

Sophomores, How Are You Doing? The Impact of Friendship and Belonging on Social Thriving

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Executive Summary

In the fall of 2019, the Sociology/Anthropology 371 course conducted research on sophomore thriving at St. Olaf College. We sent an anonymous online survey to all 764 sophomores and received 248 responses (32.5%). Our sample reflects many demographics of the student body, and it matches the “rule of thumb” for a 30% sample of a population of 1,000 or less.

Prior research has found that social connectedness, diverse citizenship, and a strong sense of belonging all contribute to social thriving. Our research focuses on four main questions:

1. To what extent does friendship play a role in sophomore social thriving?
2. To what extent is there a sense of belonging among sophomores?
3. To what extent do sophomores form friendships with those who are similar to or different from themselves?
4. To what extent do sophomores perceive the institution as effectively fostering a sense of belonging?

The most important results of our research are as follows:

- Sophomores with higher quality friendships have higher levels of thriving.
- Sophomores report having a strong sense of belonging in general. Relatively speaking, students of color, students with disabilities, and first-generation students tend to report a weaker sense of belonging.
- White students have more racial/ethnic homogeneity in their friendships than students of color.
- Although a majority of sophomores indicate feeling that the institution responds well to incidents of discrimination and crisis, approximately one-fourth of respondents feel the institution does not. This finding highlights issues in the effectiveness of institutional support where marginalized students are concerned.
- Sophomore friend groups have a tendency to be homogenous.

Based on our research, we offer four recommendations:

1. Educate faculty on the obstacles faced by students of color, students with disabilities, and first-generation students.
2. Collect student feedback on the college’s responses to incidents of identity-based discrimination and sexual assault/violence.
3. Help sophomore cultivate friendships across identities without placing pressure on students from marginalized identity groups to assimilate into the dominant culture.
4. In order to promote students’ sense of belonging and of being valued by St. Olaf, the college could institute mandatory check-ins for sophomores with representatives of the college, such as class deans..

Background and Review of Literature

Thriving has become a growing interest in many institutions of higher education. According to Schreiner (2010), thriving is a multidimensional concept that refers to students who are fully engaged (intellectually, socially, and emotionally), are academically successful, and feel a sense of community. Colleges are paying more attention to the conditions that allow sophomores to thrive on college campuses. This increased focus can be explained by the finding that a high level of institutional commitment is positively associated with sophomore "involvement in the social and academic spheres of their college life" (Wang and Kennedy-Phillips 2013).

Past research has centered on topic areas including the effectiveness of high impact practices (Jolly 2016), retention rates (Wang and Kennedy-Phillips 2013), and thriving (Schreiner 2010). We will be focusing on social thriving, which includes faculty-student relationships, student leadership and extracurriculars, and friendship and belonging. While the above are necessary to examine in order to have a holistic picture of thriving, our research focuses specifically on sophomores' experiences of friendship and belonging.

Friendship

Prior research supports the idea that the type and quality of social relations is important to the overall social thriving of students (Vaccaro and Newman 2016). In their study of first-year students belonging to minoritized groups at a public university, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) found comfort and authenticity to be indicators of quality friendships. Authenticity in this case described how a network of friends supports a person's true identity, making one feel they can be their authentic self. Interestingly, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) also found a difference in how privileged and minoritized students perceive quality interactions. Privileged students were more likely to perceive casual interactions to be meaningful, while minoritized students desired to be around people who are less superficial (Vaccaro and Newman 2016). Schreiner's two-fold dimension of interpersonal thriving includes meaningful social connectedness, which involves "being in relationships with others who listen and experiencing a sense of community within the college environment" (Schreiner 2010). Furthermore, Schreiner posits that the development of these meaningful friendships results from students being more open and positive about social interactions with people who are different from themselves, which Schreiner terms "diverse citizenship." Our research strives to measure friendship quality in a way that includes important dimensions within friendships as well as the extent to which students are contributing to a diverse citizenship.

Schreiner's exploration of interpersonal thriving as a dimension of overall thriving is analogous to the social thriving we research. This domain of thriving includes meaningful social connections, as explained above, and diverse citizenship, meaning valuing differences and being interested in relating to people from varied backgrounds (Schreiner 2010). Because an essential domain of interpersonal thriving is diverse citizenship (Schreiner 2010), it is necessary to understand the socialization patterns of different demographic groups. Stearns et al. (2009) and explore the dimension of homophily, which is the widely accepted phenomena that people tend to form friendships with others who are most similar to themselves. Stearns et al. (2009) observed homophily's effects in white students and black students, while "Asian" and "Latino" students tended to have the most interracial friendships before and during college. The finding that black students showed a high degree of homophily is explained by Stearns et al. (2009) as the "cocooning effect," which is to say that black students, though more exposed to interracial friendships in general, tend to seek solidarity with those similar to themselves. The degree to which minoritized students feel discriminated against is a factor one must consider when trying

to understand patterns of friendship formation. Additionally, the racial and ethnic categorization within the work of Stearns et al. is not exhaustive and excludes the unique experience of international students.

Studies of friendship among college students have examined the processes by which first year students create social networks in their environments. Wang and Kennedy-Phillips (2013) discuss the critical role that on-campus spaces play in sophomore engagement. Specifically, they determine through their research that living on campus is positively associated with sophomore involvement in campus activities. The authors suggest that this finding may be related to the increased accessibility of social activities to students who live on campus. Stearns et al. (2009) analyze spaces on campus through the lens of propinquity, “the propensity to form relationships with others who share the same social situation.” In their investigation of the influence of propinquity on the formation of friendships in a college setting, the authors look to residence halls as a unique setting in which students interact and form bonds in an informal environment. Residence halls are an example of a closed environment in which students are exposed to sustained contact with one another. The scholarly literature suggests that this informal and intimate space may serve to put hallmates on an “equal footing in terms of status and provide a richer seedbed for forming friendships” as compared to other spaces across campus (Stearns et al. 2009). Stearns et al. also analyze the role residence halls play in the formation of interracial friendships. A primary finding from their research reveals that higher levels of intergroup mixing are observed when roommates are matched randomly within residence halls. Students with a different-race roommate had a higher proportion of interracial friends as compared to students with a same race roommate. This trend is explained by the authors as the result of roommates serving as bridges into other friendship networks. Additionally, it was discovered that students reporting frequent cross-racial/ethnic friendships in residence halls had more interracial friends in total in comparison to students who did not foster those relationships within residence halls. Residence halls serve as deeply influential settings for the formation of student friendships.

Belonging

Studies of belonging among college students have explored the significance of a sense belonging to social thriving and examined how students perceive belonging on their college campus. Students’ sense of belonging on campus cannot be separated from their identities which may include race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion/faith, international and first-generation status. How an institution supports and responds to the identities present on their college campus is important in fostering an environment where students may establish a sense belonging (Means and Pyne 2017; Well and Horn 2017).

Previous research on the formation of a sense of belonging identifies being comfortable and fitting in as necessary conditions for fostering social thriving (Vaccaro and Newman 2016). Comfort is highlighted as a relational component that encompasses feelings of safety in physical spaces and around other individuals. Similarly, fitting in relates to students’ feeling like they are “part of the campus community” (Vaccaro and Newman 2016). The institution plays a role in creating platforms for students to establish meaning where “meaning making is not solely an individual process; the meaning that individuals attach to people, places, and processes is shaped by social forces that surround them” (Vaccaro and Newman 2016). The literature points to multicultural organizations and multicultural offices as spaces where students who identify as multicultural can freely express themselves and be comfortable. The sense of familiarity fostered by multicultural offices and student organizations provides students with a platform to become more self-aware as they find affinity with others through shared language, racial/ ethnic identities, and nationality (Means and Pyne 2017).

The importance of students' sense of belonging is stressed in previous research as necessary for social thriving on campus (Schreiner 2014; Vaccaro and Newman 2016; Well and Horn 2013). Belonging in this case is defined as the ability to be one's "authentic self" (Wang and Kennedy-Phillips 2013), feel physically safe on campus (Vaccaro and Newman 2016), and have their identities affirmed on campus (Vaccaro and Newman 2016). Students who belong to minoritized demographics may feel a diminished sense of belonging on predominantly white college campuses because they feel they are unwelcome or do not fit into the dominant groups on campus (Vaccaro and Newman 2016; Wang 2013; Well and Horn 2013). Perception of campus climate (Well and Horn 2013) is part of the split between how minoritized vs. privileged students experience a sense of belonging at their school, with privileged students describing a friendlier atmosphere than minoritized students of the same school (Vaccaro and Newman 2016).

Previous research suggests that the type of institution (community college or four-year institution) also has an impact on students' sense of belonging. Students attending four-year institutions had a higher sense of belonging than students who were attending community college. Four-year institutions have been more successful in fostering a sense of student belonging through different organizations, introduction weeks for new students, and on-campus housing (Stearns et al. 2009). However, this analysis does not take into consideration the 'othering' that occurs at four-year schools, particularly at predominantly white institutions such as St. Olaf College. Further, it fails to take into consideration the extent to which hegemonic structures that cater to the dominant group can affect the sense of belonging of minoritized students (Vaccaro and Newman 2016).

Additionally, prior research focuses on the differences in experience for privileged and minoritized students, highlighting the gaps that exist in how institutions provide support for different demographics (race/ethnicity, gender, nationality, etc.). Students' personal backgrounds, such as international student status, influence student ability to cultivate a sense of belonging at predominantly white institutions, as engagement with the norms/values of the majority population (domestic students) may reveal the cultural barriers that make establishing a sense of belonging for international students more challenging (Rivas, Hale, and Burke 2019). A further example lies in the difference in perceptions of the campus environments between white students and students of color. White students tended to describe their campus environment as "friendly, fun and comfortable" while students of color described feeling like they were being judged, treated differently, and in an environment where they could not always be "real" or their authentic selves (Vaccaro and Newman 2016).

Our Research

Most research on social thriving focuses on the impact of friendship and belonging for college students in all class years. Our research is limited to a single institution and focuses on the experiences of sophomore students. It aims to explore the extent to which friendship and belong impact social thriving and overall thriving for sophomore students at St. Olaf College.

Our research measures friendship and belonging in ways that include the concerns of minoritized students, ensuring that the environment fostered by the institution is taken into account. We explore the dimensions of meaningful social relationships and sense of community, their interactions with each other, and their effect on the overall thriving of St. Olaf sophomores. With the importance of a diverse citizenship in mind, we also measure the homogeneity of sophomore friendships as well as their overall quality.

Our research examines four questions:

1. To what extent does friendship quality affect sophomore social thriving?
2. To what extent are sophomores' friendships homogenous?
3. To what extent do sophomores feel a sense of belonging?
4. To what extent is the institution effectively fostering a sense of belonging?

Research Methods

Our study was part of a larger research project at St. Olaf College in the fall of 2019 examining the factors that contribute to sophomore thriving. Our section focused on social thriving, specifically examining friendship and belonging. We held a focus group comprised of both sophomores and juniors. Juniors were included as a means for them to reflect on their sophomore year and sensitize our research team to factors impacting the thriving of St. Olaf students. The focus group explored four main open-ended questions: (1) *What did the process of making friends at St. Olaf look like for you?* (2) *How have your friendships changed?*, (3) *What does belonging at St. Olaf look like to you?*, (4) *Is a sense of belonging essential part of thriving at St. Olaf? Why or why not?* Using information from our focus group and scholarly literature, we created a survey which we sent to the entire sophomore class (graduating class of 2022). To incentivize sophomores to participate, students could enter into a raffle to win \$20 Amazon or St. Olaf Bookstore gift cards. Approximately one-third of the sophomores who were sent the survey responded (248/764).

We focused on friendship and belonging with the following variables: friendship quality, factors that positively influence institutional commitment, perception of belonging on campus, sense of support for marginalized identities, and homogeneity of friend groups. When crafting our survey questions, our team utilized a matrix structure for many of our questions. Matrix questions include multiple items and response categories in one table formatted question, minimizing space on a survey and maximizing the ease of response (Neuman 2012).

As our team measured friendship on campus, we hoped to gain an understanding of how sophomores viewed reciprocity within their friendships on campus. Through our survey, we measured the extent of mutual support and listening within sophomore friendships. Further, we asked sophomores to indicate if their friendships have affected their level of loneliness on campus. We also measured the level of freedom respondents feel to be themselves in their friendships, and the extent to which sophomores see their friendships lasting beyond graduation. Participants were given a statement addressing each of the areas listed above, and were asked *To what extent do each of the following statements apply to your close St. Olaf friendships?* Response categories included: *To a very large extent, to a large extent, to a moderate extent, to a small extent, and not at all.* By analyzing the quality of friendship experienced by respondents, we could then test how significantly friendships affect social thriving.

In order to measure factors which positively influence institutional commitment, we focused on interpersonal aspects that contribute to students' likelihood of re-enrolling in St. Olaf College. By asking about the extent to which participants feel supported by St. Olaf through various identities, we were able to understand how the institution can bolster a sense of belonging for minoritized students on campus in order to create an environment of social thriving. Using a matrix, we asked participants about how supported they felt by the college in terms of their different identities: religious, sexual, gender, political, racial/ethnic, and ability. Participants answered *To what extent do you feel St. Olaf supports you in these aspects of your identity,*

selecting one answer from the following options for each identity listed: *To a very large extent, to a large extent, to a moderate extent, to a small extent, not at all, and not applicable.*

A concern voiced by focus group participants was the institutional role in fostering a sense of belonging. Students were concerned that they felt the institution was not supportive of all racial/ethnic groups, sexualities, and religious identities. Because of this, we created several indexes of belonging which include a measure of how well St. Olaf supports student identities and a measure of how well St. Olaf responds to identity-based discrimination and sexual assault/violence. Other measures of belonging include a measure of the extent to which students feel safe, comfortable, valued, respected, and proud of identifying as an "Ole". A high score in these categories indicates a strong sense of belonging.

Prior research focused on racial homophily, that is, the tendency for people of certain racial and ethnic categories to form friendships with each other. We measured homogeneity of friendships as a possible indicator of homophily, including a variety of identities that was more exhaustive. We measured political, racial/ethnic, disability, faith, sexual, and gender identities. We studied these areas to better understand the extent to which students form friendships with people who are similar to themselves.

Validity

Our research strives to attain a high level of content and face validity. Content validity analyzes the extent to which the full content of a definition is represented in a measure (Neuman 2012). In order to account for content validity, our group underwent an intensive conceptualization process to ensure that our research measured true manifestations of friendship and belonging on campus. This conceptualization process was guided by our professor, Ryan Sheppard, and our teaching assistant, Zipi Diamond. Our professor and teaching assistant also worked with us to assess our measures and help us achieve a high level of face validity. Achieving a high level of face validity demands that measurements are revised and approved by other researchers and experts (Neuman 2012). Thus, the inclusion of our professor and teaching assistant was critical for attaining face validity.

Reliability

Reliability is the dependability of answers, if they were to be repeated they would yield similar results (Neuman 2012). To ensure a high level of reliability, we conducted a pilot study to gain feedback on whether our indicators of belonging were clear to participants. We wished to be transparent in what we were measuring so as not to get varied answers based on participant interpretation. We did change several of our measures based on feedback from the pilot study. Additionally, we based our measures of friendship on prior studies, building on their conceptualization of friendship to include feedback from our focus group. Further, we created several indexes of belonging and several indicators of friendship quality due to the complex nature of both categories.

Sample and Sampling

Our target population was current sophomore students and excluded seniors, juniors and first years. These considerations left 764 students for sampling. We sent the survey to all sophomore students. To remind sophomores to complete the survey, research teams from our class held tabling sessions, made announcements in various student organizations and classes where sophomores may be present. To motivate students to participate, students could opt-in to be part of a drawing for gift cards by sending their name to Ryan Sheppard, indicating they had taken the survey. All responses and participants were anonymous. The survey was open for a week in November and we received a total of 248 responses resulting in a 32.5% response rate.

Respondents were asked to identify their race/ethnicity, domestic/international student, gender, and sexual orientation. In our sample of students who chose to identify their race/ethnicity, 71.5% identified as White/Caucasian, 1.4% as Black/African American, 1.4% Black/African, 1.9% Asian American, 6.1% Asian, 8% Latinx/Hispanic, and 9.4% multiracial/ethnic. Also, 91% of the sample were U.S. domestic students and 9% were international students. The gender distribution showed that of those who chose to respond, 71.4% identified as female, 25.6% as male, and 1.9% as transgender or non-binary. Of those that responded to how they label their sexual orientation, 76.5% identified as heterosexual/straight, 13.5% as bisexual, 2.6% gay/lesbian, 1% as asexual, 1.5% as pansexual, 3.1% as queer and 2% as questioning. In addition, 1% of respondents noted they were a transfer student, and 10% of respondents identified having a disability.

Ethics

To comply with St. Olaf's Institutional Review Board (IRB), our team was certified in CITI Program's "General Social and Behavioral Investigations" online course. We completed our courses individually but did so before we conducted our focus group and created our survey. This was done to ensure that we would avoid any harm, violations of privacy, and/or distress to participants in our focus group and those who took our survey.

Prior to beginning our focus group, we read a prepared statement from our team which explained our topic of interest (friendship and belonging), the nature of our procedure, and how we would receive consent from those participating. We received consent not from a written consent form, but by students choosing to stay and participate in the focus group. We also informed our participants that they were free to leave at any point in our focus group.

Our survey was administered through Form Creator, and we did not ask students to give identifying information beyond logging into Form Creator. We thereby protected respondents' information by making the survey anonymous. We did not have access to information as to who was taking the survey. Those who wished to be entered into a drawing for incentives sent their information separately to Ryan Sheppard, thereby ensuring anonymity by not including names with survey responses.

Questions were edited multiple times so that any threatening questions in relation to sexuality, ethnic, racial, gender, and any other minoritized identities, as well as questions regarding attitudes about St. Olaf College, would not cause participants distress. A threatening question is one that involves a topic which may make respondents uncomfortable (Neuman 2012).

Univariate Results and Discussion

We identified 15 items to use as measures of overall sophomore thriving. They included five dimensions, with three items in each dimension, as shown in Table 1. Respondents tended to cluster in the top two categories (more than half scored 4 or 5) for all of the positively worded items except *Tend to go beyond assignment requirements*, and they tended to cluster in the bottom two categories (more than half scored 1 or 2) for negatively worded items (*Regularly procrastinate on school work* and *Respond to stress by giving up or walking away*). However, as the table shows, some respondents scored low on the positive items and high on the negative items.

Table 1. Percentage Results for Dimensions of Sophomore Thriving

Dimension of Sophomore Thriving (all included in Sophomore Thriving Index)	Highest 5	4	3	2	Lowest 1
Engaged Learning					
Apply skills from class to other areas of life (A)	30.0%	49.8%	16.1%	4.1%	0.0%
Think about course learning even when not in class or studying (A)	34.6%	48.8%	11.5%	5.1%	0.0%
Participate actively in class (A)	25.8%	50.7%	13.8%	8.8%	0.9%
Academic Determination					
Grades are a top priority (A)	54.9%	33.5%	4.2%	6.5%	0.9%
Tend to go beyond assignment requirements (A)	9.7%	26.9%	31.5%	24.1%	7.9%
*Regularly procrastinate on school work (A)	12.1%	16.4%	18.2%	34.6%	18.7%
Positive Perspective					
Feel hopeful about future after graduation (A)	41.0%	39.7%	9.8%	7.3%	2.1%
*Respond to stress by giving up or walking away (E)	2.4%	7.7%	16.3%	35.6%	38.0%
Maintain positive perspective (E)	12.6%	23.7%	36.2%	21.7%	5.8%
Diverse Citizenship					
Have friendships across racial/ethnic identity (S)	28.1%	22.7%	31.0%	6.6%	11.6%
Have friendships across political identity (S)	35.1%	34.3%	19.4%	7.0%	4.1%
Desire to contribute to the world motivates co-curricular involvement (I)	23.4%	31.1%	24.7%	14.9%	6.0%
Social Connectedness					
Respondent and friends listen to each other (E)	38.8%	44.9%	13.9%	2.0%	0.4%
Believe St. Olaf friendships will last beyond graduation (E)	25.8%	32.4%	30.3%	9.0%	2.5%
Feel valued by St. Olaf College (A)	26.8%	37.2%	19.9%	12.1%	3.9%

*Reverse-coded items (worded negatively; coded in opposite direction from most items)

All items were measured on 5-points scales: A = strongly agree to strongly disagree; E = very large extent to not at all; I = extremely important to not at all important; S = very similar to very dissimilar

We created a *Thriving Index* which combines the 15 different items in Table 1 to measure sophomore thriving. A higher score indicates higher thriving in sophomore year at St. Olaf.

The mean score of the *Thriving Index* was 53.23 (SD=6.09). There are fewer respondents included in the index because if a respondent did not answer an item in the index, they were excluded from having an index score. This was done because skipping an item would automatically lower their score on the index. Scores on the index are normally distributed, as shown in Figure 1.

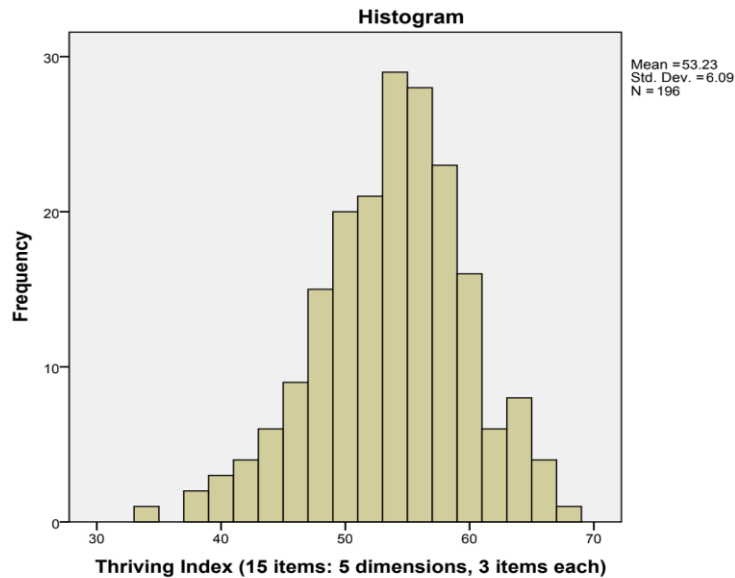


Figure 1. Histogram of Thriving Index

How are sophomores doing in regards to friendship quality?

We conducted univariate analysis to measure the quality of sophomore friendships, using the five statements shown below in Table 2. The prompt for this section asked respondents to think of up to five of their close friends at St. Olaf when answering these questions. The data shows that sophomores agree to at least a large extent (combining the top two response categories) that they and their friends support each other (84.6%), they and their friends listen to each other (83.7%), their friends make them feel less lonely (72.6%), and that they believe their friendships will last beyond graduation (58.2%). Considering sophomores' feelings about needing to change to fit in with their friends, 78.5% feel they need to change to a small extent or not at all. While that is positive, not all sophomores report high-quality friendships. For example, 11.5% of sophomores agreed to a small extent or not at all that their friendships would last beyond graduation, and 9.0% indicated their friends did not make them feel less lonely. Another 8.2% of respondents agreed to at least a large extent that they needed to change to fit in with their friends.

Table 2. Statements which make up the Friendship Index

Statements/measures	To a very large extent=5	To a large extent=4	To a moderate extent=3	To a small extent=2	Not at all =1
My friends and I support each other	46.5%	37.1%	13.1%	2.9%	0.4%
My friends and I listen to each other	38.8%	44.9%	13.9%	2.0%	0.4%
My friends make me feel less lonely	41.6%	31.0%	18.4%	8.2%	0.8%
I feel like my friendships will last beyond graduation	25.8%	32.4%	30.3%	9.0%	2.5%
I feel like I need to change to fit in with my friends*	2.9%	5.3%	12.3%	42.6%	36.9%

*We reverse coded this negatively worded item for use in the Friendship Index: "To a very large extent" was coded as 1 and "Not at all" was coded as 5

The three statements that suggest a need for improvement are *feeling less lonely with friends*, *friendships lasting beyond graduation*, and *feeling the need to change to fit in with friends*. The responses to the fourth item in the table indicate a lack of anticipation for long lasting affective relationships. Affective friendships, as described by Vaccaro and Newman (2016), were more often sought by students of color, influenced in part by feelings of belonging on campus. Even though a majority of sophomores are currently thriving in terms of their friendships, a higher proportion of students agree “To a moderate extent”, “To a small extent” or “Not at all” in regards to feeling that their friendships will last beyond St. Olaf, in comparison to the other positively worded items. It is also important to note that about one-fifth of respondents feel they need to change to fit in with their friends, which can hinder feelings of belonging and thriving in that it can deter students from being their authentic selves, which is an integral part of intra- and interpersonal thriving (Schreiner 2010).

To summarize the results shown in Table 2, we created a *Friendship Index* which attempts to measure friendship quantitatively by summing respondents’ scores to the items in Table 1. The distribution of scores on this index is shown in Fig. 2 below.

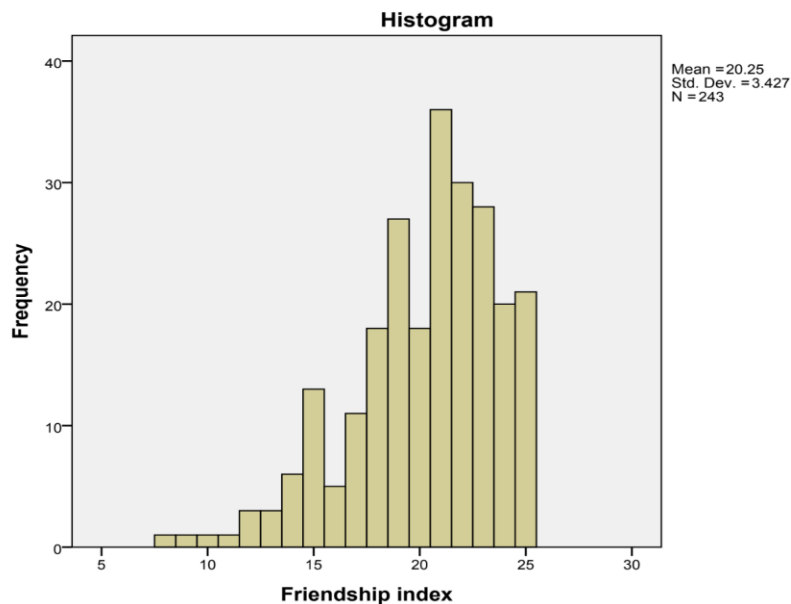


Figure 2. Histogram of Friendship Index Histogram

Scores on the *Friendship Index* could range from 5 to 25, with an index midpoint of 15. The mean score was 20.25 (SD = 3.427) on the *Friendship Index*. Approximately 85% of students scored above the index midpoint (15).

Scores on the *Friendship Index* indicate that many sophomore respondents are experiencing beneficial friendships at St. Olaf. Higher-quality friendships indicate a higher likelihood of experiencing the social thriving aspect of connectedness to others (Schreiner 2010). Social connectedness is a key component of student thriving in terms of interpersonal relations and it is part of how connected students feel to the community around them (Schreiner 2010; Wang and Kennedy-Philips 2013). While many respondents indicated that their friendship quality is good, more than 15% had scores lower than the midpoint, which shows that not all sophomores are thriving socially.

How homogeneous are sophomores' friendships?

We conducted univariate analysis of our homophily/homogeneity variables (inclination to interact and create relationships with those who have similar identities as one's own), using a matrix in which we asked respondents to think of how similar various aspects of their identities were to the identities of their friends. We did this to measure homogeneity in friendships. Again, a prompt to this section asked respondents to think of up to five of their close friends at St. Olaf when answering these questions. The results, shown below in Table 2, demonstrate that St. Olaf sophomores experience high levels of homogeneity, meaning they tended to select *Very similar* or *Somewhat similar*, in relation to the following identities: racial/ethnic (49.6%), political (67.8%), and dis/ability (48.2%). The only identity which showed high heterogeneity was faith/religious identity, which 33.1% of students answered *Somewhat different* or *Very different*.

Table 3. Table of Homogeneity and Heterogeneity in Friendships (Table 3)

Identity/measure	Very similar=5	Somewhat similar=4	Both similar and different=3	Somewhat different=2	Very different=1
Racial/ethnic	27.4%	22.2%	30.2%	6.5%	11.3%
Gender	32.3%	14.1%	38.3%	6.9%	6.0%
Sexuality	24.6%	19.8%	36.3%	10.1%	6.5%
Faith/religion	3.6%	22.2%	38.7%	19.8%	13.3%
Political ID	34.3%	33.5%	19.0%	6.9%	4.0%
Dis/ability	45.2%	23.0%	19.4%	7.7%	2.4%

Sophomores at St. Olaf experience homogeneity in their friendships in all identities except faith/religious identities. Homogeneity can be an indicator of homophily (a preference to form relationships with others who share similar identities), but it is not definitive. Students with more heterogeneous friendships may attain a more diverse citizenship by connecting and understanding others who are different from themselves (Schreiner 2010).

To summarize the extent of homogeneity in friend groups, we created an index from the responses of how similar/different students were to their friends in terms of the identities. Lower scores (15 and below) indicate that friends are *more different than similar*, while higher scores (23 through 30) indicate friends are *more similar than different*. Scores in the middle (16 through 22) indicate both similarities and differences within friend groups' identities.

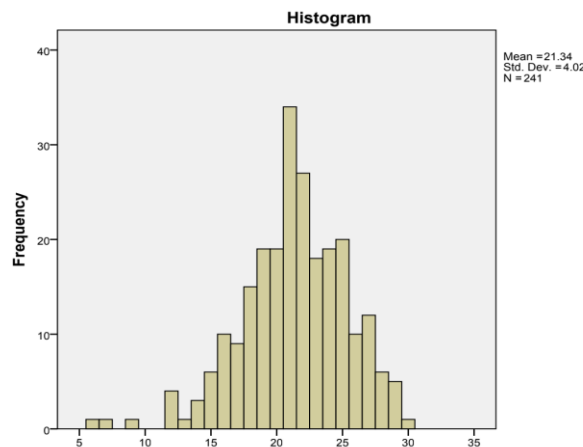


Figure 3. Histogram of the Index of Homogeneity in Friendships

The Index of Homogeneity had scores which could range from 5 to 30, with an index midpoint of 20. Respondents had a mean score of 21.34 with a standard deviation of 4.02, indicating that the identities of respondents' friend groups tended to be between *Both similar and different* and *Somewhat similar*. The majority of students scored between 17 and 25, but more scored lower (more homogeneous) than higher (more heterogeneous).

Results of the *Index of Homogeneity in Friendships* show that sophomores at St. Olaf tend to have homogenous friendships, which may indicate that they experience homophily, the preference to be friends with people who share a similar identity to themselves (Stearns et al. 2009). While sophomores' close friends may share one or more of their various identities, that does not mean they share all of them. Diverging in at least some identities can aid in their diverse citizenship aspect of social thriving (Schreiner 2010). Our recommendations for how to increase heterogeneity at St. Olaf are in our conclusion.

What support do sophomores want St. Olaf College to provide for their identities?

Our survey included an open-ended question to which students responded that they felt St. Olaf could do better to support their various identities. Based on the responses provided, six general themes appeared. Sophomores feel that St. Olaf should:

- Increase awareness regarding minoritized identities
- Increase resources to support students of minoritized racial/ethnic identities,
- Increase physical/mental health resources
- Address issues of racism
- Respond more effectively to incidents of crisis
- Address political tensions on campus

Table 4. Things St. Olaf Could Do Better to Support My Identities

Things St. Olaf Could Do Better to Support My Identities	Number of responses
Increase opportunity for awareness (classes, lectures, speakers, professors) regarding: non-white narratives, international narratives, LGBTQ+, non-Christian religions	30
Increase resources which support minoritized racial/ethnic students, mental health (Boe House), accessibility, and gender identity	18
Address pressing issues including racism on campus, response to crises, and political tensions	14
Miscellaneous (Listen to students more, general grievances)	27
Did not answer or "Did not know"	159

Students indicating that they want resources allocated to marginalized ethnic/racial, dis/ability, and gender identity validates recommendations from prior research for institutions to expand support for students with minoritized identities (Means and Pyne 2017; Schreiner 2014). These responses also echo similar studies which included international students and the need to expand domestic students' understanding of the world around them (Rivas, Hale, and Burke 2019). Sophomores ask St. Olaf to assist them and their peers to expand their diverse citizenship in terms of addressing systems of power (racism, heterosexualism, ableism, etc.) and providing opportunities for learning, all of which have been identified as important for social thriving (Schreiner 2010).

Do sophomores feel respected by staff and peers?

We created a smaller Index of Feelings of Being Respected by Staff and Peers to evaluate the quality of institutional and interpersonal interactions that sophomores have at St. Olaf. This index consisted of four items, each measured on a 5-point scale with 1 being “*Strongly disagree*” and 5 “*Strongly agree*.” The items and responses are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Index of Feelings of Being Respected by Staff and Peers

Items	Strongly Agree (5)	Somewhat Agree 4	Neutral 3	Somewhat Disagree 2	Strongly Disagree (1)
Feel proud to be an Ole	33.9%	34.7%	18.1%	4.8%	2.0%
Feel respected by peers	33.1%	46.0%	10.1%	4.4%	0.8%
Feel respected by campus staff	44.0%	43.1%	4.0%	2.8%	0.4%
Feel valued by St. Olaf College	25.0%	34.7%	18.5%	11.3%	3.6%

The *Index of Feelings of Being Respected by Staff and Peers* assesses overall feelings of respect and their manifestations. As shown in Table 5, about a third of respondents (33.9%) marked *Strongly agree* to feeling pride in being an Ole. It is interesting that a vast majority of respondents (87.1%) indicated feeling highly respected by campus staff which suggests that most sophomores feel more comfortable and safe, socially, in their interactions with campus staff. A critical component of belonging concerns students’ feeling that they matter (Means and Pyne 2017). As Table 5 shows, that more than half (59.7%) of respondents feel they are valued at St. Olaf. However, it would be beneficial to evaluate how St. Olaf as an institution communicates to students that they value them. Additionally, the type of affirmations, resources, and structures communicating value need to be evaluated to address the nearly 15% of students who do not feel valued by the college.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of scores on the *Index of Feelings of Being Respected by Staff and Peers*. On a scale of 7 to 17 with an index midpoint of 12, the average index score was 14.81 (median = 15), indicating that students tended to at least somewhat agree with positive statements about their feelings of respect, being valued, and proud of being an Ole. However, even though the average score (mean = 14.81) was high, we would ideally like to see 0.0% of students indicating that they do not feel respected, valued or proud.

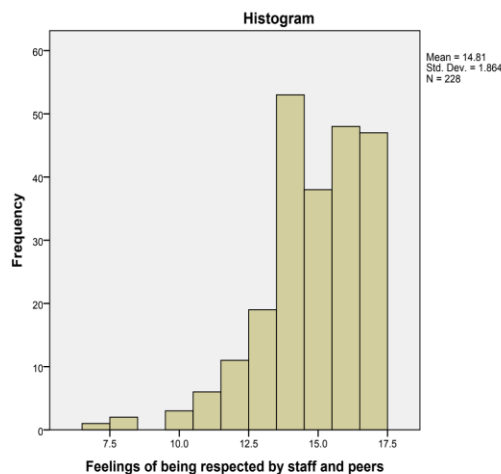


Figure 4. Histogram of the Index of Feelings of Being Respected by Staff and Peers

Index of factors that positively influence institutional commitment

We created an *Index of Factors that Positively Influence Institutional Commitment* to further investigate the overall sense of belonging among sophomore students. The index has two dimensions: a) institutional and interpersonal interaction including 4 items measured on a 5 point scale where 1 was *Strongly disagree* and 5 *strongly agree*, and b) institutional support including 6 items measured on a 5 point scale where 1 was *Not at all* and 5 *To a very large extent*. This resulted in a 10-item index that summed up the response scores shown in Table 6.

Table 6. *Index of Factors that Positively Influence Institutional Commitment*

Items	Highest (Strongly Agree or to a Very Large Extent) 5	4	3	2	Lowest (Strongly Disagree or Not at all) 1
Feel proud to be an Ole	33.9%	34.7%	18.1%	4.8%	2.0%
Feel respected by peers	33.1%	46.0%	10.1%	4.4%	0.8%
Feel respected by campus staff	44.0%	43.1%	4.0%	2.8%	0.4%
Feel valued by St. Olaf College	25.0%	34.7%	18.5%	11.3%	3.6%
Feeling of support for race/ethnic identities	33.1%	15.7%	10.5%	7.7%	3.2%
Feeling of support for gender identities	33.9%	19.8%	11.3%	3.2%	1.2%
Feeling of support for sexualities	33.9%	16.9%	10.9%	2.4%	1.2%
Feeling of support for religious/faith identities	23.8%	17.3%	15.3%	10.1%	1.2%
Feeling of support for dis/ability	29.4%	11.7%	9.7%	3.6%	2.0%
Feeling of support for political identities	28.6%	18.5%	14.9%	7.3%	2.4%

All items were measured on a 5-point scale (from Strongly agree to Strongly disagree; from To a very large extent to Not at all)

Previous research notes that students' sense of belonging on campus cannot be separated from their identity (racial/ethnic, gender, etc.), and the way in which an institution responds to identities is important in establishing a sense of belonging for students (Means and Pyne 2017; Well and Horn 2017). The *Index of Factors that Positively Influence Institutional Commitment* examines the role of the institution in creating spaces where sophomores feel supported in various aspects of their identity. The results in Table 6 demonstrate that sophomores agree that the institution presents positive factors that encourage them to remain enrolled, including the institutional support dimension and the interpersonal dimension. This supports previous research noting that comfort is a relational component where the feelings of safety around other individuals are important in fostering a strong sense of belonging (Vaccaro and Newman 2016).

As Table 6 also shows, there are differences in response to items such as the *feeling of support for political affiliation*, where 28.6% of respondents indicated *To a very large extent* and 14.9% *To a moderate extent*. This difference suggests that there are varying political identities present within the sophomore class who perceive unbalanced institutional support. It would be interesting to further evaluate which political identities indicated higher levels of support and how that relates to the overall campus environment.

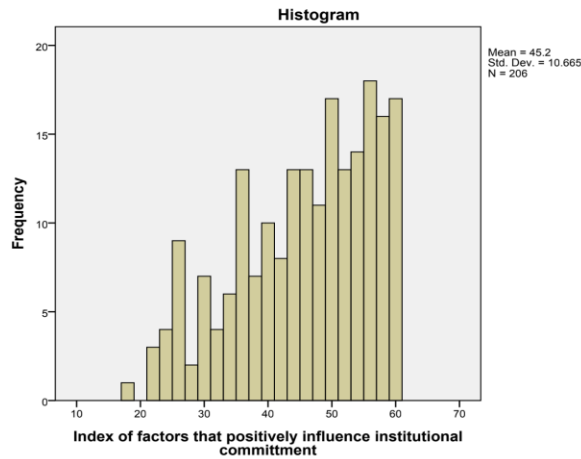


Figure 5. Histogram of the Index of Factors that Positively Influence Institutional Commitment

Figure 5 shows the distribution of the *Index of Factors that Positively Influence Institutional Commitment*. On a scale of 18 to 60 with a midpoint of 39, the average index score was 45.20 (median = 47.00), indicating that respondents scored high on positive statements about factors that positively influence institutional commitment. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents have scores between 34.5 and 55.9 (SD = 10.665).

The index of effective institutional responses to discrimination and crisis

We created the *Index of Effective Institutional Responses to Discrimination and Crisis* to further examine the components of belonging for sophomore students. The items in the index asked respondents if they agreed that the institution responded well to the two items shown in Table 7, each measured on a 5-point scale.

Table 7. Items in the Index of Effective Institutional Responses to Discrimination and Crisis

Item	Strongly Agree 5	Somewhat Agree 4	Neutral 3	Somewhat Disagree 2	Strongly Disagree 1
I believe St. Olaf responds well to identity-based discrimination	14.9%	24.6%	29.8%	19.4%	5.6%
I believe St. Olaf responds well to cases of sexual assault and violence	14.1%	27.8%	27.8%	17.7%	6.9%

Table 7 indicates that 25.0% of respondents believed that St. Olaf does not respond well to incidents of identity-based discrimination (combining somewhat and strongly disagree). Ideally, students should not have to encounter discrimination sexual assault, or violence in any capacity on campus and should feel that the institution responds well when such incidents occur. However, how the institution responds to such incidents displays where students who are most at-risk/likely to experience identity-based discrimination rate the institutions' priority. Previous research identifies the perception of campus climate as part of the split between minoritized and privileged students (Wells and Horn 2013). The results above present an area where the institution can channel effort and resources to foster an environment where incidents of identity-based discrimination prompt substantial response.

Table 7 also highlights varied views about the institutional response to cases of sexual assault and violence. As the table shows, 24.6% of respondents believe the college does not respond well to cases of sexual assault and violence. This is important in assessing the degree to which respondents feel safe on campus and the institution's commitment to providing the necessary resources to victims. The results suggest dissatisfaction with the institution's existing mechanisms for responding to discrimination and crisis.

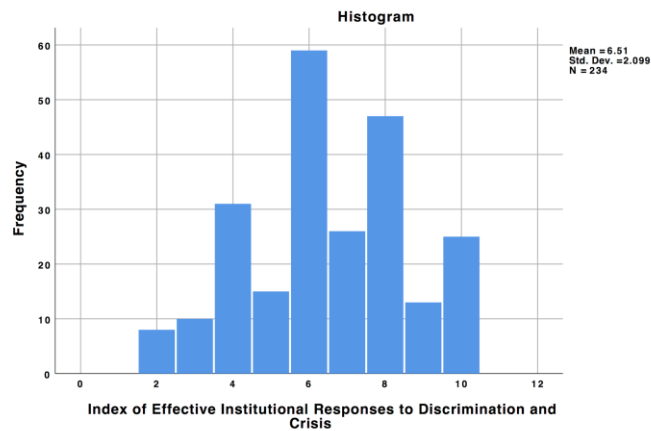


Figure 6. *Index of Effective Institutional Responses to Discrimination and Crisis*

Figure 6 shows the distribution of scores on the *Index of Effective Institutional Responses to Discrimination and Crisis*, which sums the responses to the items in Table 7. On a scale of 2 to 10 with an index midpoint of 6, the average index score was 6.51 (median = 6.00), showing that students tended to indicate neutral responses to the index items.

The results of the *Index of Effective Institutional Responses to Discrimination and Crisis* portray sophomore perceptions of the extent to which St. Olaf College provides a socially and physically safe environment for them. This is an important contributor to students' sense of belonging as it encompasses the perceptions of the institution's actions towards victims of discrimination and sexual violence.

Index of belonging

To evaluate the overall feeling of a sense of belonging for sophomore students, we created a 6-item *Index of Belonging* with two dimensions: 1) physical and social safety, 2) institutional and interpersonal interaction. Table 8 shows the distribution of responses for each item of the Index of Belonging.

Table 8: Items in the Index of Belonging

Item	Highest (Strongly Agree or to a Very Large Extent) 5	4	3	2	Lowest (Strongly Disagree or Not at all) 1
Feel physically safe on campus	53.6%	32.3%	5.6%	2.4%	0.0%
Able to interact comfortably outside close social circle	27.8%	39.1%	14.9%	7.7%	4.0%
Feel proud to be an Ole	33.9%	34.7%	18.1%	4.8%	2.0%
Feel respected by peers	33.1%	46.0%	10.1%	4.4%	0.8%
Feel respected by campus staff	44.0%	43.1%	4.0%	2.8%	0.4%
Feel valued by St. Olaf College	25.0%	34.7%	18.5%	11.3%	3.6%

Table 8 shows that most respondents scored high on the items included in the *Index of Belonging*. Over half (53.6%) of respondents indicated *Strongly agree* to feelings of physical safety on campus. Similarly, most respondents (87.1%) scored high on *feeling respected by campus staff* (44.0%). It is interesting that only just over one-fourth of respondents (27.8%) indicated a strong sense of being able to interact comfortably outside their social circle. This suggests that there may be barriers hindering sophomores' ability to expand their social networks.

Figure 7 presents the distribution of summed scores for respondents on the *Index of Belonging*. The histogram shows that on a scale of 15 to 34, with 34 as the highest score, the average score for respondents was 28.44 (median = 29) on the *Index of Belonging*. The scores are skewed to the left with approximately two-thirds of respondents having scores between 24.488 and 32.392 (SD = 3.952). The average is above the midpoint of 26 indicating that most respondents have a high sense of belonging at St. Olaf College. However, 15.7% of respondents score below the midpoint highlighting that there are gaps at St. Olaf where fostering a sense of belonging is concerned.

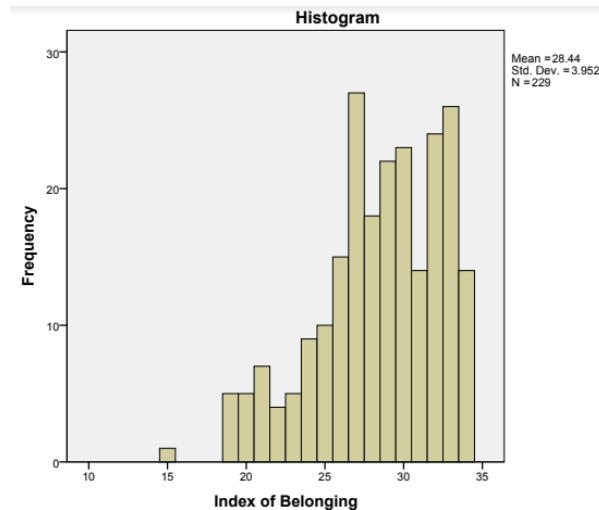


Figure 7. Histogram of the Index of Belonging

Scholarly literature highlights feelings of safety in physical spaces and around other individuals as important aspects of establishing environments where students can comfortably express

themselves (Vaccaro and Newman 2016; Means and Pyne 2017). The results of the Index of Belonging support this idea as the feeling of physical safety on campus is a component of the *Index of Belonging* of which above half (53.6%) of participants marked *To a very large extent* when asked if they felt physically safe on campus. Although respondents report high scores (87.1%) of *feeling respected by campus staff* about 15.3 % report *To a moderate extent* to *Not at all* with regards to the item *feel respected from peers*. The discrepancies between peer interaction and campus staff interaction are interesting because they provide an opportunity for comparison between how sophomores address each other and how they address those who hold positions of authority. Although our scholarly literature does not explore the reasons respect among peers may be low, it suggests that the institution plays a role in fostering environments where the conversations surrounding interpersonal conflicts may be addressed.

Bivariate Results and Discussion

Using the univariate data discussed above, we examined the following relationships:

1. *Demographics and thriving,*
2. *Friendship and Thriving,*
3. *Race/Ethnicity and Racial/ethnic homophily.*
4. *Effective institutional response to Discrimination and Crisis and thriving and Effective institutional response to Discrimination and Crisis and belonging,*
5. *Demographics and belonging and Demographics and friendship, and*
6. *Demographics and feelings of support for identities.*

The following section presents the results of our findings and discusses their meaning in the context of sophomore experience at St. Olaf.

1. What is the relationship between sophomore demographics and thriving?

As the ultimate goal of our research is to understand the extent to which sophomores are thriving at St. Olaf, we conducted bivariate analyses of all demographics and our *Thriving Index*. We found significant differences between white students ($m=53.79$) and students of color ($m=51.44$, $p=.022$), non-first generation (53.80) and first generation (50.58 , $p=.003$), and persons without a disability (50.66 ,) and persons with a disability (54.20 , $p=.002$). Sophomore students of color, non-first-generation students and students with disabilities scored comparatively low on the *Thriving Index*.

These differences indicate that, although the sophomore class fails to show the kind of sophomore slump identified in prior research, there are certain students at St. Olaf who clearly have more barriers to thriving than others. Although our data focuses on social thriving, we believe there are factors outside of this study and outside of St. Olaf's purview that contribute to a lack of access and resources for minoritized students. In regards to social thriving, research shows, for minoritized students specifically, that a sense of community and belonging is harder to achieve but is also more important to overall thriving (Vaccaro and Newman 2016). As establishing a sense of belonging and creating friendships is largely dependent on identity, it is necessary that identity is taken into account when studying the overall thriving of minoritized students.

2. How does friendship affect overall thriving?

We can infer from prior research that social thriving, and therefore friendship quality, is a strong indicator of overall thriving (Schreiner 2010). We conducted a Spearman Rho test to measure

the correlation between our *Friendship Index* and the *Thriving Index*. A p-value of .000 means we can be more than 95% confident this relationship is not due to chance. We also calculated a Pearson correlation coefficient ($r=.521$) suggesting a strong linear relationship.

Schreiner’s study of overall thriving includes the key variable of interpersonal thriving because meaningful social relations contribute to the overall thriving of students (2010). Our exploration of friendship and thriving shows that sophomores at St. Olaf who develop meaningful and engaged social connections tend to be thriving at a higher level. The institution should continue to provide opportunities for students to develop these relationships, informed by prior research which says that propinquity is a strong determiner of friendship formation (Stearns et al. 2009). Propinquity, as defined in our literature review, is the tendency to form social relations with others who are in the same social setting (Stearns al. 2009). Although our own analysis does not address how friendships are formed at St. Olaf, prior research suggests that increased social interaction in spaces like residence halls and the cafeteria are necessary for meaningful interactions across social class and demographic group (Stearns al. 2009). The existing sense of community at St. Olaf is reflected in our research as contributing to the thriving (high or low) of its students.

3. Is there a difference in the racial/ethnic homogeneity within the friendships of white students and students of color?

An analysis of the measured racial/ethnic homogeneity of white students and students of color allowed our team to look into the ways in which race/ethnicity influences the process of friendship formation. Previous research suggests that analysis of racial/ethnic homogeneity among sophomores is a necessary focus for thriving, given the high impact of socialization on the interpersonal thriving of different demographic groups (Schreiner 2010). In order to run analysis for racial/ethnic demographics, we combined the respondents into two categories: *Students of Color* and *White Students*. This decision is innately problematic given that it obscures the varying experiences and perspectives of specific racial/ethnic groups. However, it was a necessary action because there was not a large enough number of responses from students with specific racial and ethnic identities to conduct analyses for those individual identities.

To analyze racial/ethnic homogeneity among sophomores, we ran a Chi-Square test of independence to compare the *racial/ethnic homogeneity* of *white students* and *students of color* and found a significant interaction ($p = .00$). A Cramer’s V of .383, measuring the strength of this interaction, suggests a moderately strong relationship. As shown in Table 6, 62.5% of white students reported that their friends are “very similar” or “somewhat similar” regarding race and ethnicity, while students of color reported only 26.8% in those two categories.

Table 9: Racial/Ethnic Homogeneity in Sophomore Friendships

Racial/Ethnic Homogeneity	Students of Color, including bi-/multi-racial	White Students	Total
Very different	21.4%	6.9%	11.0%
Somewhat different	17.9%	3.5%	7.5%
Both similar and different	33.9%	27.1%	29.0%
Somewhat similar	12.5%	27.1%	23.0%
Very similar	14.3%	35.4%	29.5%

It is interesting to observe a lower level of homogeneity among students of color as compared to white students, as this contradicts the previously defined 'cocooning effect' explained by Stearns et al. (2009). When considering this contradiction, it is important to recognize that St. Olaf is a predominantly white institution. This characteristic likely influences the friendship formation process of students of color and white students at St. Olaf, shaping the friendship options available to students. Our findings may also indicate that St. Olaf has found success as an institution in facilitating diverse friendships for students of color. However, the comparatively higher level of homogeneity among white students indicates that St. Olaf could benefit by being more active in cultivating friendships between white students and students of color. This process could be accomplished through the facilitation of campus events where diverse citizenship in friendships is explored. This process must be conducted carefully to ensure that students of color at St. Olaf are not tokenized or do not otherwise bear the burden in the drive to increase diverse friendships for white students.

4. Does effective institutional response to discrimination and crisis impact sophomore thriving and belonging?

The ability of an institution to effectively address incidents of discrimination and crisis was a factor students highlighted during our focus group when discussing their sense of belonging on campus. In order to explore the influence of effective institutional response to discrimination and crisis on sophomore thriving and belonging we completed the following analyses:

- We conducted a Spearman Rho test of correlation between *effective institutional response to discrimination and crisis* and the *thriving index*. The p-value was .000 indicating that the relationship is significant and we can say with more than the standard 95% rate of confidence that the relationship between the two scores is not due to chance. Pearson's R is .268, indicating a moderately positive relationship between the variables.
- We conducted a Spearman Rho test of correlation between *effective institutional response to discrimination and crisis* and the *belonging index*. The p-value was .000 indicating that the relationship is statistically significant and we can say with more than the standard 95% rate of confidence that the relationship between the two scores is not due to chance. Pearson's R is .311, indicating a moderately positive relationship between the variables.

These results confirm that the effectiveness (or perceived effectiveness) of institutional response to incidents of discrimination affects student thriving and belonging. As previously stated, prior research illustrates the importance of an institution's consideration of the identities possessed by members of its student body when facilitating student thriving and belonging (Means and Pyne, 2017; Well and Horn, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial that members of the college approach their response to incidents of discrimination with an understanding of the high level of impact their actions have on student thriving and belonging. In order to demonstrate institutional investment in creating an effective response to incidents of discrimination, student feedback on the effectiveness of St. Olaf's response could be collected following any such events. This process could reassure students that the college is interested in listening to their views and needs, particularly during times in which certain student groups may feel their sense of belonging at St. Olaf is threatened.

5. What is the relationship between sophomore demographics and friendship and belonging?

Our next step was to conduct analyses of the binary demographic groups which scored lower on the thriving index (students of color, non-first generation, and students with disabilities) and their scores on the friendship and belonging indices. We found the following results:

Race/Ethnicity

- We ran a Mann-Whitney U test to compare the mean score of students of color and white students on the *Belonging Index*. The mean score for white students ($m=29.01$) was *significantly higher* than for students of color ($m= 26.85$, $p= .001$) indicating that this difference is not likely due to chance and can be generalized to St. Olaf sophomores overall.
- We ran a Mann-Whitney U test to compare the mean score for students of color and white students on the *Friendship Index* and found the difference to be insignificant. The mean score of white students ($m= 20.45$) was not significantly different than students of color ($m=19.38$, $p =.079$).

Regarding friendship quality for students of color, it is not surprising that there was little difference due to the tendency for minoritized students to adapt to their environments (Stearns et al 2009). In other words, making friends is necessary to navigate a space that doesn't necessarily reflect your identity, as Stearns et al. illustrated in their "cocooning effect" analogy (Stearns al. 2009). Our study shows that students of color and white students are forming friendships that have high levels of reciprocity, making them feel less lonely and able to be their authentic selves.

Our prior research addresses many of the differences between how minoritized students and privileged students create a sense of belonging and perceive their belongingness on campus. Perception of belonging and even the perceived atmosphere of "friendliness" were varied between the two groups (Vaccaro and Newman 2016; Well and Horn 2013), indicating that belongingness is highly dependent on individual experience. Our data suggest that St. Olaf fosters a greater sense of belonging for white students than for students of color. For the purposes of discussion, we consider white students to be under this "privileged" category. We suspect this difference is largely due to the identity of St. Olaf as a predominantly white institution and its rather homogenous geographical location, yet we encourage the administration to adapt to and reflect the student diversity that they encourage. Colleges typically pursue a certain level of diversity and should continuously support minoritized students throughout their time in the institution.

6. What is the relationship between sophomore demographics and feelings of identity support from St. Olaf College?

To further understand the institutional role in fostering belonging and thriving, we conducted a Spearman's Rho measure of the correlation between the *dis/ability demographic* and *feelings of support from the institution for dis/abled identities* and for the *race/ethnicity demographic* and *feelings of support for racial/ethnic identities*. Both tests generated p values of .000 indicating significant relationships. Our team chose these two specific aspects of identity (dis/ability and race/ethnicity) because students who identified as disabled and as students of color had the lowest observed thriving scores among the various demographics measured. The other demographic with notably low thriving levels was first-generation students, but we did not collect data regarding feelings of support by the institution of first-generation students. Therefore, we

were unable to establish the extent to which feelings of identity support from St. Olaf affected first-generation students.

Our findings on the importance of identity support align with prior literature on the role of college institutions in promoting a sense of belonging and thriving among students. Prior literature suggests that institutional support for the multifaceted identities of the student body, particularly students with marginalized identities, is critical to fostering a sense of belonging and thriving (Means and Pyne, 2017; Well and Horn, 2017). Our data confirms this meaningful role of the college, providing evidence of the importance of cultivating a campus community in which students experience and perceive support for their identities from the college.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To understand the factors that contribute to high levels of social thriving for sophomores at St. Olaf College, our study focused on friendship and belonging. Based on prior research on thriving, we identified aspects of friendship and belonging that positively influence social thriving overall. Regarding friendship, our study found that having high quality and meaningful friendships is important for sophomores in order to experience high levels of social and overall thriving. Additionally, white sophomores were found to have higher levels of racial/ethnic homogeneity in their friendships than students of color, indicating that white students are less likely to engage in diverse citizenship, which has been identified in previous research as a factor that positively contributes to social thriving. Our study found that feeling a sense of belonging also positively contributes to social and overall thriving for sophomores. About 75% of respondents indicated feeling a high sense of belonging. However, students of color, first-generation students, and students with disabilities were among the demographic groups that reported the lowest sense of belonging.

A strength of our study was the use of a focus group to help contextualize prior literature and ensure that our survey would be applicable to St. Olaf College. The focus group allowed us to gain a better grasp of the components of friendship and belonging that matter to sophomores. The information from the focus group supplemented our scholarly research on friendship and belonging trends. About 32.5% of the sophomore class responded to the survey which allows us to make generalizations about the current sophomore class. Our study adds to prior investigations of thriving in that it takes into account first-generation students and students with disabilities as identity categories that require further examination.

It is also necessary to address the limitations of our study. We are unable to generalize our data beyond St. Olaf. As the sophomore class at St. Olaf is not representative of the broad array of sophomore college students at other institutions, our study does not provide insight into the ways in which friendship and belonging impact the thriving of sophomore students outside of St. Olaf. Additionally, several areas of our bivariate analysis could have benefitted by identifying and controlling for demographic variables (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, dis/ability). This may have resulted in a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between the *Friendship Index* and the *Thriving Index* as well as of the relationship between the *Belonging Index* and the *Thriving Index*. Controlling for these demographic variables may have enabled us to more fully understand the ways in which friendship and belonging influence thriving across a variety of identities. This could still be done with our data, but it did not fit with the time frame of a semester research project.

Our results suggest that friendship and belonging contribute to social thriving among sophomores, as do identity and the environment created by the institution. With this in mind, we offer the following recommendations to improve the social and overall thriving of sophomore students at St. Olaf College:

1. Considering our finding that students of color, students with disabilities, and first-generation students experience a weaker sense of belonging compared to other demographic groups, St. Olaf should address these disparities by educating its faculty on the obstacles faced by these demographic groups. This education would enable faculty to better support students struggling to form a sense of belonging at St. Olaf.
2. Based on the percentage of sophomores who feel the institution does not respond well to identity-based discrimination and sexual assault/violence, St. Olaf should reevaluate current procedures of responding to incidences of identity-based discrimination and sexual assault/violence. For example, it could collect student feedback on the effectiveness of St. Olaf's response to these types of incidents as they occur, which could function as a display to students of St. Olaf's intentionality in creating an effective response to such events.
3. Looking at the results of our friendship index and measures of homogeneity, St. Olaf should continue to foster meaningful connections and consider increasing the cultivation of friendships across identities. Considering that white students currently tend to lack diversity within their friend groups, St. Olaf should provide spaces and events where diverse citizenship in friendships can be explored.
4. Based on the percentage of students who feel they are not valued by St. Olaf College, the college should increase communications to students that they value them beyond academic and leadership awards. Regular, possibly mandatory, check-ins with representatives of the college, such as class deans, could further the sophomore sense of belonging.

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