

# **Stress and the First-Year Experience**

SOAN 373: Ethnographic Research Methods

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## **Executive Summary**

**TITLE:** Stress and the First-Year Experience

### **ABSTRACT**

This research qualitatively explored how stress affects first-year students at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN. Data was collected through interviewing first-year students, upperclass students, professors, administrators, and staff from campus stress-reducing resources. We focused our research on what caused first-year students to feel stressed and how they coped with stress, as well as how campus resources worked to support students and first-years specifically. Our analysis helped us to determine that first-year students do experience a unique type of stress compared to upperclass students, with much of their stress relating to establishing themselves socially and academically in a new setting. We conclude our research with a summary of specific suggestions for St. Olaf campus resources, recommending changes they could implement to better support St. Olaf first-years.

### **SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS:**

- Past research demonstrates that college first-years often experience stress, and a study done on St. Olaf students in 2010 found that students at St. Olaf College have higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than national averages.
- On campus, many students are familiar with a common discourse of stress, which constructs a campus atmosphere that socially values stress and encourages students to be stressed out.
- We conducted qualitative interviews with St. Olaf first years, upperclassmen and upperclasswomen, professors, and staff and administrators from campus resources. These campus resources locations are all intended to provide students with support to reduce or limit

their stress: the Henry C. Piper Center for Vocation and Career, the Wellness Center, the Boe House counseling center, and the Academic Support Center.

- First-year students were found to have a unique kind of stress, focusing on stress relating to course registration, extracurricular involvement, social life, and academic expectations.
- There were a number of students who reported that they did not feel stressed out, significantly due to strong stress-reduction or coping habits.
- Professors reported being very tuned in to student's levels of stress, noticing and observing stress not only in how students acted or looked, but also noting linguistic changes in students writing or speaking styles.
- Of the four campus resource locations that we discussed with interviewees, the vast majority of students were not familiar with all of these resources, pointing to a need for greater advertising for these resources to raise awareness about their available support and to reduce the stigma of utilizing these resources.
- Interviewees were asked what concrete, realistic improvements they could imagine for these campus resources that would help them to function in a way that could better support stressed-out students and reduce student stress. Increased awareness and advertising was suggested for all resources. Longer hours for the Academic Support Center were recommended to provide tutoring options when students are available. Many students suggested that Boe House, the counseling center, increase their staff to allow more students access to counseling appointments.
- Overall, we suggest that with its established high rates of mental health disorders, St. Olaf College should work to increase the resources allocated to campus services that strive to reduce student stress.

## **ABSTRACT**

This research qualitatively explored how stress affects first-year students at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN. Data was collected through interviewing first-year students, upperclass students, professors, administrators, and staff from campus stress-reducing resources. We focused our research on what caused first-year students to feel stressed and how they coped with stress, as well as how campus resources worked to support students and first-years specifically. Our analysis helped us to determine that first-year students do experience a unique type of stress compared to upperclass students, with much of their stress relating to establishing themselves socially and academically in a new setting. We conclude our research with a summary of specific suggestions for St. Olaf campus resources, recommending changes they could implement to better support St. Olaf first-years.

## **SETTING/COMMUNITY**

Walking through the halls of the student commons building, students rush down the hallways, hurriedly checking their PO boxes or lining up in front of the café. Others pause to chat with friends, discussing coursework and upcoming deadlines. This building is usually a blur of activity and faces during the day, as students move quickly to their next destination. While waiting to get into the cafeteria or walking through the quad, overheard conversations often linger on the topic of student stress—students complain about their workload for the night, and friends counter with their own list of assignments. At St. Olaf College, stress is a frequent topic of discourse, and its presence is a dependable constant in the lives of students.

St. Olaf is a small liberal arts college located in Northfield, Minnesota. Located about 50 miles south of the greater Minneapolis St. Paul area, Northfield is home to 20,007 people. A defining trait of the small town are the two colleges that reside within the city, including St. Olaf College. Ranked amongst the top liberal arts schools in the nation, St. Olaf's mission statement states that the school is

“a four-year college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, [that] provides an education committed to the liberal arts, rooted in the Christian Gospel, and incorporating a global perspective. In the conviction that life is more than a livelihood, it focuses on what is ultimately worthwhile and fosters the development of the whole person in mind, body, and spirit” (Mission Statement). The St. Olaf student body is comprised of 3176 students with 56% being female and 44% being male. This student population is predominantly white along with a mix of small minority groups which includes American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African-American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino, and non-resident International.

In addition to these concrete facts, there exists certain perceptions of St. Olaf that further help define the college. St. Olaf is a residential college with 96% living in one of the nine dorms or 18 honor houses that are within a 10-minute walk spanning from one end of the campus to the other. St. Olaf is known for the friendly and light-hearted students that uphold the “Minnesota nice” state of mind. This leads to a community where people are comfortable leaving their backpacks and computers unattended, in addition to the school deciding that there is no need for locks to be put on PO boxes. This college also proudly upholds its highly ranked cafeteria along with its nationally renowned choir. Beyond the choir, there are many opportunities to get involved in the music department and one third of the students are involved in some sort of musical activity on campus. There are also a number of opportunities for students to get involved in the many college sponsored organizations. The plethora of opportunities at St. Olaf appeal to the students as they are notoriously known to be overly involved in extracurricular activities.

An additional element that contributes to the St. Olaf community is its high rates of tuition, which continue to increase each year. For the 2013-2014 school year, tuition will be \$49,960 including room and board. This high price point speaks to an elevated economic status that is often affiliated with St. Olaf and its students. Simultaneously, however, approximately 70% of students receive some type of

financial aid, and with both need-based and merit-based scholarships, grants, and loans available, St. Olaf is not limited to the affluent.

As students walk through campus hallways and gather in classrooms, a discourse of stress often penetrates conversation. Foucault's (1971) theoretical discussions of discourse shed light on this common topic of conversation and the construction of stress among St. Olaf students. Foucault considers discourse to be a way that communities and groups talk about certain topics, constructing the topic through their conversation. Stress at St. Olaf is constructed by the student body, professors, administrators, etc., and perpetuated by the discourse of stress that each new generation of students learns and is socialized into by their predecessors. At St. Olaf College, students talk about stress frequently--they complain to each other about how stressed they are and how overwhelmed they are with their to-do list. Students appear to attribute value to themselves and others when stressed out, and this value acts as social currency, which further perpetuates the valuation and continued discourse about stress. This does not mean that the stress students experience is any less real, but understanding a theoretical perspective of the construction of stress via discourse, how the stress is conversed about and lived out, gives insight into the topic we will be further exploring with our research.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was completed with qualitative data from informal interviews that were conducted in April 2013. After receiving approval from St. Olaf's Institutional Review Board to conduct our research, we began contacting individuals from four target populations: current first years, current upperclass students, professors, and representatives from student support organizations. To select first year students for interviews, the three researchers initially contacted students they knew through their separate social networks, with a total of 18 first year students interviewed.

The first year students were asked questions about their general experiences in college, factors that cause stress (academics, social life/relationships, extracurricular involvement, and family interactions), how they deal with stress, whether they use supportive student organizations, and how they felt their school could better support first years). A similar process was completed to select upperclassmen, with 15 upperclassmen and upperclasswomen being interviewed in total. Upperclassmen were asked similar questions to first-years, but the questions were asked in a reflective sense, asking students to think back on their time as first-years in hopes that this would provide a deeper student perspective.

Professors were sought out who interacted frequently with first year students: some professors teach a section of the GE-required First Year Writing classes, and others teach introductory level classes that are popular with first-years. A total of six professors were interviewed. Professors were asked about their experiences working with first-years, their observations of the stress levels of students in general and first-years specifically, how their department provides specific support for them, and changes they would like to see on campus to better support stressed first-years.

Representatives from five on-campus supportive student organizations were contacted for interviews as well, in hopes of understanding the available supports and resources available to St. Olaf students. These organizations were the Piper Center (career and vocational counseling center), the Academic Support Center, Boe House (counseling center), the Wellness Center, and Residence Life (which provides first-year-specific programming in first year dorms). These representatives were asked about the services and resources that their organization offers to all students as well as specific to first-years, how they perceive stress affecting students, limitations their organization faces in providing support to first-year students, and changes their organization could make to better support first-years.

Throughout our interviews, documentation, and analysis, we adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Institutional Review Board. All of our interview participants were provided with information about

the purpose and intent of our research. They were ensured that their identity would remain confidential and that their privacy was maintained, and all names used in this paper are pseudonyms. We emphasized that their participation in our interview was voluntary, explaining that no questions we asked were required. While our research was deemed low-risk by the Institutional Review Board, as we were asking questions about stress, we did not ask questions that we felt would be distressing to discuss, and worked to ensure that participants did not feel uncomfortable or pressured to discuss any topics they preferred to keep private.

## **PROBLEM & LITERATURE REVIEW**

The milestone of going to college can be a very exciting and positive experience. Young adults are given the chance to attain a higher education, live more independently and make their own decisions, get involved in a variety of new activities, establish new social relationships that for many last a lifetime, and develop and grow as a person. Despite all these positive aspects, college is not always the smooth sailing utopia that it is sometimes made out to be. These great experiences and opportunities can be the cause of great happiness, but the pressure to attain these can also be a source of stressful avenues in the life of college students. Much research has been completed to explore stress, especially as it affects students.

### **Stress**

“From a psychological point of view, mental stress is a cognitive and behavioral experience process constituted by mental stress sources and mental stress reactions together” (Ji 30). For students, stress often occurs when there are demands that maintain expectations beyond a student’s capabilities (Dyson and Renk 2006). Stress during the first college year is not always negative; the feeling of stress could aid first-years to adapt adequately to the new college environment. However, stress could be negative in the sense that it could manifest itself through depression. Pastor Koenig, who was the

associate College Pastor at St. Olaf College in 2011, explained to researchers that there are two main types of depression. The first is “clinical depression” which completely affects the student’s health. The second is “circumstantial depression”, which results from a more temporary but stressful situation including over-involvement in activities or obtaining a poor grade on an assignment (Kaszuba 2011). High academic ambitions play an immense role in stress among college students. According to researcher Lauren Sieben (2011), increased stress among college students might be due to an increase in the issues they come into college with. For example Sieben (2011) stated that “Of the freshmen surveyed, 75.8 percent rated their drive to achieve as above average or in the highest 10 percent and 29.1 percent said they felt overwhelmed in high school” (page number). Especially since college tuition is remarkably high, students feel the responsibility to give their parents an academic that is worth the money they are paying. Additionally, there is the belief that higher grades result in a higher chance of securing a job upon graduation (Sieben 2011).

Family relationships also affect a first year's stress levels. Most freshmen and freshwomen report more psychological dependencies on their parents as well as poorer social and emotional adaptation to life on campus. First year students may develop different belief systems than their family members (Dyson and Renk 2006), which can result in stress as the student reconciles contrasting world views. In their research on college students and stress, researchers Ji and Zhang (2011) determined that a combination of four factors result in stress: academic conditions, employment situations, personal factors (family relationships, interpersonal interactions, self-care ability) and economic conditions.

Stressed students often manifest their stress in physical, mental, and social ways. Manifestations of stress include but are not limited to hostility, anxiety, paranoid ideation, depression, obsessive-compulsive, and phobic anxiety (Jee-Sook). Other effects of stress, especially among college students include loneliness, difficulty in establishing social relationships, overwhelming anger, and difficulty handling career-related issues (Kaszuba 2011).

## Coping

With extensive research that has been conducted on the effects of stress, researchers have found that students experience and deal with stress in various ways. Marcia Roe Clark (2005: 302), in her research on college first-years, noted that student's stressors and challenges "reflected four broad themes: overcoming an obstacle, seizing an opportunity, adapting to change, or pursuing a goal." She also notes that "similar challenges did not necessarily yield similar strategies among...participants" (306). Individual students, when faced with varying stressors, will use different types of coping mechanisms as they face these challenges. Clark emphasized that the types of coping mechanisms or strategies that students choose are influenced by a range of circumstances, including their perceived obligations, resources available to them, student's perceptions of their options, persistence, and confidence. All of these varying factors point to the individualistic quality of stress and coping. Despite the lack of across-the-board uniformity when discussing stress, researchers continue to study coping mechanisms and styles, and much research exists on the subject.

Chartier, Gaudreau, and Feeteau (2010) conducted research on coping strategies, determining two categories of coping styles: *task-oriented coping* and *disengagement-oriented coping*. Task-oriented coping involves directly facing and dealing with stressors, and "encompasses strategies such as seeking support, increased effort, cognitive reappraisal, relaxation, and planning" (45). Disengagement-oriented coping can also be called "avoidance coping." It occurs when an individual withdraws and avoids facing their stress, and can "include strategies such as denial, behavioral disengagement, and venting of unpleasant emotions" (45). This type of coping can actually increase student stress, rather than decreasing it (Dyson and Renk 2006).

Some students may seek counseling as a resource during their time of stress. At colleges, the National Survey of Counseling Center Directors recommends that most colleges have a counseling-staff-to-student-ratio of one to 1,000-1,500 (Sieben 2011). Sieben reports, however, that most colleges have

a ratio of closer to one to 1,600, and that many college's counseling centers are far overbooked, with students interested in receiving counseling services being forced to wait for months before they can get an appointment. For the sake of comparison, at St. Olaf College, the counseling center has 13 staff members for 3,176 students (in the 2012-2012 school year) resulting in a ratio of a staff-to-student ratio of one to 244.

Students may also find that spirituality assists them in coping with stress. Researcher Jessie Hayman (2009) conducted research on 433 first year college students, who completed a quantitative instrument called the Faith Maturity Scale, which measures "the degree to which a person embodies the priorities, commitments, and perspectives characteristic of vibrant and life-transforming faith." She found that spirituality could significantly affect student's experience struggling with stress and self-esteem issues. "Spirituality had a significant stress-buffering effect for participants experiencing negative life events...even though self-esteem and stress had a negative relationship, spirituality was able to buffer this effect" (66). With spiritual activities like prayer or meditation, she found that students could use spirituality to serve as a coping mechanism to combat stress.

These examples represent student coping mechanisms that have recently been studied by researchers. Overall, students cope with stress via the formation of some type of strategy, whether that is ignoring and refusing to acknowledge their stress, or actively working to combat it. Clark (2005) summarizes the need for these coping strategies well by stating that "students' college transition experience includes an active process of strategizing... Students responded by devising strategies to address those challenges and accommodate the related influences... in many instances, colleges would enhance first-year student's success by being intentional about understanding students' strategy patterns and helping them to devise effective strategies." (310)

## **Family & Individuation**

In the body of research on college student stress, many researchers have focused on the student transition from high school to college, and the resulting separation of children and parents. For many incoming college freshmen and freshwomen, the first eighteen years of life is spent at home under the guidance of their parents. Parent-child interactions while living together can lead to relationship dynamics that vary across a spectrum, from distant parent child relationships without strong emotional attachment to families that maintain a high level of emotional connectedness between parents and children.

When dealing with stress as a college first year, some researchers have found that the level of stress the student is experiencing has a direct correlation to the level of attachment that the student has to his mother or father. In these instances, a closer parental relationship or connection is associated with lower levels of stress (Tick, and Ee 2007). Whether this is a coping mechanism or just an outlet to perceive stress differently, levels of stress have been measured to be lower to those that have strong relationships with their parents. Other research agrees, as it has been found that first year students coming into college with high levels of family connectedness demonstrated a better psychological well-being than those with low connectedness to their parents (Yelle, Kenyon, and Koerner 2009). In this study, psychological well-being not only encompassed the degree of psychosomatic illness, but also the depression level of the student.

Further research has investigated whether gender plays a role in student individuation from parents. These results found that women with close connections to their parents have a greater positive effect on their psychological distress and adaptation to college stresses than do men with equally strong ties to their parents (Kenny, and Donaldson 1991). While it seems evident that parental attachment seems to be a lucid predictor of the stress of college first years, some find it to be not nearly as important as other relationship factors that can cause stress. These include peer, community, and

mentor relationships with individuals in the student's life (Frey, Beesley, and Miller 2006). Because no two students will experience stress in the same way (Clark 2005), it makes sense that student stress can be altered by a range of sources, from the new friends and community a student meets at their college, to the level of connection and support they receive from their parents.

### **St. Olaf and Stress**

Since this study aims to study stress and the first year experience at St. Olaf, it is also important to note the prior research that has been reported with regards to the mental health of St. Olaf students. During the spring of 2010, St. Olaf participated in the ACHA-National Collegiate Health Assessment II (Kaszuba 2010). The results explored the mental health of St. Olaf students, comparing mental health statistics of St. Olaf students to those of the national college student average. With regards to reporting stress related feelings, in 2010 St. Olaf recorded higher averages of students reporting being overwhelmed, lonely, and sad (92%, 68%, and 69.7%) in comparison to the student nationwide averages (86.4%, 57%, and 62%). The report further indicates that these feelings could be due to the high participation in different organizations on campus as displayed in the number of St. Olaf students who are involved in varsity athletics, club sports, and intramurals (18.6%, 18.2%, and 46.1%) in comparison to the national average participation rate for these extracurricular activities (8%, 10.4%, and 20.8%). St. Olaf also recorded a higher percentage of students who sought help for depression: 12%, with the national average at 10.1%. Other startling numbers that put St. Olaf above average in the mental health category included the percent of people that felt that social relationships (outside of family and intimate ones) were difficult to handle, with 30.9% of St. Olaf students reporting this sentiment in comparison to the national average of 24.6%.

In this same mental health report there were also statistics that demonstrated better-than-average aspects of mental health of St. Olaf students. The study showed that only 17.7% of St. Olaf students have had a difficult time handling career-related issues in the past 12 months, compared to the

national average of 25.3%. In addition, only 17.8% of St. Olaf students cited having family related problems in the past 12 months while the national average found 26.3% of students to report dealing with family problems. Although these numbers indicate that St. Olaf students may have stronger family relationships and career readiness than the national average, the unfortunately high rates of depression, anxiety, and being overwhelmed at St. Olaf speak to a stressful atmosphere that is incorporated into the college.

These statistics set the scene for our own research, which seeks to explore the stress and mental health experiences of St. Olaf first-years. With high stress rates at St. Olaf, we focus our research on the new class of students as they are being socialized and assimilated into the St. Olaf community. We hope that we can determine some of the causes for the high stress rates on campus, and ultimately provide suggestions to campus resources for how they can better support St. Olaf students.

## **FINDINGS & ANALYSIS**

### **What Stresses Oles Out**

Not to our surprise, the first-year experience was comprised of many different categories of stressors that varied from student to student. Reported stressors by students varied as people instinctively perceive and deal with stress in different fashions as well as to different degrees. Despite this variation from student to student, there remained recurring themes of stressors for St. Olaf students. After careful analysis of what first-years reported we comprised a list of four principal categories of stressors that students experienced. This list includes class registration, over-involvement in extracurricular activities, establishing a social life, and academics.

#### *Registration*

At St. Olaf, first year students arrive to campus during a week-long orientation experience known as “Week One.” During this period of time, students move into their dorms, say goodbye to their

parents and families, get to know their roommates and peers, and meet with their academic advisor to plan for their course registration. All of these activities and aspects of the week represent exciting and challenging events for students, but many of the students that we talked to looked back on their Week One experience with memories of stress, specifically relating to course registration. This is especially cumbersome to first-years due to the fact that they have to register for classes 2 days before they begin taking them. St. Olaf professor Rachel Miller describes it as a time of “high stakes” as they frantically meet with their advisors and deal with the confusing “computerized game of registration.” Miller compared the registration experience for St. Olaf first year students to those at other colleges and universities, most of whom register for their courses months before they arrive to campus.

At the time of our interviews, St. Olaf students were going through the process of registration once again, making it a topic fresh in the minds of students. This could explain why so many students brought up registration, but regardless it is important to note the identification of this stressful event for all St. Olaf students, particularly first year students. Because the classes students choose will be affected by their specific major or their intended career, first year students can often feel that they need to have their future completely planned out in order to successfully register. Registration can feel like a high-stakes experience, especially if students are unable to get into the courses they hope for. First-year student Nigel expressed that registration has been one of his most stressful experiences while at St. Olaf. “The decision-making process for classes is so immense. If I do not start taking prerequisites for my major now I will not have time to take all the classes needed to graduate.”

### *Extracurricular Involvement*

Another significant source of stress for St. Olaf students was being over-involved in extracurricular activities. St. Olaf provides a wide variety of extracurricular activities for its students and St. Olaf students generally are known for their desire to be involved outside of the classroom. Not only are these extracurricular activities provided but students reported that although not *mandatory* “there

is this sense on campus that you need to be involved at all times.” This is an example of Foucault’s discourse, as discussed earlier. Students construct a sense of expectations and pressure from their peers, and they discourse about the stressful expectations they feel. Interestingly, as they talk about sensing this pressure, they are further constructing this expectation for themselves and each other. With this pressure and expectation to go above and beyond in extracurricular involvement, students often experience a feeling of being overwhelmed as many students, similar to Sophia, reported that they are “involved in ten million extracurriculars--as most Oles are!” Many students addressed their perception of most of their peers being over-involved, even to a point of unhealthiness. As student Sierra describes it “St. Olaf really has a culture where it feels like a necessity to be stressed and busy. We’re told you’re not doing enough if you get a full night’s sleep, eat well, and are not always busy.” It is a double sided sword as students who are not as involved feel the stress and pressure to get involved, while those who are overly involved find themselves stressed in being a part of too many organizations. For first year students this social pressure is eminent as most are adjusting to campus life. Adapting to the social and environmental pressure of being very involved in extracurriculars can lead to a high amount of stress.

### *Social Life*

Many students worry about fitting in with their friends, but this worry can be particularly stressful during the first college year, when most students arrive on campus without any existing friendships. “Freshmen stress revolves more around finding good social relationships and trying to fit in”, said first-year Jake who spent his first semester working on social relationships prioritizing finding a group of “really good friends.” For fresh-woman Kelsey, signing up for a slew of new activities and campus organizations provided her with a means of finding a social circle, fulfilling her desire “to have a distinct niche and find my place.” In our interviews during mid-second semester, many of our first-year interviewees reported having found that niche and establishing a good group of friends, but many also

expressed that relationships were not given and you had to go out of your comfort zone in order to find people you can relate to and form bonds with. With the large student body this can be stressful as first years come to realize it is impossible to meet everybody and it can be difficult finding out that people that you thought might be your good friends really are not. In addition one of St. Olaf's big selling points, advertised in admissions materials and told to students over and over again, is that Olaf is not only a school but also a community. This idea of community helps elicit the notion that St. Olaf is a place where great relationships will be made as students will work and grow together in their college experience in education and relationship. This is part of the St. Olaf package that students not only expect but want to experience, which helps illustrate why struggling with these relationships can be a cause of great stress for first year students. Having gone through one semester of school many of the freshmen and freshmen reported having stable friend groups as most noted that the social relationships have been amongst their best experience so far in college. In terms of stress many first-year students also noted how these relationships can be a great means of relieving stress as well. The stress-relieving elements of a solid friend group further illuminates why students who have not yet found a social circle may be more stressed, and why they may continue to feel stress and pressure as they continue to pursue their social niche.

### *Academics*

One of the areas of highest stress reported by students was St. Olaf academics. When bringing it up amongst interview participants, nearly every student mentioned academics as a source of stress. With the college continuing to increase its admissions standards, becoming more competitive each year, current students report high academic expectations. Students feel stress through the workloads that they are given in their courses. Mike, a first-year at St. Olaf, believes "stress is an inevitable thing with regards to academics at St. Olaf. There is no way to rid it completely from your system." Similar to student's perception of extra curricular activities, almost everyone surveyed felt that there were

academic expectations that exist at St. Olaf. First-year Kelsey shared that “if you were chosen to be here at St. Olaf, you should have the ability to succeed. But I do know some who transferred because of the academics, and it is stressful.”

The expectations are high at St. Olaf, and we asked students to ponder where these academic expectations arise from. Although parents, professors, and advisors play a role in formulating these expectations it was often found that fellow students were the main source of these expectations. Jake, a first-year at St. Olaf, describes the academic environment as “being put in a atmosphere where students are competitive and doing really well, which in turn makes you want to try much harder.” Another student, Matthew, is on the pre-med track. He started his first year by taking a combined biology/chemistry course, filled with first year students who had similar career motivations. He recalled that at the beginning of the term, it felt as though all of the students had such high expectations for each other; there was a strong sense of competition among all the students, which lead to a rather stressful atmosphere. Many students become prone to adapting to fit into this competitive environment, fitting themselves into the constructed expectation of stress that is perpetuated by discourse relating to it. While these academic expectations maintain St. Olaf’s level of academic excellence, they also contribute to great academic stress among students.

### **Students who are not stressed**

This study intended to measure stress at a school that we hypothesized to contain students with high stress levels, especially freshmen and freshwomen. What we did not anticipate in our data collection was a number of students reporting that they were not stressed at all. Not only were there people that shared these feelings of non- stress with us, but the majority of these people were in fact first year students. For first-years like Ned, things like academics and his social life are not overwhelming and stressful. He stated, “I can not remember a week this year where I have been stressed about anything.” Other first-years reported similar feelings, as first-year Austin shared that “he gets nervous

before test, but I would not categorize it necessarily as being stressed.” As explained earlier, prior research states that student stress is often caused when there are demands that maintain expectations beyond a student’s capabilities (Dyson 2006). Many first year students reported that their college experience has been an on going adjustment process as they learn how to successfully and healthfully be a St. Olaf student. This social and academic adjustment had been stressful for many of the stressed freshmen and freshwomen, but in the case of these unstressed first years the adjustment may have been less difficult because they are equipped with the proper means of dealing with the many new changes that college brings. Whether these unstressed students came to college with stronger study habits or social skills, or are able to better manage their stress, these students’ capabilities seem to exceed the expectations set for them, allowing them to avoid stress.

In Ned’s example, he shared that “academics are only stressful if you do not have a good system of getting all the work done.” He went on to say that since he figured out how to handle his studies, his academics have not been stressful at all. For Austin he shared that his house was no more than 5 minutes away from St. Olaf’s campus, and that most of his family attended school at St. Olaf. This familiarity both through close proximity and family legacy could bring him to a better understanding of how to handle this transition in life. The majority of students are under the belief that higher grades result in a higher chance of securing a job upon graduation (Sieben 2011), which provides huge motivation for people to push themselves to the limit at school. It could be that in the case of these non stressed first year students that since the occupational portion of their life seems in the distant future that they do not hold this same perception about their grades, and in turn do not feel this stress that many college students experience.

### **Stress in First Year Students Compared to Upperclass Students**

We found that the stress experienced among first-years was distinct from the stress experienced by sophomores, juniors, and seniors. First-year Matthew explains the difference by stating

that “stress for all college kids is about looking towards the future. For first years, those are more college years, with perhaps a glimmer of what’s after, but I have to realize I can’t decide too much about that now, and I need to focus on college while I’m here. For upperclass students and especially seniors, their stress is about looking toward life after college, where you have to think about jobs and houses.” Professor Rachel Miller believes that first year students have a unique situation in that for the first time in their lives, they are learning how to deal with stress without the embodied comforts of their home. These comforts include accessibility to comfort foods, a familiar home and community environment, and family members who may be there to listen to or hug students when they are overwhelmed. Whereas, “juniors and seniors share many of the same stressors as freshmen,” Miller said, “but freshmen don’t have patterns of safety and security established yet as they’re new to the Olaf community, and that can be alienating.” Without an established safety net of supportive friends or stress-reducing habits, first year students find themselves in uncomfortable, new situations without sure methods of stress reduction. This aligns with previous research that specified how the adjustment process during the college first year can increase student stress (Siddiqui 2009).

First-year student Kelsey testifies to this higher level of stress. She says that the reason for her increased stress was that during her first year at St. Olaf she struggled to find her identity within such an unfamiliar environment. Kelsey realized that she over-involved herself in activities because she was “trying to have a distinct role and find my place on campus.” Kelsey felt that in the fall, she was involved in so many activities that she began to feel different from who she was in high school, where she had been involved with theater and music. Now, on the Rugby team and involved with Residence Life and Student Government, she struggled to integrate her high school identity with the opportunities and activities she was engaging with on campus. Therefore Kelsey’s stress resulted from the struggles of adjusting to St. Olaf and finding a niche away from home. However, as Professor Miller stated most upperclassmen and upperclasswomen would not have to face this struggle. The good thing is that Kelsey

was able to find a way to manage her stress and her case did not deteriorate into a more serious mental health dilemma.

As first year students worked to find their place on campus, one element that they often sought during the beginning of their first year is working to define their social life by finding groups of friends. Many first-years reported this as a difficulty and stressor more so at the beginning of their first semester, as they began to get to know and connect with their peers. Sophia found that it was often difficult to develop close friendships on campus. “Everyone is so busy that they don’t really have time to develop meaningful connections,” she explained. Though she has a few close friends, she stated that she has closer relationships with professors. Similarly, when reflecting upon his first year at St. Olaf, Charlie remembered having a difficult and stressful time finding friends during his first year. “I had a couple friends from high school, who eventually introduced me to the friends I have now,” he explained. “But for a while, I didn’t fit in well in my dorm, and it was harder to find a place to fit in. There was a lot of loneliness.” Throughout his college years, Charlie now has an established friend group and has grown a lot more comfortable initiating conversations with peers, but he still empathizes with the social uncertainty that first years face.

Another reason for increased stress among first year students is that for the first time, most St Olaf first years are living away from their families. Research shows that it is beneficial for a first-year to remain emotionally attached to the parents but to be functionally independent from the parents (Yelle 3009). Different first years found ways to maintain or balance the relationship with family and that with their peers on-campus. Kelsey, for example, has noticed that as a first-year she has been loving her independence while simultaneously missing her family. She said that she values her parents and her family more since coming to college, and that she misses them a lot when she’s away. Simultaneously, when she goes home to visit, she starts to miss her independence from college, and gets irritated with her parents pretty quickly. Greg, a current senior, reflected on his first-year experience as a much-

appreciated opportunity to develop some independence from his family. He explained that his parents split up during his senior year of high school, and that it felt great to move out and “start over” in some ways. He didn’t talk to his parents for a couple months, and while they now call or text every couple weeks, he has maintained a pretty separate lifestyle from his parents. These represent just two examples of St. Olaf students’ adjustments to living apart from their families, and each student will have a unique experience. It is important to note that a student’s adjustments to living away from home can vary due to a number of factors including their family situation at home, their individual characteristics, and their personality traits.

### **How Oles Cope or do not Cope with their Stress**

St. Olaf students deal with stress differently. Many students reported exercising as a great stress reliever. Andrew stated that “working out has always been a great way to relieve stress for him because it is a time in the day that you can just forget everything thing that’s stressing you out and just focus on the goals you set out for yourself when you go to work out.” First-year Matthew also exercises every day as a way to stay healthy and keep stress levels down. The mental benefits of aerobic exercise are neurochemical. This is because exercise reduces the levels of the body’s stress hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline. It also induces the production of endorphins, natural painkillers and mood elevators produced in the brain (Exercising, 2011). Additionally, when the student’s body is working hard, he or she will be distracted from the stress and worries of life on and off the hill.

Other first year and upperclass students refer back to their friend group for support and emotional upheaval during stressful times. First-years reported that having a good friend group is a great way to deter the stress they are having. For example, Mike shared that “it is great to have a solid friend group that you can go to and talk about what is stressing you if you want, or talk about other things to take your mind off the stress.” Other Oles deal with academic stress simply by addressing

whatever they have to do. Junior John deals with stress by making a “big ol’ list” with all he has to do. Then he allocates time to each activity/task and makes sure he gets it done.

While most students find ways to deal with their stress, some don’t feel they have time to manage it. “I don’t deal with my stress,” first year Sophia admitted. “I repress it; I really don’t have time to be self-indulgent.” Sophia felt that she was so busy that she didn’t have free time to be able to deal with her stress, and she usually would try to ignore it, continuing to move forward with school work and extracurricular obligations until she hit a breaking point. “I just move from one crisis to the next until we get to a break from school, when I just crash and sleep for ten hours a day.” Similarly, Ellen, an upperclasswoman, reports that she does not deal with her stress. “I just let it overtake me.” She has tried using different strategies and sought the assistance of the Boe House to look for solutions but still has not found a flawless stress reducing technique that works for her. Upperclasswoman Katie also sometimes deals with the issue of relieving stress as she notes that “sometimes I do not even have time to try and release stress.” Upperclasswoman Samantha sees stress relief as a very big challenge. She believes that “relieving stress is hard because people tell you to relax and calm down when getting the stress off you is often getting the work done, giving you no time to relax.”

### **How Professors Recognize Stress on Campus**

Professors have a unique perspective on student stress, as they are able to continuously interact with students throughout a semester. All the professors we interviewed reported observing levels of stress among their students that were often startling or worrisome. Professor Miller, a writing professor, states that she has grown accustomed to recognizing stress in her students, noticing the physical manifestations of their stress. She observes student’s weight loss and change in hygiene habits due to lack of sleep or spare time. As a writing scholar, Miller can also notice student’s stress via their writing styles, either in writing assignments or in emails her students send to her. She explained that stressed writing styles are manifested in linguistic incoherence and a harried, frazzled tone to their

writing. Psychology Professor Rickshaw notices the way students speak, paying attention to how their expressions and their choice of words reflect their stress levels.

Some professors believe that although stress at St. Olaf is remarkably high, the school only reflects what is prevalent in the American society at large. Sociology Professor Rebecca Smith sees stress as an American cultural dilemma. She believes that it would be valuable for students to understand that stress occurs throughout our culture, so that they don't personalize it, but rather perceive it as a societal issue. Smith acts as an academic advisor to students each year, and she has observed students who have extreme cases of stress. She has found that in modern society, stress revolves around the idea that one needs a "good package" for one's future career. She also suspects stress is worsened in some ways by technology. "Facebook, texting, and the social expectation that you should be constantly available for these things, make it hard for students because they may be better off focusing on their courses and studies."

In order to address stress among students, Professor Miller and Professor Rickshaw, among other professors, often use the campus-wide Continuous Report System, or CRS, to document student stress. The CRS is a report that any faculty can use to submit concerns about students. The report is sent to the Dean of Students as well as the student's academic advisor. The faculty member making the report can decide if they want the student to be notified or contacted based on the report, or if they'd prefer to keep it confidential, simply documenting the student's behavior. "If I have 60-90 students per semester, I'll submit between seven and ten CRS reports," Miller explained, although she doesn't believe most faculty members utilize this system at all. Miller's academic background teaching high school in an urban setting, where abuse and violence were common, make her more sensitive to utilizing the available resources to best support her students. At the high school she taught at, "it was a post-Columbine world, and we were told to document all abnormal behaviors," she elaborated, explaining that she would always prefer to get students help and support earlier rather than later. The

CRS program available at St. Olaf acts as one possible resource to get students the help and support they need during stressful times. However, many campus resources are not able to be utilized to their full potential as will explain later on.

### **Stress Resources on Campus: How Students Understand and Utilize Them**

Another important element of our research was the way in which St. Olaf students understood and utilized the different support centers on campus that in some way or another help students with their stresses. We focused on four campus resources: the Boe House (St. Olaf's counseling center), the Academic Support Center, the Piper Center, and the Wellness Center. Through our interviews we found that although most students are vaguely familiar with their existence, the majority of them tend to not utilize these establishments that St. Olaf offers in order to help their students.

#### *Boe House*

The counseling center, known as "Boe House" on campus, had been attended by a few of our student interviewees. However, the majority of the students we talked to were unfamiliar with the details of who would go to Boe House, or the services offered there. This could be due to lack of advertising, as many first year students reported that they heard it mentioned during Week One but hadn't seen it advertised or openly talked about since, and could no longer remember what function it served. The students that used this center reported positive experiences with it when they were able to get appointments, but scheduling such an appointment could take weeks. Sophia, a first-year who was diagnosed last fall with PTSD, bipolar disorder, and a sleep disorder, often tries to utilize this center as much as she can but says that it usually take two to three months to schedule an appointment. Burnhart, a psychologist at the Counseling center, referred to the wait students have to endure to get in as "a big problem with no easy solution."

First-year Kelsey, although feeling that she could benefit from the Boe House, felt intimidated to go and use this resource. Other students expressed this same sentiment as they felt that this center was

only for extreme cases and that although they struggled with stress, they did not perceive themselves as having the kind of problems that warranted a counselor appointment. Professor Smith of the sociology department also recognized intimidation as a big problem for students. She stated how it does not seem right Boe House is out in the open on St. Olaf Avenue, as it made walking into the counseling center public. "It is right in the middle of the open, and for your peers to be able to watch you walk into a place that is synonymous for having problems is something that no one wants to be subjected to," she elaborated. Students' hesitation to going to a counseling center demonstrates an existing stigma against mental health disorders.

### *Academic Support Center*

A couple of students mentioned using this student resource center for help with their academic stress. When she was a first-year, student Samantha said, "I went to Academic support center because I needed a tutor. I left with a lecture on new study habits, and no tutor." She was unhappy with this experience and said that first-years who need tutors generally express that it is very difficult to get a tutor when you are a first year. When she went back when she became an upperclasswoman a tutor was provided for her through a much easier process. Many students, both first year and upperclass students, did not know much about the Academic Support Center, and few knew specifically about the tutoring and academic services it provides, although a few guessed on it's function based on it's name. Many upperclassmen and upperclasswomen interviewed were completely unaware of the location of this center, despite the fact that it is located in Buntrock Commons, the same student commons building where students eat meals and pick up their mail.

### *Piper Center*

The Harry C. Piper Center for Vocation and Career, known as the "Piper Center," was not mentioned or utilized by any of the first-years that we interviewed. A few upperclass students discussed using the Piper Center as a resource for compiling resumes or cover letters as they applied to summer

jobs or internships. Students all seemed to generally understand that the Piper Center was the on-campus career center, but many students seemed uncertain about what specific services were offered. No students discussed using the Piper Center as a means of relieving stress.

### *Wellness Center*

Many first year students were unsure of where the Wellness Center was located or what it's function as a student resource was, and only one upperclassman mentioned using the Wellness Center as a resource for stress reduction. A upperclassman we interviewed worked at the Wellness Center himself, and would go into the Wellness Center to talk to his fellow Peer Advisors when he felt stressed. Upperclassmen and upperclasswomen seemed generally familiar with the Wellness Center because attending Wellness Center events is a requirement for many physical education GE courses. Beyond attending these events and information sessions, students did not seem aware of what the Wellness Center did and were generally confused about how they could benefit from this resource.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **Implications for campus resources: our suggestions**

Our interviews provided us with the perspectives of students, professors, administrators, and staff. After explaining to us how they individually experienced student stress, or how they observed stress in first year and upperclass students, our interviewees were each asked what realistic changes they could imagine that would reduce the stress level among students and first-years. Each person had ideas for potential changes, and here we conclude our research with a summary of the suggestions from our interviewees.

### *For Professors*

Professor Miller discussed how she utilizes the CRS system to document students' stress and to make reports on students that she believes should be contacted by their advisor or dean. She thinks that

professors should actually be encouraged to make student reports on this system. This would help academic supports, like the Dean of Students and academic advisors, to be better tuned into student's stressors and to offer the students support when they need it and could allow for the college to help students get to the campus resources they need.

Students overall seemed hesitant to blame other students for their stress; they seemed to feel that generally, professors' expectations and the academic workload at St. Olaf were reasonable. However, Ethan Burnhart at the counseling center did have some suggestions for how professors could better support students and assist with stress reduction via the classroom. "Breaks really need to be breaks for students. One of the worst things about stress is when it is ongoing with no relief, and when it is unpredictable. Professors should avoid assigning big papers or exams to be due after a break, and they should write a clear syllabus and avoid surprising students."

### *Suggestions for Week One*

Professor Miller suggested a re-structuring of Week One for first-years. Rather than a busy, "packed to the gills" schedule, she pondered, "wouldn't it be nice if Week One were a nice, relaxing time?" Reflecting on her own observations that the hyper-busy schedule of Week One sets students up for an expectation of a hyper-busy college routine, she suggested allowing plenty of downtime for students to unpack, socialize, get to know their corridor peers, and explore campus. Rather than filling Week One with intimidating information sessions about sexual assault and alcohol poisoning, she suggested facilitating discussions where these topics could be thoughtfully deliberated and absorbed, and continuing those discussion formats throughout the year. These topics can be intimidating, and Miller felt that students get overwhelmed if they have to quickly memorize a powerpoint presentation about how to deal with a situation like this. She felt that providing space for deliberation, conversation, and experience-sharing would be better suited to helping students absorb information and connect with each other.

### *Campus Resources*

Professor Smith also felt that “the school tries to throw too much down the throat of freshmen during freshman week.” She felt that with so much information being presented to students quickly, they are not able to really understand and remember what campus resources are available, where they are located, and how to access them. This aligned well with our findings of many first year students and upperclass students. Almost all of the students we interviewed were uncertain about what all of our campus resources did. When asked about their involvement with the Piper Center, Academic Support Center, Wellness Center, and Boe House, students usually understood a couple of these resources but did not know about all four of them.

For example, Charlie, a senior, felt that it would be beneficial for campus services to “get their name out there a lot more.” He vaguely remembered learning about resources like the Wellness Center, Boe House, and the Piper Center during his Week One experience, but he felt it was too jam-packed with information that he didn’t remember the resources when he needed them later. Additionally, nearly every student we interviewed suggested that campus resources should better advertise themselves. This would continue to remind students what they do, who can access them and how to do so, and where they are located. Students also felt that continued advertising could make resources like the Academic Support Center or Boe House seem more “normal,” helping to decrease the stigma on campus associated with requiring and accessing academic or mental support.

#### *For the Academic Support Center*

Senior Greg suggested that the hours for campus resources like the Academic Support Center be expanded to include evening hours. Reflecting on his own first year on campus, he remembered being busy during the day with classes, lessons, and appointments, but he usually left his evenings unscheduled so that he would have time for homework. Knowing other students who structure their days similarly, he felt that having evening hours would allow students to access this service at a time

when they didn't have conflicts and were already focusing on homework. Brianna at the Academic Support Center already works over-time. She mentioned that the Academic Support Center still does not have enough staff and resources to fulfill the needs of students who come in. She mentioned that students often walk away frustrated and more stressed when they come in multiple times a week seeking one-on-one tutoring or assistance but there is no one available to help them.

### *For Boe House*

Many students mentioned that Boe house needs more staff so that the students who currently want to access it can get the regular appointments they need. Already overbooked, the counseling center does not advertise on campus because it cannot handle an additional influx of students. However, the lack of advertising leads many students to forget that Boe House exists when they need it, and creates an air of mystery and a stigma against the students who need to go to Boe House.

First Year Sophia recommended that Boe House initiate a peer counseling program. While the Wellness Center may be intended to work in this way, the Wellness Center is perceived as a group of students who put on information programs, and is not frequented by students who have more serious counseling needs. Instead, students who were unable to get appointments at Boe House, could be encouraged to talk with a peer counselor in the time before their appointment. Sophia's idea would make the peer counseling program more similar to campus EMT's. Students would complete an intensive training program and be available on-campus for scheduled appointments. Sophia felt that she often would benefit from just talking to someone, and believed that many students would take advantage of a Peer Counseling program.

### *Funding*

Overall, many of the staff and coordinators of campus resources cited funding as the main limitation that prevented their organization from serving the number of students they need to. Most of the counselors and staff at Boe House work just part-time and have to schedule weeks or months out at

a time; at the Piper Center, Sarah Matthews expressed that budget concerns limit the number of students they can support; the Academic Support Center cited that they cannot hire enough staff to meet their needs. We have found that many of the resources on campus are able to help students who come to their organization, reducing student and first year students stress significantly. However, without greater resources allocated to these stress-reducing organizations, there will remain a stressed-out portion of the student body who are unable to access the resources they want to. We recommend that St. Olaf College significantly consider the high rates of stress on this campus, and work to allocate more resources to on-campus resources that support students in this situation.

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