as a whole leans to the left, though a number of people qualify this opinion by adding that regardless of St. Olaf's liberal tendencies, the climate as a whole is fairly moderate. Josh indicates that St. Olaf does not lean as far left as "schools like Macalester or Carleton" and Erica observes that it is "not like some schools that discount the conservative way of thinking completely." Roger, the only participant who does not describe St. Olaf as left leaning, allows that "there are a few hard core people on either end," but for the most part St. Olaf is fairly moderate. He goes on to say that, "most people are willing to listen to both sides as long as it is not shoved in their face." Others share the opinion that St. Olaf is a safe and fair place for political dialogue. Helen applauds the moderate climate saying, "I chose Olaf because I wanted a place where all views are accepted."

Other participants argue more staunchly that St. Olaf leans heavily to the left. Mary, a liberal, asserts that a lot of people think that St. Olaf is liberal-minded, especially conservatives. As an example, she cites the recent presidential caucus when the turnout for students voting democratic was considerably higher than those voting republican. Samantha, who identifies as conservative, states that "when people talk about politics they assume that I am liberal, they don't think about how I might not necessarily agree...people joke when they find out I'm conservative and say 'you're one of the six on campus.'" There are two points that are particularly telling in Samantha's response. First, the fact that other students "assume" that she is liberal indicates that liberal discourse is a common feature in social interactions between St. Olaf students. Analyzing Samantha's comment in light of a symbolic-interactionist framework, one can see that students define St. Olaf as a "liberal" place and therefore interact with others in a way that validates that definition (Ritzer, 2004: 335-373). While both liberal and conservative students may define St. Olaf as a liberal setting, it is impossible to extend this liberal definition to the personal beliefs of every individual. In this situation, liberal students, who are in the majority, assume that most students share their own beliefs. Secondly, the phrase "you're one of the six on campus" is noteworthy. Although this comment may have been made in jest, like political satire, jokes often act as meaningful commentaries on social interactions and, more often than not, such jokes contain a kernel of truth.

So we have discovered that there appears to be a common discourse around campus that reinforces the belief that St. Olaf is liberal, but what is the foundation of this perception? Picture a typical day at St. Olaf College. Everywhere you go you are bombarded with signs and symbols of the political climate of St. Olaf: outside the Caf the Students for Reproductive Health are tabling across from the College Republicans, walk down the hall and you may find yourself standing under a rainbow of crepe paper declaring the start of Pride week, or pass through crossroads and you may be recruited to sign a petition for an Amnesty International campaign. There is simply no way to escape the inundation of politicized messages that exude from all directions; political discourse is certainly alive and well in the heart of St. Olaf College. These are several images that typically surfaced during our interviews when contemplating whether or not certain political ideologies are more visible on campus than others. The fact that this is an election year intensifies the political atmosphere, as one student observes, "it seems like there's more Obama type people around." Also, there are several issues that are particularly visible on campus according to our participants: sustainability, or in Samantha's words, "the 'green' thing," gender issues, diversity, and social justice. Groups like the Environmental Coalition, GLOW (Gay Lesbian Or Whatever), Students for Reproductive Health, and Amnesty International have a big presence on campus and are very vocal about their causes. Most students agreed that the issues these organizations deal with are stereotypically associated with liberal ideals. However, several students indicate that issues such as environmentalism and diversity should not be considered bi-partisan, but rather, should be embraced by everyone, regardless of where they fall on the political spectrum.

Apart from all these concrete indicators of St. Olaf's liberality, students also maintained that higher education is intrinsically liberal. Several participants attributed the progressive nature of the college to the fact that it is a "liberal arts" institution. However, when pressed to explain what it is about

liberal arts education that contributes to the overall aura of liberalness at St. Olaf, they were often at a loss for words. The most common response was something to the effect of "you know, it's liberal arts, it's just...*liberal*." We cannot gather any conclusive evidence from these rather cryptic responses, but we can link them to the common perception, expressed not only by students but by commentators like Katherine Kersten and Philip Altbach, that institutions of higher education and their students and faculty tend to be more liberal. In Philip Altbach's (1990: 48) discussion of post-sixties trends in higher education, he predicts that, "Having endured eight years of Reaganism, it seems likely that this liberal collegiate tradition will continue into the post-Reagan era and that the campuses will retain their potential as a source of progressive dissent in American society."

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that student sponsored organizations and events were left leaning, but when asked about whether college sponsored events swung to the left or right, their attitudes were more ambivalent. After much deliberation and "hemming and hawing," responses generally ranged from "not in my opinion" to "they do a good job of keeping events straight up the middle" to "ummm, not sure." Some students did feel that events were biased towards the left but you would have to "dig deep" to find it, unlike with the student organizations, the bias or college sponsored events is not as visible on the exterior. Of course, there were some dissenting voices. Tom, a conservative, exclaimed fervently, "Left! Everything that the school does leans to the Left! Just look at the types of events, the globalization conference had a left tweak to it."

When analyzing the disparity between participants' perceptions of student-run versus college-sponsored organizations and events, it helps to return to Foucault's theory of discourse. Boland (1995: 530) explains that "For Foucault, knowledge and power are inextricably bound together," that is to say, those in power often influence the topics of acceptable discussion. It is important to note that Foucault does not maintain that those who are not in power have no agency to express their opinions, rather they less authority to control the discourse as a whole. Because the administration of St. Olaf College is technically in power, we would assume that, according to Foucault's theory, the views of the administration would be reflected in the students' perceptions of the political climate. However, this does not seem to be entirely true due to the fact that, according to our participants, the administration projects a more neutral image but the students still perceive campus to be liberal. It is obvious that both the administration and the student body influence the political climate, however, it seems that the student body holds greater sway over the direction of discourse on campus. Student organizations and events have a greater influence on whether individual students view the campus as liberal or conservative.

Politics in the Classroom

The classroom is one place in which different political ideologies surface and converge. The majority of participants feel that St. Olaf professor's do a good job of keeping their personal political beliefs out of the classroom, even though they believe that the majority of professors are liberally inclined and none say that they have had a professor with a conservative bias. These students, mostly liberals themselves, do not feel that their professors' political ideologies make the classroom an unwelcoming environment for dissenting views. However, some students, all of whom profess to be moderate to conservative, have specific anecdotes recounting negative experiences with liberally biased professors, experiences that often go unnoticed by others.

Ricky narrates his experience with a first-year writing professor who he describes as "extremely biased" and "so far out there [to the left]." According to his account, the professor was constantly foisting his political views on the class. For example, he showed a series of videos with "liberal" themes, one of which Ricky describes as, "we shouldn't shop at Target and stuff." Ricky goes on to say, "I disagreed with him [the professor] so deeply on everything that it made me angry going to class, it was very irritating, I didn't like being preached at all the time about what to believe." In

addition, he believes that the professor in question was biased when grading papers if he did not agree with the content. In one paper that Ricky composed for the class, he expressed two different viewpoints, one more liberal, and the other more conservative. When he got the paper back, the professor had made no comment on the liberal part, indicating that it was acceptable, but had circled the conservative argument and wrote, "You made this point too strongly." Ricky believes that this biased mark brought his grade down from an "A" to a "B" on the assignment.

Other participants have had similar experiences. Samantha says that some of her professors are definitely liberally biased: "In English we talked about politics and the professor didn't give the opportunity to express different views." She does not mind that there is bias in the discussion, after all, in any political debate there are sure to be different view points, but she also recognizes that certain ideologies are not being fairly represented. Usually Samantha does not want to share her opinions in class because arguing her opinion, due to her minority status as a conservative, "is not worth the time and energy." Samantha confesses that she fears that she could receive a bad grade for disagreeing with a professor. Though this has never happened to her, or anyone she knows, at St. Olaf, the fact that she nurses this fear indicates a perceived atmosphere of intolerance. Additionally, Mary recalls, "I know someone who was conservative and in her first year religion the professor, who was more liberal, would always call her out and try to prove her wrong."

Malcolm also claims that he sometimes feels uncomfortable expressing his views in class. He asserts that one of his religion professors had different views from him and "only wanted to hear what she thought in class papers so I played to the professor and used her Biblical interpretation." Sabrina has had a similar experience explaining, "I had to go out on a limb when I differed from the professor; there was a pressure to conform." The fact that Malcolm and Sabrina feel that they have to conform to the dominant discourse supports the Foucaultian idea that because the professor is the authority figure, he or she dictates the accepted discourse. Some other examples of professorial bias include a music professor who "made a clever composition round that spelled out 'Bush sucks' and shared it with the class" and other professors with Democratic propaganda, i.e. Obama stickers, on their office doors. Overall, the political leanings of some professors make him feel "just a little uncomfortable." Although the previous examples come from conservative students, they are not necessarily the only group that experiences discomfort in the classroom setting. Stuart, who describes himself as a radical liberal, says that it is sometimes difficult for him to share his opinions in class discussion: "As a gay male, GLBT rights are very important to me and it's hard to talk about it if I don't know the professors' views ahead of time."

It is not only professors who influence the political atmosphere and discussion environment in the classroom. Other participants described experiences where other students in the class made them feel that their conservative views were unwelcome. Natalie, a conservative student, shared with us a negative experience she had in Great Conversation. The topic of discussion for the day was on the New Testament and Paul's teachings on gender roles, specifically the role of women in the church. A verse concerning wives being submissive to their husbands produced a heated debate as the majority of students were outraged by the idea that the Bible seems to condone male dominance. Natalie, the sole voice speaking in defense of a more literal interpretation of Paul's text, remembers that she felt "kind of uncomfortable because everyone disagreed." A number of students were quite vicious in their reactions to her more conservative take on the Bible. Although she may have felt attacked at the time, two years after the event she does not appear to be emotionally scarred and nonchalantly remarks, "it makes me sad that everyone's opposed, but I was always taught to stand up for what you believe in, especially the Bible." On the opposite end of the spectrum, a very liberal student, Erica, laughingly states that she only feels uncomfortable sharing her political opinions in class if they might be construed as conservative. She narrates that in her feminist political theory class, "I feel like even though I'm a feminist my practices are sometimes conservative (i.e. go to church, dress modestly) and so I'm afraid I might come off as conservative *in general*. Sometimes I would get weird looks for my views in the class because they were not as radical as the rest of the students."

Though the nature of the previous examples may give the impression that the St. Olaf classroom is a hostile environment, we want to emphasize that these are isolated events and represent the experiences of less than a quarter of our participants. In addition, even the students who *did* feel uncomfortable at certain junctures could only cite one or two examples of negative experiences. In the end, most students, conservative and liberal alike, feel that though the professors and classroom environments may swing to the left, most professors try to make the classroom a fertile place for a variety of diverse opinions to blossom. As Nehemiah, a conservative student, succinctly puts it, "I don't buy academic bias because it's usually totally overblown. Even if they [the professors] had a different opinion, I don't feel like they graded me unfairly."

Politics and Peers

A group of friends are lounging in Fireside enjoying a brief respite from the stress of the day and conversing amongst themselves. One girl casually leans over and picks up a New York Times from the pile of newspapers strewn on the floor. She studies the front page momentarily and comments off-handedly about the ongoing stalemate between senators Obama and Clinton in the primary elections. Suddenly, the conversation detours into the realm of politics, that touchy, volatile subject that one tries to avoid at dinner parties. What will happen next? Several members of the group have different political inclinations. Could this foray into politics lead to an all-out debate? Will the students awkwardly skirt the topic to avoid offending others, or will an outspoken individual take the opportunity to bombard the others with his or her opinion? Will some members feel ostracized and stay silent?

For the most part, our participants said that they prefer to avoid big political debates, especially if they know there will be dissension in the group. We went through our interview notes and highlighted how often students responded that they "didn't want to get into a debate" over potentially contentious topics with people of different political ideologies. We were surprised by the high percentages of students seeking to avoid a quarrel. Some responded rather humorously. For example, Thorbjorn said he talks about politics with his conservative friends "every now and then, mostly when we get drunk. It can get intense but no one gets mad at each other. The discussion usually turns to something light, like a dirty joke." And Roger states that rather than get into a debate "we usually do something mindless, like playing video games." Other students simply claim that it is not worth the headache of trying to argue with people who are already set in their views. Tom explains that he does not like debating with his liberal friends because "I know my views, I really don't like this political bullshit. I say 'believe what you want to believe, but don't come preaching to me.'" Foucault (Year: 229) might explain this overwhelming aversion to conflict as "a profound logophobia, a sort of dumb fear of these events, of this mass of spoken things, of everything that could possibly be violent, discontinuous, querulous, disordered even and perilous in it, of the incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse." He argues that people avoid situations in which they might come into conflict with an opposing discourse. Instead of debate, many choose silence.

In order to avoid debate, several participants say they censor the issues that they bring into everyday discussions. For instance, Malcolm censors his political views if he does not know what other students will think of his opinions. He further explains that, in his experience, liberals either "attack" and want to foist their political opinions on him, or they refuse to engage in dialogue and simply "write the conservative off saying, "Oh, that person's racist or sexist etc. and not worth talking to." Malcolm explains that it is difficult to maintain his opinions without being labeled a "hateful person" by liberals. For Malcolm, avoiding debate is a defense mechanism rather than a lack of motivation to vocalize his views. Although he might like to express his opinions, a debate might cause him to feel marginalized.

Another reason that students choose not to enter into debates is due to the fact that they may not feel as educated about politics as their peers. Some participants state that they do not have well-defined political beliefs and indicate that in some cases they are eager to discuss politics in order to learn more about the issues and help solidify their own opinions, but in other cases they find it difficult to engage in political debates. Jane, a moderate, says, "Because I'm not as educated about politics, I'm afraid that if I say something they might say 'that's not right,' so I usually stay quiet if [politics] comes up." Others point out that it's hard to compete with people who are knowledgeable and have strong opinions about the issues. As Sabrina aptly puts it, "Some people have more well-formed ideologies, mine is more squishy and amoeba-like."

The majority of participants claimed to have close friends, or even best friends and roommates, with different political ideologies from their own. However, for some students there are certain issues that are so central to their lives that it would be impossible for them to relate to someone who did not support this issue. Stuart, who is gay, explains that the desire for equal rights for GLBT people is an integral part of his life, and feels that "there is no chance for me to be friends with someone who isn't for gay rights." This is not a case of a conservative-liberal dichotomy, but rather a matter of specific politicized social issues. Of course, gay rights are typically associated with liberal politics, but it is important not to over-generalize the wide range of individual opinions held within "liberal" and "conservative" categories. Stuart acknowledges that there are other politicized issues that can shape the way a person views the world, such as religious beliefs or strong moral inclinations, for example, being opposed to abortion. These beliefs could influence whom one chooses to associate with.

One of the primary aims of our study is to find out whether or not students feel discriminated against for their political views at St. Olaf, and we discovered that most participants were hesitant to describe their negative experiences with such a loaded term as "discrimination." Discrimination carries a lot of heavy connotations of institutionalized and overt oppression that is more akin to civil rights struggles than the political polemics on campus. Often perpetrators of this ideological intolerance may not even be aware that they are ostracizing others: as Jane puts it, "I don't think people intentionally intend to offend others, but sometimes people who are very outspoken will say something and people may be offended but don't let other people know about it...People may be sensitive to certain issues, so you have to be careful about how you talk about them." In addition, Natalie says that she does not feel overtly discriminated against, but that she can tell from the way people react to her beliefs that they do not approve of them. Another form of "invisible" intolerance for political diversity is in "the fact that the only political stuff that we see is for the Democratic Party, it's not fair just to have the liberal point of view shown," explains Tom. Although liberal students are not actively oppressing the conservative view, Tom feels that the discrimination is present in the fact that on this "liberal campus" the conservative viewpoint is insufficiently represented. Sabrina agrees, saying that students are "obliquely discriminated against by their ideas or opinions being discounted and dismissed." Malcolm also comments on the hidden social discrimination that is "the result of an outpouring of a liberal campus." He feels that some liberal students he has interacted with are not considerate of his conservative views and notes that he does not see the same level of rudeness coming from conservative students.

Interestingly, students who table for controversial issues and those with dissenting views who pass by said tables, feel mutually offended by each other even though neither party means to cause discomfort. For example, Roger who commonly tables outside the cafeteria for the Students for Reproductive Health organization explains that "people with opposite views take it personally that we are there...Sometimes people are generally not polite and are rude. They take [our] beliefs as a personal attack, like it's against their religion." Natalie claims that it *is* against her religion: "The students for reproductive health are always outside the Caf. I am deeply religious so having them there handing out condoms and being pro-choice is uncomfortable." It is ironic that both a liberal and conservative student can have starkly different views but still feel the same level of intolerance in the same situation.

Political Organizations

The two main partisan political organizations on campus are the College Republicans and the College Democrats. Most of our participants were not actively involved in either organization and when we asked them if, time constraints notwithstanding, they would consider joining, many replied, "no." Erica, who is a very politically minded person, still says she would not want to join College Democrats. She explains, "Maybe if it was better organized. It is kind of cliquey too. You have to be a hard core Democratic Party person to have an 'in.'" The other participants echoed Erica's reluctance to align themselves with a "hard core" Democratic or Republican political agenda. Stuart reasons, "I think that membership in these organizations means you believe 'this, this, and this.' It's a template for what you're supposed to believe and I don't like being put in a political box." Roger, while acknowledging the necessity for political parties to present a unified front, says he dislikes the "group think" aspect of these organizations.

On the other hand, there were a few participants who say that they would potentially consider joining one of the groups. Samantha hopes to join College Republicans next year because "it's nice to know that there are others who are like minded, you can talk to upper classmen about choosing professors...It's good to meet some of your own kind." She related an experience she had in choir where she cautiously turned to her neighbor, whom she suspected to be conservative, and asked "Are you conservative?" When the student replied affirmatively, the two shared a moment of relief and camaraderie in finally finding a fellow conservative student on a largely liberal campus. Similarly, those participants who are already members of College Republicans say that the organization feels like a "safe place" that is welcoming and affirming in a way that, perhaps, the rest of campus is not. Malcolm enjoys being a part of College Republicans because he can engage in dialogue and network with other conservatives in a place where he says, "I feel comfortable." Nehemiah also points out that College Republicans is a good way to "know what's going on in the campus conservative community," especially because, as we have already discussed, according to the majority of our respondents, conservative issues are not as visible at St. Olaf.

When we visited the College Republicans meeting we met a member, Sally, who was very reluctant to discuss her organization with us. She feels that the College Republicans already have a negative image on campus and was thus hesitant to participate in any project that might further denigrate their reputation. Sally went on to say that she has participated in events that encourage more conservative voices to enter the campus discourse. These events are supposed to affirm the importance of intellectual diversity; however, she has always felt that they did not live up to their goal. This said, it is important to ask whether other students feel the same way about the reputation of College Republicans and whether College Democrats has a similar reputation. Several participants claim that members of these groups are "known as the political radicals on campus, the raging democrats or republicans" and other participants describe College Democrats and Republicans with words like "fanatics," "hard core," "way out there," and "rabid right (or left) wing whack jobs." However, it seems that in general, there is a greater stigma associated with being involved in College Republicans. This makes sense, seeing as these students are viewed as being both part of, in the words of Nehemiah, the "old geezer" party, and as being more radical than their Democratic counterparts.

Students, both conservative and liberal, agree that College Republicans are cast in a more negative light than College Democrats. Kristin says, "I don't wear my College Republicans shirt in public, not many people do, sometimes people look at you funny...When you're going to a CR meeting, sometimes people walking by kind of point and make [derisive] comments to each other." Nehemiah agrees that there is a "small stigma with College Republicans. Some people look at you differently when they find out that you're involved." Stuart also perceives that there is "more of a 'down-look'" on people involved in College Republicans, whereas students are more ambivalent towards those involved with College Democrats. It is interesting that three separate respondents mentioned the idea that there is a sort of negative "look" directed at College Republicans. This fits

in to our previous observations that discrimination against those of different political opinions is implicit rather than explicit. Another student jokingly states that being a member of College Republicans "marks you as a terrible person." Once again, a joke is being used to mask an unsavory reality, the reality that many students actually *do* look down on Republicans at St. Olaf. Perhaps it is the stigmatization of College Republicans that leads Sabrina to say that she sees College Republicans as constantly on the defensive, or in her words, "circling the wagons." She thinks that members of the group might be seen as "those poor crazy bastards that just have to stick together" and further indicates that they are "seen in a more negative light, small, pitied."

The College Democrats, on the other hand, have a very different reputation. Either students do not pay much attention to the organization, or, as Erica comments, they "just assume that the Dems do 'good stuff.'" Similarly, Natalie says that "people like the College Democrats more. They are seen as easy going and they hang out and watch the Daily Show." The purported cause of these positive perceptions may be the fact that, as our participants pointed out, the Democrats have a greater presence on campus through better publicity and more speakers and events. Tom feels that "College Democrats is more supported than College Republicans by the students and also seems to be more supported by the school because they have way more speakers, more posters, advertising, and general events." In accordance, Sabrina claims that "College Democrats organizes lots of things, more people go to their events, they are seen in a more positive light, and people listen to them." Although a number of participants echo these opinions, no one indicated why there is such a large gap between the perceived activities of each group. There are several inferences that we might make in the absence of any concrete evidence: Do College Republicans feel that they cannot have events due to a hostile campus, or do College Republicans simply choose not to sponsor as many events? Do College Republicans lack the monetary and human resources necessary to put on said events? Do people simply *assume* that College Democrats put on more events even if it is not true? We cannot be sure of the answers to any of these questions, all we can say conclusively, is that, in the minds of most of the participants, College Democrats is more highly regarded and more visible on campus.

In spite of the fact that there may be some negative stereotypes surrounding College Republicans, many participants were careful to point out that students involved in both College Republicans and College Democrats are "some of the most respected people on campus" and that "they are smart confident people." In addition, there is little animosity between members of these organizations and, as Tom says, "there seems to be mutual respect between the groups. They have something in common that they really care about, politics." Regarding the College Republicans, Mary, a member of College Democrats, explains "I'm friends with a lot of them, we have talked about having and inter-group kickball game. They are open, nice, and friendly." Mary recalls that a member of the College Republicans put it best: "We're not fighting each other [College Democrats and College Republicans]. We're fighting apathetic students. But we are not enemies. You can't really have one without the other because you need the other to define yourself. We complement each other like light and dark, male and female." Most students agree that there is not "a huge blood feud" between the organizations and interactions are, for the most part, friendly and open.

Religion

As a College of the Church, religion plays an important role in discussions and interactions at St. Olaf, not only within the walls of Boe Chapel, but also in social and academic spheres. Boe Chapel is home to both daily chapel, which often features student and professor speakers, and Sunday morning services. All but one of our participants had attended at least one service in Boe, and of these, a few replied that they found Boe to be politically neutral, while the majority said that they felt services had some liberal undertones. Erica, who attends worship regularly, emphasizes that, "Boe leans left. It is a reflection of the ELCA...a lot of people are attracted to worship in Boe because

it is left-leaning. In America, many people have become more conservative Christians and Boe is a place for people who don't like the way religion is headed. The pastors often preach on social justice, which has been politicized as a liberal issue."

There are several aspects of services at Boe that participants feel are more liberal in nature. For instance, several participants mention that Boe Chapel is a Reconciling in Christ community, which means that it has pledged to be an open and affirming worship space for GLBTQ people. Also, Thorbjorn says that he does not consider Boe politically liberal but, rather socially liberal, and claims that "Boe uses liberal interpretations of the Bible that would have been controversial in a more conservative space." Thorbjorn means that the pastors and speakers often take a less fundamentalist approach to the scriptures, a practice that could be offensive to those who take the Bible to be the literal Word of God. Other participants pointed out that Boe Chapel is inclusive of women and has a female co-pastor, Pastor Koenig. In more conservative Lutheran denominations women are not allowed to be ordained. Jane observes that, "Pastor Koenig doesn't always use "he" pronouns when talking about God which could be seen as a more liberal practice associated with feminist theology." As feminism is traditionally a liberal issue, the fact that the campus pastors embrace gender-inclusive language points to their left leaning tendencies.

Religion naturally extends beyond Boe Chapel and into to the classroom, especially as St. Olaf requires that all students take two courses in Biblical studies and theology. According to our participants, as well as our own experiences, the religion department places a good deal of emphasis on interreligious dialogue, ecumenism, and a less literal, more historical interpretation of the Bible. For Natalie, this theology stands in opposition to her conservative Christian beliefs. She says that she once had a religion professor who gave a Great Conversation lecture on the Gospels and was "cutting on people who believe [the Bible] is the Inspired Word. He said 'you can't take the Bible at face value.'" She goes on to say that she is bothered by two things in particular: "I'm a little uncomfortable being against gay marriage because so many people here are for it...It's [also] hard to have the belief that there is only one way to heaven and other religions aren't valid." Natalie feels that the religion department challenges fundamental tenets of her faith and does not include more conservative theology in the curriculum. Malcolm agrees saying, "The religion department is more liberal than I wish it was. They aren't interested in teaching the Bible, they teach a lot of other things. They get away from history rooted in the church and choose language that isn't uniquely Christian."

The incorporation of other religions into the curriculum and the faculty is an issue that is disturbing to some individuals. We recently overheard a conversation on this topic through the paper-thin walls of a residence hall room in which two girls were discussing the fact that the religion department employs a practicing Hindu professor. One girl expressed disgust that St. Olaf would hire a professor who is not Christian at a school that is labeled "College of the Church." The other agreed and asked, "Isn't that one professor Muslim?" The two went on to disparage people and professors of different faiths. This example shows that not only are some students offended by the more progressive policies and teachings in the St. Olaf religion department, but also that they themselves are perpetrators of intolerance.

Summary and Conclusions

We all know what the physical climate of the St. Olaf campus is—cold. Now, after interviewing 19 students, we are starting to understand another type of climate, the *political* climate. It is impossible to escape political discourse at St. Olaf, as it permeates every aspect of campus life, from the classrooms, to the dorms, to the chapel, to Buntrock Commons, politics is *everywhere*. In our study, we began by exploring the terms "liberal" and "conservative" and then discerned where students who define themselves as either one fit into the political spectrum at St. Olaf. We also investigated

the role politics plays in the classroom, in peer relationships, in political organizations, and in religion in order to draw conclusions about whether or not stereotypes and intellectual intolerance shape the St. Olaf experience, especially for those students who consider themselves to be a political and/or social minority.

We used Foucault's theories on discourse as our primary analytical framework. For the purpose of our study, the most important aspect of his theoretical work is the idea that those in power dictate the parameters of discourse and either encourage or forbid certain topics based on the desire to remain in control of the situation. Jacques Derrida builds on Foucault's ideas, claiming that institutions of higher education "construct a far-from-innocent hierarchy of values which attempts not only to guarantee truth, but also serves to exclude and devalue allegedly inferior terms or positions" (Bloland, 1993:527). As we have discussed in greater depth previously, according to these theorists, one would think that the St. Olaf administration would be the primary holder of power, but in reality discourse is more likely to be governed by professors and students. Because both of these latter parties are in control of the discourse and thus are more visible on campus, they are able to perpetuate the idea that St. Olaf is a liberal campus.

Also, we found that Goffman's idea of "dramaturgy," as presented by Ritzer (2004) can be useful in analyzing how students censor their political opinions when they are presenting themselves to different "audiences." When students are on the front stage, that is, around students that they are unfamiliar with, they often choose not to discuss certain political views that they assume will be negatively received by those in control of the dominant discourse. However, on the back stage, when they are with others who they know to be like-minded, these students feel more comfortable laying bare their true feelings about issues that might be controversial if they were talking to students that they did not know very well. We feel that this micro-level analysis can apply to interactions at St. Olaf; every setting on campus is like a small stage on which actors present themselves as they want to be seen by those immediately surrounding them. This leads into Cooley's conception of the "looking-glass self" which Ritzer breaks down into three main components: "First, we imagine how we appear to others. Second, we imagine what their judgment of that appearance must be. Third, we develop some self-feeling, such as pride or mortification, as a result of our imagining others' judgments" (2004: 356). When conservative students engage in dialogue with students they presume to be liberal, they may imagine that they are being viewed negatively by their peers and thus experience embarrassment or unease.

In the end, we found that the general climate on the St. Olaf campus is not as viciously oppressive as Katherine Kersten makes it out to be. As one conservative student sums it up, "Even though I feel like a minority as a conservative on a campus that leans to the left, it hasn't affected my experience in a negative way, I'm not complaining." A liberal student sees it in much the same way explaining, "In general we have one of the most open communities. People feel comfortable expressing their various opinions." However, at the same time, it would be false to conclude that *everyone* is content with the political climate at St. Olaf because we did hear several examples of bad experiences caused by differing political ideologies, especially from conservative students who are in the minority.

It is easy to conceive of racial, ethnic, or gender minorities because they are visibly distinct, but it is also easy to forget the fact that not all minorities are readily identifiable. For us, as liberal St. Olaf students, Katherine Kersten's claims that intellectual minorities are being oppressed on the St. Olaf campus seemed exaggerated and even offensive. It was hard for us to believe that conservative students could feel so ostracized when we considered St. Olaf to be such a welcoming and affirming place. However, in the course of our research, we began to realize that although Kersten's allegations are over-the-top, they should not be completely dismissed. One of Stuart's comments helped us to understand why intolerance sometimes goes unnoticed. He attests that, "Discrimination is easier to identify if you are part of the oppressed." We hope that this study can illuminate the importance of recognizing the legitimacy of a variety of intellectual views, even if they

do not line up with the dominant opinions. This understanding could help St. Olaf live up to its ideal of inclusivity and open discourse, by pointing out that it is difficult for those who have minority beliefs to speak up against the majority.

Our study answered many questions, but it raised many more. If we were to continue to investigate this issue we would first try to interview more conservative students as they were the group that had the most insight into what it is like to be a political minority. In retrospect, we are curious as to whether those who recounted negative experiences would have chosen St. Olaf if they had known that the political climate was so liberal. Additionally, it would be interesting to ask students what course of action they think St. Olaf should take to ensure that there is ample room for intellectual diversity on campus.

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