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- How identity impacts individuals’ perceptions of community
- How the formation of sub-communities affects the overall sense of community at St. Olaf

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By Emily Goodhue, Isaac Rysdahl, Laura Willodson, and Michelle Anderson

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Setting/Community of Our Study:

The physical setting where this research was conducted is intrinsically connected to the people upon whom the study focuses. When thinking of the small liberal arts college of St. Olaf, a working knowledge of both the buildings and the people are needed to understand the institution and thus, our*** study.

St. Olaf is an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America affiliate college in Northfield, MN with a student population of 3,176 students (Princeton Review) of whom 49% come from out-of-state. The college employs roughly 284 faculty and 374 staff and administrative personnel. The city of Northfield has roughly 19,000 people and is located 35 minutes south of Minneapolis. Because of its proximity and the number of people who commute to the Twin Cities, Northfield is considered by many to be a suburb of Minneapolis.

Reverend B.J. Muus, along with other Norwegian immigrants, founded St. Olaf College in 1874 with the purpose of assisting “parents in the education of their children” (Fellend, O). The school was initially for Norwegian immigrants so that their children could receive a Christian education that would help them to be good “American Citizens.” Along with the desire to educate their children in matters of U.S. life, Muus wanted to foster Christian growth. Because of this desire, five of the six founding theses were concerning the youths’ “eternal education” and claimed that although, “it cannot be asserted that it is under all circumstances a sin to make use of the common school; it is the duty of Christians in proportion to their ability to work for the erection of Christian schools for their children.” From its creation, St. Olaf was a learning institution that was placed above “common schools.”

St. Olaf is located on a hill on the outskirts of Northfield, MN, which gives inspiration for the school’s nickname, ‘the Hill.’ The campus is comprised of 16 academic and administrative buildings, 30 student residences, and 10 athletic facilities all on a 300-acre campus. The residential buildings are divided up into two categories: standard co-ed dorms with single-sex floors, and honor houses where students participate in a variety of interest and outreach organizations. One of the central locations on campus is Buntrock Commons, which is where the student cafeteria, “The Cage” (the campus cafe), “The

Pause” (an on-campus nightclub and student hangout spot), and the student government offices are located. Because of the high percentage (91%-94%) of students who live on campus during all four years of their time at St. Olaf, the school’s common areas get lots of use and can feel over-crowded. This feeling manifests itself in long lines and a shortage of seating at the cafeteria during peak hours, and a lack of study spaces in the library and the Cage.

St. Olaf College has an incoming student acceptance rate of 60% for the roughly 4,000 students who apply yearly. Of the students admitted in 2012 (class of 2016), 864 decided to enroll. These students come from all 50 U.S. States and 63 other countries. A large majority of the class of 2016 is White, Non-Hispanic (81%) while only 6% identify as Hispanic or Black. The most popular courses of study for the student body are Biology, Mathematics, Economics, Chemistry, and Psychology. The students who graduate with one or multiple of these majors comprise over 40% of the majors awarded yearly.

Although just over half of the student body comes from states other than Minnesota, the feeling of the college is distinctly Midwestern. This is due in large part to the fact that the majority of students comes from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois. Students describe this atmosphere as “Minnesota Nice,” which encapsulates a general belief that Midwesterners are very friendly in face-to-face encounters, but often passive aggressive in their interactions.

Methodology:

This study took place throughout the months of March, April, and May 2013 at St. Olaf College. The study was carried out by four junior students Qualitative Research Methods, a required course for completion of the Sociology/Anthropology major. During this time, 42 one-on-one interviews were conducted and 4 interviews were conducted with 1-2 students and 1-2 interviewers. This method was used so as to limit the intimidation of the interviewee by framing the interview as a one on one conversation. In the study 19 students, 16 staff members, and 11 faculty members were interviewed with 24 being women and 22 men. These categories were chosen to be the focus of this study because of our interest in the different perspectives of individuals in different positions within St. Olaf.

Individuals were recruited to participate in the study by e-mail, chain referral, and personal invitation. Those who were targeted to participate in the study were chosen by their inferred interest in social change, the St. Olaf community, their position within the community, their unique perspective, or their willingness to share their thoughts. The recruitment email stated our research topic and an invitation to speak with us, and those who were interviewed were limited to those who had the time and interest in meeting to be interviewed.

Interviews were conducted across campus, mainly in public spaces or private offices. Interviews were between twenty and sixty minutes in length. Before beginning the interview, participants were told that this was a voluntary interview, that they could withdraw at any time, and that their answers would remain confidential. This confidentiality was ensured by the elimination of potentially identifying pieces of information in the data and by the fact that the researchers did not discuss the interviews outside of the research group. In this report each individual is only identified by their category of a staff, faculty, or student and possibly by gender. During the semi-structured interviews, notes were taken by the interviewers, but no recordings were made in order to decrease the intimidation factor and to encourage honesty that a recorder might defer.

Similar sets of questions were tailored for students, faculty, and staff participants, but conversations were encouraged to flow in the direction of the interviewee's interests. First, individuals were asked about their involvement and identity on campus, as well as questions about where they spend their time. Second, interviewees were asked to expand on their perspective of the St. Olaf community in the present, and in the past. Lastly, questions were posed about the relation of social position (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, position, religion, etc.) and community at St. Olaf. These open-ended questions were framed to allow the individual to spend time on the specific topics that they found most important to them, as well as to reflect on their experiences in the St. Olaf community.

To analyze our data, notes taken from interviews were compiled into themes to identify trends and disparities between responses. These trends were used to examine what community means to faculty, students, and staff, what factors contribute to the lived experience of the St. Olaf community, what the

purpose of the community is, and how the community can be improved. At the end of our study, a presentation of our findings was given to the general public. This presentation offered overview of intriguing aspects of our study and highlighted suggestions to improve the community at St. Olaf. All of our participants were invited to attend.

This study involved several aspects that had to be considered in terms of their strengths, weaknesses, and limitations. First of all, we did not record the interviews. Depending on the preference of the interviewer, we either typed or hand-wrote our notes. While we felt the lack of a recording was beneficial in that interviewees would feel more comfortable and speak more openly without it, it also could have resulted in missed information and quotations that may have been important to the study. Second, many of the interviewees were people that we know personally, especially among the student participants. This may have provided a biased sample, where interviewees either felt obligated to participate, or had biased views because they belonged to our specific friend groups that experience the St. Olaf community in a particular way. While interviewing friends or acquaintances provided a convenience sample, a strength of this method is that they may have been more willing to open up and give us valuable information. A third consideration is that we conducted most of our interviews alone. Because we conducted interviews individually, it is possible that the flow of the conversation was not necessarily uniform between group members. While this is a weakness in that we may have covered or emphasized different questions or topics, it is also beneficial in that we likely gathered a wider range of information. In addition, a limited amount of time and a small sample size limited the quantity and depth of information we could gather.

In this study we initially wanted to understand the sense of community of staff members because of the seeming lack of interaction between the student body and staff. We decided to include faculty in the mix because we wanted to protect the interests of staff who might be more vulnerable when sharing frustrations. We conducted our interviews and slowly realized that community at St. Olaf does not readily include staff. As stated, community at St. Olaf is strongly connected to academics and because staff members are not directly linked to the academic growth of students they are left out.

Problem Review:

We set out to study the problems with community at St. Olaf. Initially, we were going to focus on staff members and the degree to which they feel a part of the St. Olaf ‘community,’ but a few factors made us broaden our focus to staff, faculty and students. First of all, we were worried that by interviewing only staff members, we would place them in a vulnerable position because their responses would be identifiable as staff comments and could threaten their job security. Also, as this semester brought more dialogue about hate crimes and racism on St. Olaf’s campus, we wanted to use our project as a vehicle for collecting the stories of students, faculty members and staff members from different social positions in order to ascertain how different social factors affect individuals’ experiences at St. Olaf.

Our research questions focused on the concept of community, in general, and how different individuals experience community to varying degrees at St. Olaf. ‘Community’ is a term that is used frequently especially by the Admissions and Residential Life offices. The sense of campus community attracts both prospective students and prospective faculty or staff members to choose St. Olaf over other institutions. The college’s small size promotes the formation of bonds that foster community, but there are also aspects of the college’s structure and culture that inhibit the formation of a shared view of community.

The term ‘community’ is used frequently on campus although there is not an established idea of what it means. We asked each of our participants to define community in their own words, and, although certain themes emerged, these responses demonstrated that there exists a range of perspectives about the meaning of the term ‘community’ and individuals’ have different experiences with St. Olaf’s ‘community.’

Literature Review:

In a study conducted at a predominantly white, non-residential, multi-campus community college, Price, Hyle and Jordan (2009) examined the comfort and discomfort experienced by black students and the reasons why there is limited integration between white and black students. Rooting their research in

Granovetter's strength of ties theory (1973), the researchers argue that the strong ties among the white cliques that are carried over from high school create feelings of exclusion and alienation for black students. Also, the strong ties present in these homogeneously white groups do not prompt white students to break out of their comfortable groups and interact with black students. The white students, who claimed to have a colorblind perspective, were largely ignorant and oblivious to the difficulties experienced by black students. In fact, many white students blame the existence of homogenous black student friend groups on the black students' desires to self-segregate instead of on the white students' own self-segregating practices.

They conclude the article by advocating for colleges to play a proactive role in addressing race problems instead of perpetuating the status quo by reinforcing the discomfort that many black students bring with them to college. By intentionally analyzing social structures and helping students to understand how black and white students have different experiences because of structural inequalities, colleges could lessen black students' feelings of discomfort and alienation and white students' level of ignorance.

This article directly informs our analysis of the effect of students' races on their experiences of community on St. Olaf's campus. Although the residential nature of St. Olaf was identified as a factor that plays an important role in the creation of a sense of campus community, this study of a non-residential college can provide important comparisons because it is also a predominantly white institution with underlying issues of exclusion and alienation for nonwhite students. Recent public discussions at St. Olaf have confirmed that this phenomenon of black students feeling uncomfortable in their role as the minority and white students being largely unaware of this issue occurs on our campus, too.

Also, we use Granovetter's strength of ties theory as a framework for understanding how the dynamic within homogenous racial groups affects the degree of integration across the racial groups but we will expand this theory beyond race to include sub communities. According to this theory, strong ties within a group tend to perpetuate the status quo by reinforcing existing practices and beliefs whereas weak ties can encourage members to reach out to other groups, thereby increasing knowledge of other perspectives. The authors argue that this theory can be used to explain why there is limited integration of

white and black students on the campus in their study; the strong ties in homogenous white student groups do not motivate white students to bridge the gap between white and black student friend groups.

In a study done by Lounsbury and DeNeui (1996), the psychological sense of community (PSC) in colleges is explored by looking at the factors of school size and residency on or off campus. The sense of community at colleges is seen to “strongly affect the personal and social lives of students” and makes “substantive differences in behaviors and satisfactions” of the students (382). In the study of twenty-one colleges, belongingness, commitment, fulfillment of needs, attachment, and overall sense of community were researched to determine an overall psychological sense of community. It was determined that smaller schools have a more positive sense of community than larger schools. In addition, “students who reported that they lived on campus had significantly higher PSC scores than those who reported that they lived off-campus” (391). For this reason, our research, especially when speaking to students, focuses on residential living to help identify how St. Olaf’s heavily residential campus may affect students’ sense of community. In the same way, we also highlight space for our non-student interviewees to better understand how their presence in concentrated areas on campus may mold their sense of community.

A study conducted by Ellett and Schmidt (2011) at a large, private research university sought to understand the perceptions of faculty members toward community development in residential institutions. Boyer’s (1990) tenets of community, which define community as purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative, served as a theoretical lens for the study. The purpose of the study was to better understand faculty’s definition of an ideal community, through which residence life professionals could better structure “communities that support faculty engagement” (Ellett and Schmidt, 2011, p. 28). The study emphasized the importance of faculty-student contact outside of the classroom, namely focusing on faculty engagement in residence life. Research has confirmed that “student-faculty interactions that extend beyond the classroom have significant effects on a host of student outcomes, including academic achievement, personal and intellectual development, persistence, and degree attainment” (p. 28).

In addition to the benefits of faculty-student community building efforts, the study notes the “detrimental effects of fragmented approaches to holistic learning” (p. 29). The study affirmed that

faculty members serving as the Faculty In Residence (FIR) or Faculty Affiliate (FA) had overall positive experiences in “living-learning communities” (p. 34), in which they lived and were involved in the residence halls and worked with the residence life staff and students to build community. Within our own research context, many interviewees noted the exceptionally strong relationships between faculty and students, while some students noted that they have very limited contact with faculty members. The students who had strong ties with their professors cited these relationships as one of the most valuable aspects of both their academic and personal experience at St. Olaf. Therefore, the significance of student-faculty relationships is important to our research in pointing out the value of communication and integration of these two major bodies on campus. While FIRs and FAs are but one method of increasing faculty-student contact that may not necessarily be relevant to our purposes, it is important to promote ongoing out-of-class interactions in order to engage faculty and students in “mutually beneficial ways” (p. 37) that contribute to a shared sense of community and a more holistic learning environment.

Findings & Analysis:

Section One: What is community? What factors contribute to the sense of community?

The St. Olaf community is a unique entity in that all faculty, students, and staff perceive, experience, and reflect upon the same community differently depending on factors such as race, age, position, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, personality, inhabited space, responsibilities, etc. This subjective stance on the St. Olaf community prompted us to first define what ‘community’ is for the purpose of our research. As expected, our interviewees had different definitions for this trademark word at St. Olaf. However, common themes were notable in their definitions of what constitutes community, such as: a community’s “fluidity” the sense of “belonging” experienced by members of a community and how a community exists to achieve a “common goal or interest.” One uniting factor in the definitions of community was the focus on the individuals that made up the community and their attachment to others within the same community. These themes have been put together to create a definition of community for

our research as follows: A community is a group of individuals who share similar values and a sense of belonging to an institution where they strive for a common goal.

St. Olaf uses this definition of community to create its own unique experience of community for its faculty, students, and staff that highlights these themes in order to exemplify St. Olaf's distinctive characteristics. This paper will explore the ideological and physical definition of the St. Olaf community, focusing on the creation, purpose, practice, and failures of community, and providing suggestions for how to improve the community in order to create a more cohesive community that benefits all of its members.

The St. Olaf Administration engages in identity management of its community, and this management is shaped by the structural forces of college tradition and the cultural ethic of what it means to be a member of St. Olaf. The college's mission statement alludes to the traditional mission, stating, "St. Olaf College remains dedicated to the high standards set by its Norwegian immigrant founders", this includes "the development of the whole person in mind, body, and spirit" through "liberal arts", "the Christian Gospel", and "a global perspective" (Saint Olaf Website).

Students, faculty, and staff today recognize this influence and the identity that informs our current characterization of the St. Olaf community. During our interviews people explained that an important part of this shared identity is an "ethic" of Oles as "passionate people" that "share bonds" together. Individuals "believe in the need to be good people", and comply with the "common culture on how to treat people well". As a member of the St. Olaf community, an "ethic of care" and level of "trust" are deeply embodied and expected, stemming from the tradition of high Christian morals found in the college's mission.

The Lutheran religion and deep Norwegian heritage at St. Olaf shape much of the traditional ideology that differentiates the St. Olaf community from other similar institutions. As a staff member described, "we wear a Norwegian sweater badge of honor". A student explained that although she isn't Norwegian or Lutheran, she still loves these aspects of St. Olaf because they give it an identity. For example, the Christmas musical festival, Christmas Fest, and the school song, UmYaYa, which both have strong ties to Norwegian and Lutheran heritage, give the St. Olaf community opportunities to "bond, even

if people don't care [about the traditional foundations of the institution]". At special ceremonies such as Commencement and Honors Day, people collectively sing Lutheran hymns, thus reinforcing the Norwegian-Lutheran tradition through this community activity. Interviewees remarked that "the church gives [the St. Olaf community] identity" that "compiles [with] unwritten rules and norms that bring people together."

In addition to its tradition of religion and its Norwegian heritage, St. Olaf was founded as an educational institution of the liberal arts, and this remains its main identity today. And as many of our interviewees noted, this commitment to learning is best seen in the close bonds between faculty members and students which often contribute to students' feelings of community. There is a "focus to get professors to know students" and act as mentors and advisors. The "open door policy" enhances this feeling for students and faculty, creating a culture of a more "closely-knit community." Students recognize a positive academic community where everyone has the same goals and professors want you to do well. As a student explained, "I like how we can interact with our professors...and how that's pretty informal". And another reflected, "The reason I don't want to leave is the professors. They go out of their way to form relationships and bonds with students. They are mentors...and talk to you about life and provide an outlet you can't have with friends". Similarly, faculty recognize this commitment to the students and their education, as a faculty member expanded, "At St. Olaf, it's student-focused even beyond classes. Students come in for office hours or discussions...here, students are our calling; our vocation focuses on students and teaching". This dedication to creating a learning-focused mission, in addition to a foundation in Lutheran and Norwegian tradition forms the foundation of the St. Olaf community.

Although these long-established principles have an influence today, the college still must actively perpetuate interactions between members of the St. Olaf community in order to continue cultivating the community within. One conscious way of doing so is consciously manipulating space.

Among our interviewees, the most recognized instance of intentional community-building space was the residence halls. Residential Life Staff focus on the facilitation of community in residential halls year round, especially in first year halls. Interviewees noted the significance of the residential campus to the fostering of community, in that “everyone is here all the time”, which creates a sort of “social hub.” One interviewee noted the importance of close proximity to maintaining relationships, in that “friends are not too far to visit and it is easy to hang out on weeknights.” As a space with a small population of students and a high rate of on-campus living, St. Olaf works to facilitate the desired sense of community that has long been an integral aspect of the institution’s tradition.

The residential staff are trained to create and promote a community-oriented space within the residential halls, especially for first-year students, because it is understood that a community is what “freshman are looking for.” A sense of community within residence halls is especially important for first-years because they “are eager to make friends”, and haven’t necessarily had an opportunity to do so outside of their residential space. Students even claimed that they had been excited about “the bubble” stereotype of St. Olaf. Students’ remarks about their residential experience as freshmen reflected the significance of first-year dorms in creating community. Students made statements such as, “I met my friend group early on freshman year in my dorm,” “most of my friends live in my [first year dorm]...there is definitely a community here,” and “everyone hangs out with other people in the dorm” .Clearly, this residential space has “fostered a lot of closeness and community” within the students’ living corridors.

Nevertheless, sometimes this encouraged community in first year dorms can become suffocating. A student replied, “I met most of my friends freshman and sophomore year through proximity in my dorm because we were forced to hang out in the community area because of the size of the rooms, but [the residential hall] community was good because we were told there was a community, so we self-actualized the community”. With pressure to become involved in the St. Olaf community, some feel “claustrophobic”, like they are being forced into a specific social setting with an “expectation to be involved and have a lot of friends”.

This idea was solidified by students who have or are employed through the office of Residential Life. As one student stated, this position allows students to see “how much effort goes into fostering a community for freshman and St. Olaf as a whole...the St. Olaf community doesn’t just happen magically, it takes a lot of work to try and create it”. A student reflected that they now see that “the community feeling is forced much more than they thought coming into St. Olaf as a freshman”. With weekly meetings, corridor events, and all-hall events, one can see how the emphasis on community may seem overdone, even though most focused on the positive influence the strong community had in creating relationships with other students.

However, this strong sense of community in first year halls seems to be short lived. Throughout students’ time at St. Olaf, they felt that the emphasis on community in dorms seems to dramatically decrease. Upperclassmen students suggested the community “was a first year thing” and explained that “I haven’t met people in my dorm. Now my friend group is homogenized by interests and family, but first year it wasn’t like that- it was more mixed and the community part is a big reason for that”. Put bluntly, “there isn’t much community in the residence halls of upperclassman. There used to be lots of activities that people went to, but now there aren’t many and not many people go”. Another student said that her community was “wider and less focused” as a first year compared to her new group of friends that are centralized around common interests. This suggests that as first year students, the St. Olaf community felt by many is one that is determined primarily by proximity. Who you live near and how many peers you know seems to be much more important early on in students’ time at St. Olaf than it is in the second half of their college experience. For first years, community is a feeling or a sense that comes from relationships that thrive because of proximity.

Apart from upperclassman dorms, some students steer away from the promoted, traditional residence hall community and choose to live in honor houses or off-campus housing. These students uniformly addressed the lack of proximity to the St. Olaf “bubble” and how that affected their lived experience within the St. Olaf community. One student chose to live off-campus because he “doesn’t

need the forced interaction that he once did as an underclassman,” however, he stated that this year he feels more disconnected and is more aware of the community he had in the dormitories and “wishes [he] would have cherished it”. Similarly, another student reflected that she “now feels less connected to campus activities and is less likely to meet up with friends” with whom she does not live. This further shows that the creation of spaces that promote close proximity to one another does contribute to individuals’ sense of connectedness and community, both with other students and with the campus as a whole.

Section Two: The Purpose of Community and What it Looks like in Practice

The St. Olaf Admissions Office highlights the school’s strengths and downplays its weaknesses in an attempt to attract more future students. There is disagreement among the people we interviewed about whether Admissions markets an honest portrayal of St. Olaf and, in particular, whether the characterization of St. Olaf as a place with a strong sense of community is accurate. Although some staff members argued that Admissions does its best to portray the community authentically, many students, faculty members and staff members stated that Admissions at best presents a glossy, shallow version of St. Olaf that masks the many complications inherent in ‘the Olaf community.’ For instance, Admissions gives the idea that St. Olaf has an increasingly diverse student body without alluding to the difficulties that non-white or non-middle class students can face as members of the minority on campus. The idea of community, notes one faculty member, is “BS” that is used to market the college to potential students. Also, some of the rhetoric of Admissions tour guides, like the claim that there is never theft on campus, dangerously oversimplifies St. Olaf, where people do commit crimes and life is not always idyllic.

One of the potential harms of Admissions’ idyllic presentation of St. Olaf is that students may come to Olaf with a false sense of what life is like here. Students, especially, were quick to point out the many ways in which the ideal of community created by the Admissions Office does not match the lived experience. One student expressed concern that Admissions gives a false sense of how Oles behave and

how people interact with each other in ‘the community.’ Although not all students with whom we spoke cited the perceived sense of community as a significant factor in their decision to attend St. Olaf, many students said that they were attracted to St. Olaf in part because of its apparent sense of community. Almost all of our student interviewees said that they now know (as enrolled students) that the St. Olaf community is not as picture perfect as Admissions made it out to be and that any sense of community that exists does not necessarily include everyone. The majority of our respondents, across the groups of students, faculty and staff, said that there *is* a sense of community at St. Olaf, but this sense is experienced in very different ways by individuals at St. Olaf.

As one staff member noted, it is very important that Admissions markets an honest picture of St. Olaf to potential students so that they attract the kind of students who will do well in St. Olaf’s lived environment. The staff member explains, “Tell the story of who you are, and you’ll get people who want to be a part of this community.” In some ways, community at St. Olaf could be perceived as a cultural force. Therefore, it is important that the college attract the type of people who fit into and want to perpetuate that culture if the college wants to maintain its current identity and existing sense of community.

Admissions’ focus on community is perceived to be only one part of the Administration’s intentional emphasis on the sense of community at St. Olaf. The Administration is engaged in constant identity management of the college which includes fostering the idea that this campus is a ‘community.’ There is a pervasive institutional rhetoric around community at St. Olaf that can be seen in multiple aspects of campus life. Examples include the hour-long block of time on Thursdays that is called “Community Time” or the welcome page of the Admissions website that describes St. Olaf as “a *community* of 3,000 students, over 800 faculty and 35,000 alumni around the world” (emphasis added). Additionally, the ‘About St. Olaf’ webpage states that “St. Olaf is an inclusive *community* that welcomes people of differing backgrounds and beliefs, a *community* that embraces spirituality and cultivates compassion” (emphasis added). There even used to be an Office of Community Life and Diversity that is

now broken into the Multicultural Affairs Office and the St. Olaf College Lesbian and Gay Employee Network.

Running on the assumption that St. Olaf is in some senses of the word a 'community,' the question arises: whose responsibility is it to create this community or to address the issues that arise within it? On this matter, our interviewees were split. Some stated clearly that it is the responsibility of the Administration to move the college in a strong, healthy direction; therefore, it is the Administration who must tend to community at Olaf. Many interviewees discussed their frustrations with the Administration's unresponsive attitude toward student/faculty concerns or desires for change which seems to imply that they hold the Administration responsible for the management of St. Olaf culture and community. A more proactive, democratic administrative model could increase the sense of community at St. Olaf, they implied.

Other interviewees, however, argued that it is the responsibilities of students and faculty members to institute change. Students/faculty members know better than the Administration what goes on at St. Olaf, so they should be the ones to guide change. In general, students tend to blame the Administration for problems with the experience of community on campus, but perhaps this is not fair, one student suggested. Another interviewee proposed that the college could fund events that foster community but that the people who want community need to take responsibility for organizing these events. Individuals make the community what it is, so it only makes sense that these individuals should address its continuation and improvement. A student argued that student organizations and groups do a better job of creating community than the Administration, so it would be more effective if students took responsibility for the campus community rather than leaving it to the Administration.

A theme that emerged repeatedly in our interviews is that the Administration has many shortcomings that inhibit its ability to foster community. For example, multiple interviewees expressed frustration with the perceived weakness of the Administration's response to hateful acts that threatened

the security and comfort of members of the St. Olaf 'inclusive community.' Also, the Administration was generally perceived by interviewees to be reluctant to receive input from actors outside of the upper Administration, so if students, faculty and staff took responsibility for community, it could be more closely in synch with shared desires and needs. The Administration has innate power over the strength of the St. Olaf community because it is the keeper and perpetuator of the rules of the institution. As one interviewee put it, "the sense of community ebbs and flows with the Administration." However, there is room for different interpretations and enactments of these established rules and policies.

One student suggested that the structure and the problems that it creates are so firmly rooted that the Administration has little ability to change them. There is a perception that the Administration often has different goals than students, faculty or staff might have, but perhaps it is unfair to blame the Administration for all of the issues that arise at St. Olaf because their power over the structure is arguably limited. It seems that our interviewees argued that community comes from structural and cultural sources. The structure of St. Olaf is perhaps difficult to alter, and the culture is also difficult to change because its perpetuation happens naturally due to facets of the institutional structure. Perhaps, then, as some of our interviewees argued, answers to questions about community need to come from both sides, the Administration and students/faculty/staff, and solutions to problems that arise need to address both the structure and the culture of the institution of St. Olaf.

No one, from students to faculty members to staff members to Administrative staff, seems to understand the exact nature of this entity that people call 'community' at St. Olaf. There is little known about how it affects individual members, how it is perpetuated from one year to the next or what its consequences might be. As one respondent offered, "We don't fully understand what this community thing is. That's concerning because if you don't know how it works, how do you know at any moment that you're not screwing it up?"

The rhetoric of community is heard frequently and in varying contexts around St. Olaf's campus as if everyone knows its meaning and its purpose. In some ways, this pervasive ideology of community creates at least a theoretical sense of community on campus because there is a shared script about 'the St. Olaf community.' On the other hand, though, this rhetoric obscures the fact that not everyone believes in the existence of a community or feels included in it. The dominant ideology about community paints St. Olaf as a small, inclusive place where everyone can feel welcomed and cared for. This is not an accurate representation of everyone's experience at St. Olaf, however, especially for those who do not fit the traditional mold of a St. Olaf student or faculty/staff member. As one faculty member noted, St. Olaf as an institution seems reluctant to abandon its identity as a historically white institution. The college was established for a certain group of people (i.e. white Lutherans of Norwegian descent), and structural aspects (like the requirement that all students take two classes on Christianity) only serve to reinforce its traditional identity despite the changing demographics of the college.

Most of our interviewees agreed that despite its shortcomings, the community at St. Olaf is well-intentioned. People support each other and there is an ethic of care that promotes kindness between people. The idea of community, though idealized, serves important purposes for the college. St. Olaf's sense of 'community' draws prospective students to choose St. Olaf, gives some people feelings of belonging, and attracts and retains staff and faculty members.

Included in the ideology about community at St. Olaf is the idea that the goal of this community is to create an academic, residential environment in which everyone is united around a common goal of learning and personal development. Students are comfortable enough to be able to delve into their studies, and faculty are committed to the institution to such a degree that they give of their time freely in order to foster students' learning. One key contributor to the St. Olaf ideology about community is the school's status as a teaching college instead of a research institution. St. Olaf is much more student-focused than larger research institutions, and some professors with whom we spoke emphasized that teaching is their

vocation and not just a job. The core responsibilities of faculty members are to believe in the institution and to care about students.

St. Olaf's identity as a teaching college and not a research institution is important to its sense of community, but the expectations that this identity creates can be restrictive because they coerce faculty members into spending more time working on campus than they might otherwise want to. There is an unwritten rule that faculty members will engage in an open door policy and will always be available to meet with students, even if this cuts into their time with their families. Professors find it very difficult to get any research done because they must devote so much time to teaching and meeting with students. Although this was generally accepted as worthwhile by the faculty members with whom we spoke, many faculty members lamented the feeling that there was never enough time in the day to get everything done.

Also, this single-minded focus on academics can leave out those who are not directly involved in learning and academics. Although they are integral to the college's ability to offer education to students, custodians, food service staff members and other support or professional staff members are not often recognized for the role that they play in college academics. In this way, if the goal of community is to foster academic learning, this could effectively alienate those who are not students, professors or administrators.

Another facet of the St. Olaf ideology is the college's history as a college of the Lutheran Church. This faith tradition lingers in the ethic of care and compassion promoted on campus. St. Olaf is no longer firmly rooted in the Church, and our respondents expressed mixed feelings about this shift. On the one hand, the Church gives the school an identity, but on the other hand, this affiliation can be alienating to students, faculty and staff who are not a part of the Lutheran religion or the Christian faith. Some of our interviewees argued that a lasting legacy of St. Olaf's Christian affiliation is the focus on the overlap of the mind, body and spirit, which will be discussed more thoroughly later on in our paper. Even as the general body of St. Olaf moves away from the Lutheran tradition, the Board of Regents is perceived as a hindering force that is reluctant to let go of the school's Christian roots despite the St. Olaf body's growing diversity.

There are some notable negative effects of the ideology of community at St. Olaf. All of the talk about St. Olaf community contributes to the St. Olaf bubble which isolates St. Olaf students from Northfield. Because community is defined as ‘the Hill,’ on which St. Olaf’s campus rests, students are not as motivated to look beyond their immediate surroundings and get involved in activities or volunteering in the town of Northfield. Students can become complacent and comfortable in their bubble on a hill which is detrimental both to these students, who miss out on being involved, active citizens, and to Northfield residents, who could benefit from the energetic involvement of young people in various community efforts.

The idea of community and its accompanying expectations are sometimes felt to be projected upon students in ways that are detrimental to their mental health. As one student explained, there is the message that if you do everything right, you’ll be successful, happy, the “ideal Ole.” Olaf students are expected to be passionate about a variety of things and to be involved in a plethora of activities. Although the sense of community can offer students support, it also creates stress as students try unsuccessfully to live up to the pressure to be an optimal St. Olaf student. As at many colleges, student life at Olaf seems to be characterized by extremes rather than moderation. Students are constantly busy, either with school work or with social engagements. This fast-paced lifestyle (and the repressive expectations of success that accompany it) can prevent students from fixing problems that arise within the Olaf community because they are simply too overwhelmed or too busy to take on anything new.

Community can also be used to repress viewpoints that are deemed unpopular either by the student body or by the institutional powers like the Board of Regents. As one staff member noted, there is also the coercive requirement that you hold certain beliefs or a certain outlook on the world. The unifying power of community can be exploited to prevent people from expressing disparate views because, since we’re all in this together, individuals cannot go around saying whatever they please without first checking with the group. For example, as one of our interviewees explained, when the faculty came out in support of gay marriage and the VOTE NO movement in Fall 2013, the Board of Regents was very upset seemingly, because they felt that the faculty should not be expressing views that could be potentially

isolating to some members of the community. In this instance, the sense of community at St. Olaf was used to squelch dissent. A significant problem that faces the St. Olaf body is how to balance the different desires and beliefs of a large, increasingly diverse community.

In practice, the St. Olaf community is not as simple as the college Administration makes it out to be. A student claimed, “[Admissions] gives a false sense of the college in a lot of ways... the image of a moderately conservative, Christian college is honestly total bullshit,” but the student claims that underneath that image of St. Olaf was “something way cooler than that.” Many interviewees felt that the strong sense of community is something that is unique to St. Olaf. A faculty member who recently moved to St. Olaf from another institution stated, “St. Olaf presents a more intimate relationship between faculty and students and staff in general... everyone is much more closely-knit.”

When put into practice on a daily basis, many felt that the community at St. Olaf affected them most by providing them with a safe and welcoming environment and constant contact with friends and colleagues. It provides many people with a sense of support, and an outlet when they need to share their stress or personal experiences with others. However, this constant contact has both a positive and a negative effect. While students appreciate the closeness and interaction with friends, they often felt that it could become “exhausting” when there is “too much togetherness.” Faculty and staff members felt similar social pressures. A faculty member referenced the “organic intellectual encounters” that place a burden on students and faculty, as they are never provided the space to let up on energy or work. The constant pressure to nurture personal or academic relationships and engage socially can serve as an added source of stress to members of the community who feel they already have too much on their plate.

Although students, faculty, and staff agreed that there is some sort of community that exists at St. Olaf, a widespread understanding among all three groups is that St. Olaf is not simply comprised of one overarching community, but many separate communities. Many people feel that there is a “general unifying factor of communities” at St. Olaf, but sub-communities form based on identities. These perceived identities include, but are not limited to extracurricular activities, student organizations, and racial, ethnic, or religious identities. Belonging to sub-communities provides different groups with

completely different experiences during their time at St. Olaf. Students felt that being part of smaller groups helps them “find internal bonds”, gives them a sense of belonging, unites people around an ideal, and provides some of the most valuable parts of their experience at St. Olaf. Students, faculty, and staff all felt that there should be more interaction and collaboration between sub-groups in order to “facilitate better communal life” and promote more constructive discussions between groups. A student mentioned that “Departments are divided and aren’t necessarily talking to each other and meshing, and that trickles down to students – we’re not talking or meshing.” Overall, interviewees enjoyed the positive effects of the sub-communities on their own personal experience at St. Olaf, but as we will explore later, they did feel that the formation of these insular sub-communities has the potential to be “harmful” and “necessarily exclusionary” when put into the context of the overarching St. Olaf community.

Section Three: Where does Community Fail? What Inhibits a Sense of Community?

Community is a complex word with an unclear definition because it encapsulates two contrasting meanings when talking about St. Olaf. The first aspect of the community at St. Olaf is one of inclusion. As described earlier in this paper, St. Olaf’s community is a place where many people feel welcomed and feel, as one student described it, “a connection” to something bigger than her. But within this understanding of community is another aspect that many do not initially think of when describing the word: exclusion. Simply put, community means that some people are left out. This paper will expound on these ideas of exclusion that became visible through interviews of St. Olaf’s community’ members in order to answer the question posed by one student, “What am I doing wrong? Why don’t I feel [like a part of] this community [like my peers]?”

St. Olaf’s community attracts a certain type of person to come work and study in its circle as it maintains its tradition of being a learning institution above those of the “common schools.” According to a variety of people connected to Olaf, this attraction is intentional on the part of the institution of St. Olaf. This idea is present in Admissions marketing of St. Olaf to prospective students because “if you lie [to

high school students], you'll get the wrong people". There is an unofficial understanding of the "ideal Ole" that comes to Olaf: someone who is "white, Lutheran, upper middle class, straight, ideologically conservative, or moderate, at best." Further, according to a staff person, the "most difficult thing is to help every member feel included". With a student body of over 3,000 students and more than 600 staff and faculty, it is easy to understand how some people fall through the cracks of community.

St. Olaf's strong historical tradition is one of the creators of community that continues to influence the perception of St. Olaf. Students, faculty and staff face the tradition every day when they walk around campus and see Old Main, the original building of the college that serves as a constant reminder of where the college began. Students know the Norwegian immigrant history that is highlighted by the recent presence of Norwegian royalty and the yearly tradition of Christmas Fest, which brings thousands of Norwegian sweater-sporting grandparents to the campus to eat traditional Norwegian foods and sing the college hymn with their current Ole grandchildren.

These traditions help connect a certain population to the community of St. Olaf, but they also serve to alienate those who do not relate to or share Olaf's history and tradition. Students and faculty who do not share this background and set of beliefs connected to Olaf's tradition do not feel welcomed into the community. One student explained how students can study at Olaf, but unless they are in "the circle," they don't feel a connection beyond academics. This circle is reserved for students who are groomed for St. Olaf, which, as one student claimed, means people who "had more than average access and opportunities to arts, sports, camps, a religious upbringing." These are perceived as experiences that "non-legacy students" or less affluent students may not understand, and therefore serve as a source of exclusion to those who don't necessarily fit the mold.

One of the most prevalent examples of how the tradition of St. Olaf alienates certain populations from feeling included in the community is the presence of religion on campus. Although not all of those who spoke of the isolating effects of religion focused on the importance of the college's ELCA affiliation,

they stressed the often-exclusionary spirit of the college's focus on religion and spirituality. St. Olaf's focus on the growth of the Mind, Body, and Spirit serves to blur the lines between a purely academic institution and one where community members are encouraged to be open to "the fundamental questions [that religion struggles with]". Even though the college does not force religion onto its students, faculty and staff, there is still an underlying tradition of religion that makes a certain group feel uncomfortable. Although chapel is not mandatory and St. Olaf, unlike some other Lutheran educational institutions, does not require faith statements from students, faculty or staff members, the culture of Christian tradition makes people "feel different because [they] aren't religious." Another example of the often unseen role religion plays in community was provided by a faculty member when she described the conflict she feels when going to academic celebrations that take place in Boe Memorial Chapel. She wants to attend and be part of the academic community but does not feel comfortable singing hymns. Because of the combination of religion and academics, she feels as though she shouldn't be here. As she explained, "community is interpreted as when we don't have different opinions and beliefs." This tradition of religion, although often seen as more inclusive than other peer colleges, still reminds a certain population that they are not full members of the community at St. Olaf.

St. Olaf's Norwegian tradition also continues at the school in the form of a majority white population. Although this is the norm in Minnesota and across the country at small liberal arts colleges, this aspect of community has the power to exclude. People of color at St. Olaf sometimes do not feel welcomed because they are such a minority presence on campus (Student and faculty are 85% and 87% white, non-Hispanic respectively). This minority presence affects faculty because, as one faculty member explained, it feels like the administration "uses [nonwhite or international faculty members] at certain points to highlight the international and racial diversity", but then does not listen to their concerns that St. Olaf maintains a "hegemonic mainstream white identity". Also, a concern expressed by many faculty, students and staff is that the students who are involved with the Student Support Services (SSS) do not experience the overarching community of St. Olaf. These students are mostly students of color and move

into school a few weeks before the majority of students. One reason the interviewees do not feel that the SSS students fit into the general student body is because they do not interact with the larger community.

Another downfall of community at St. Olaf involves the role gender plays in faculty interactions. It is interesting to note that when asked, the majority of interviewees who responded with negative comments regarding gender were faculty members. Members of the faculty believe that women in the different academic departments take on the “dish washing roles” such as note taking at department meetings and interviewing prospective students for Scholar’s Day. And although there are examples of male professors who work against these gender roles, the women of St. Olaf’s faculty continue to live out the social pressure to be the “good white girl”.

Political belief also plays into students feelings of alienation from the community because of the description of St. Olaf as both a conservative and liberal school. As mentioned earlier, many consider St. Olaf to be a conservative or moderate institution when it comes to political and social thought. But as one individual posted on College Prowler, an online forum that explores and rates college life, “If you are a family value orientated socially conservative Lutheran, you will not believe you are at a religiously based school. The LGBT community [members] are very active and have a drag ball. If you are conservative or religious or don’t support the gay agenda, don’t go to this school.” These conflicting sentiments of the dominant political and social ideas on campus highlight an interesting way in which two large groups at St. Olaf feel excluded when thinking of the community because they both feel that their political and social beliefs are the minority beliefs. This can be explained through the over-simplified observation that the St. Olaf students are considered to be liberal and the Administration is considered to be conservative. But regardless of the actual political and social beliefs of St. Olaf, the political beliefs at St. Olaf are exclusionary because they are undefined.

The ideology of community can serve to make both students and faculty overly busy. At St. Olaf there is an idea that, as one student put it, “if you do it right, you’ll be this successful, happy, ideal Ole”,

and once you accomplish that status you will fit into the community of St. Olaf. Doing it right for students and faculty means being involved in many activities and being “very engaged and ambitious.” Students who are not heavily involved in extracurricular activities because they do not have time or because they are introverts feel that “St. Olaf would be a difficult place;” it would be an alienating place.

Faculty members are expected to devote a large portion of their time, on top of committee and department work, to mentoring students. This focus on faculty-student relationships is one of the non-negotiable expectations of St. Olaf and many see it as a way that community is built. Students know that one-on-one interactions with professors are possible and even expected. But this expectation to do everything is unrealistic. First, faculty members do not feel comfortable doing their academic research at St. Olaf because there is a continual stream of students seeking help. Other faculty described how they have to take days off and work from home where they cut all ties with the school because of the number of emails they receive each day from students, faculty, and staff. This blurs the lines of responsibility for faculty and causes many to desire separation from campus because of the intense campus atmosphere in which community is created.

The St. Olaf community’s focus on an ‘ideal Ole’ is also harmful because of the ethos of business that it creates. Students and faculty both described how Oles hold a renaissance ideal as a goal, meaning that they do as much as possible. This detracts from the community of St. Olaf because it sets an unrealistic goal for the majority of those associated with the school and because it distracts people from focusing on interacting with each other.

The ethos of business at St. Olaf also distracts individuals from seeing problems within the community as a whole. Students are so focused on their work that there “is not a lot of space or time for relationship building.” Students and faculty are focused on their own tasks so when something disrupts the community at large (like racist comments written on walls), no one has time or energy to address the problems. Also, applying Granovetter’s strength of ties theory would explain that because of the strong

ties within interest groups (better called sub communities) that many students are not compelled to interact with people outside of their insular groups. This can have important consequences for the St. Olaf community as a whole because it reduces overall solidarity and concern for those in other sub communities. An example of this occurred during the 2012-2013 school year when the phrases “what’s with all the niggers [at St. Olaf]?” and “death to Gaza” were written on posters in a residence hall and a hallway in the student center, respectively. These phrases, although they represent a rift in the St. Olaf community, are not the only problem. The other problem is that when students organized on campus to address the issues of hate crimes they received a “very limited response from other students and faculty.” This is perhaps largely because St. Olaf breeds busy-ness and does not leave time for its members to respond to even very important issues.

Finally, an important finding of this research was that staff is in many ways inherently not included in St. Olaf’s community because they lack a direct link to the academic growth of students. Their role on campus is one of support for faculty and students which makes them easily forgotten and dismissed. Although many interviewees described an ethic of care that colors interactions between members of the St. Olaf ‘community,’ some staff members with whom we spoke mentioned that faculty members and students do not always treat them with respect and compassion. Also, many of our interviewees’ comments about community focus on the interactions between students and professors which inherently exclude staff.

Suggestions for How to Improve the St. Olaf Community

Many of our interviewees agreed that confronting the problems with community at St. Olaf and working to improve them requires a dual approach of the Administration and the rest of the St. Olaf community. A student referred to addressing the problems as a “two-way street,” in which Administration should take initiative, but efforts must be made from the bottom-up as well. While St. Olaf works to carry

out a specific mission that should be respected by students who choose to attend the college, the Administration must also make an effort to truly listen to and accommodate the needs of its body of students, faculty and staff.

In order to create common ground between the Administration and the other members of the St. Olaf community, interviewees pointed to the need for better communication among members and subgroups within the community. This communication should not only include discussion and ongoing dialogue about issues or concerns but should also make explicit the goals we wish to achieve as a community and how each body can contribute to attaining these goals. For example, as mentioned previously, recent racist events on campus have led to much discussion about diversity between students, faculty, and staff; however, it is imperative that with this discussion come concrete goals for achieving solutions that include all members of the community.

To achieve constructive dialogue between the various bodies on campus, each group needs to create the space and time for discussion and make adequate room for dissent. The aforementioned “Minnesota Nice” attitude, as well as the commonly-felt pressure to conform to a certain set of beliefs on campus leave little room for constructive disagreement and have made it difficult for certain groups of people to voice their opinions. Furthermore, interviewees expressed the need for all members of the St. Olaf body to fight against the “busy culture” in order to allow for more organic community-building time. Because the ethos of busy-ness pervades the campus, students, faculty, and staff are left with little time or energy for more informal, genuine interactions. Staff, especially, wished for more informal events and activities that would foster real communication and appreciation for one another, and create an organic, rather than constructed, sense of community both within and between the groups of staff, faculty and students.

Staff and faculty also stressed the need for Administration to create a culture of trust and to express more appreciation for the work of faculty and staff. Staff and faculty feel generally under-

appreciated and alienated from the mission of the college as carried out by the Administration. In addition, students and faculty expressed discontent with Administration's lack of transparency in daily operations and outlook for the future of the college. Faculty members in particular feel a level of distrust and would like communication from the Administration to be more frequent, clear, and direct. Students and faculty recommend strongly that the Administration accept more input from students, faculty, and staff. By listening fully, implementing more of the larger St. Olaf community's ideas, and increasing transparency in communication, Administration will learn more about what problems are facing members of the community and can work to make the St. Olaf community more of a universal reality by making all individuals feel included.

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