

Appendix G-7

May 2004 student reports on the curriculum (Swett and Niermann, '04)

Dear Tour Guides,

All year long, one St. Olaf tour guide has been concocting a scheme to convince the rest of the guides to refer to the campus P.O. Boxes as "rabbits" rather than "P.O.s" when they are giving tours. She figures that if all the guides do this, the incoming first-year class would be fooled into using this word and eventually "P.O." would disappear from Olaf lingo. Though this will probably never happen, this idea illustrates the fact that you have a great deal of influence on prospective students - many of whom will one day become Oles and help to shape the campus community.

That influence is the reason we are writing to you. As a senior capstone project for our American Studies major, we have spent our final semester at St. Olaf reflecting on our four years here, considering what we've gotten out of our education, and what we'd change to make it even better. One of our most significant conclusions is that we wish we had more fully understood the mission of St. Olaf from the start. As tour guides, you have the opportunity to share that mission with prospective students and their families. Here are some of the most important points you can incorporate into your tours.

We are driven by a clear mission.

Have you read the mission statement of St. Olaf College? Most students haven't. Read it online at

<http://www.stolaf.edu/president/guidingdocuments/mission.html>

Better yet, read *St. Olaf College 2000: Identity and Mission for the 21st Century*. Check it out at

<http://www.stolaf.edu/church/identity/index.html>

This document will help you understand what is unique and important here at St. Olaf. Once you've read it, consider ways to incorporate ideas from it into your tours. For instance, explain that certain areas in Buntrock Commons were intentionally designed to promote community: a single cafeteria where everyone takes their meals, unlocked POs, and spaces for people to gather and interact, like the Cage and Fireside Lounge.

We care about the environment.

As an institution and a community of individuals, St. Olaf is committed to an ethic of sustainability. We care about our impact on the environment and the problems facing our world. Share this information with your tour groups, and point out specific examples of our commitment to the environment. We recycle, we compost, and we're looking into renewable energy sources for our campus. The new science complex will be a "green" building, meaning that it will be highly energy-efficient and its negative impact on the natural environment will be minimal. We have restored several wetlands and much of the natural prairie in the areas surrounding the main campus.

St. Olaf is a college of the church, not a Christian college.

On a typical tour, you will stop by the chapel, briefly mention chapel services and the religion requirement, and tell prospective students that St. Olaf is a college of the church. But, let's be honest, most of us don't know what that means, or how that influences the discussion and practice of religion on our campus. Help your tour group to understand that St. Olaf is a college of the church and not a Christian college like Bethel or Wheaton. Unlike those schools, students and faculty at St. Olaf are not required to adhere to certain religious beliefs or practices. Explain that although St. Olaf is affiliated with the Lutheran church, there are people here from many religious backgrounds and we are all expected to take religion seriously. We are encouraged to question and think critically about issues of faith.

We give back to the college after we leave, and we are thankful for what we've been given.

Did you know that tuition would be about \$7,000 higher if it weren't for alumni gifts to the college? We can also thank generous alumni donors for Buntrock Commons and the Tostrud Center. These are great places for you to talk about alumni giving on your tours. There are a few reasons for doing this. First of all, it demonstrates a sense of appreciation and stewardship of what we've been given. Secondly, it shows prospective students that St. Olaf is a place that former students want to give back to - over 80% of the class of 2004 has pledged to the Seniors in Annual giving campaign, a record-breaking number, which is evidence of our appreciation of the education we've received here. Third, it will hopefully instill a sense of stewardship in prospective students. If students enter St. Olaf understanding the importance of giving back, they will be more likely to do so in the future.

We get to know our professors.

Think back to your first semester at Olaf. You were probably pretty intimidated by most of your professors. Maybe you still are. The fact is, though, that our professors are not scary people - they are intelligent, interesting, funny people who care deeply about students and have a lot of great life experience to share with us. You can begin to instill this knowledge in your prospective students, and maybe even alleviate some of their fears. Tell them stories about your interactions with professors - especially out-of-class interactions. Perhaps one of your professors invited your class over for dinner, or maybe you've gotten to know one better because you attend the same church in town. Let them know that professors are available for more than just discussing paper topics. They are advisors, mentors, and if we're lucky, even friends.

You are introducing prospective students to St. Olaf campus culture; you are, in essence and sometimes in practice, saying, "This is how we do things here." You're in an excellent position to help prospective students understand not only what we do here, but also what we value - qualities that cannot be observed with the naked eye. We often don't verbalize the attributes of St. Olaf that mean the most to us. Take some time to think about your own St. Olaf story and how you can share it on your tours. Keep up the good work!

Sincerely,
Jenilyn Swett '04 and Luke Niermann '04

May 19, 2004

Dear Professors,

After four jam-packed years here on the Hill, it is hard to believe that we will be graduating in just a few days. With graduation ahead our focus is drawn towards the future and life after college; everyone is constantly asking us, "What's next?" When we are not busy trying to figure out the answer to that question, we've been spending our final semester at St. Olaf looking back.

As a senior capstone project for our American Studies major we have been considering how the education we've received here will shape our futures. Through research and conversations with faculty, administrators, and students we have come to value our experiences more deeply, which makes paying off piles of loans for the next ten years a little more bearable. At the same time, we have realized that there are some things we wish we had done differently and discovered areas where we see room for improvement. It might seem presumptuous for two students to point out the shortcomings of a college and offer advice to faculty, some of who have been teaching since before we were born. However, we think it might be valuable for you to hear a perspective that you cannot get from colleagues or many books on higher education. We've compiled six "Ole Insights" to give you a little peek into the enigmatic minds of your students, and we've offered some suggestions as to how to address these issues.

1) We're scared of you.

Ole Insight: Even though you do a great job of being approachable and accessible to us, there is a persistent feeling of intimidation that prevents us from really engaging with professors. We act as though your office hours are reserved for asking last-minute questions about papers, arguing for a higher grade, or begging to get signed into a closed class.

Advice: We love Wendell Berry's idea that a professor is an example of what is possible - whether good or bad. The best way for you to be an example to us, and to break down the wall on intimidation, is for us to see you as more than simply an intellectual machine. Share your passions and convictions with us and invite us to do the same with you. We are not suggesting that you should share your deepest secrets with

us; rather, allow us to see you engaging on a personal level with the subject you're teaching and how it relates to the rest of the world. And you seem more real to us when we hear stories about your kids or your days in college - keep telling those stories. Hold your office hours in the Cage or on Buntrock plaza now and then.

2) GEs are a waste of our time and money.

Ole Insight: Those of us who are humanities majors hate taking our science requirements just as much as those pre-med students hate the art requirement. We know that we're here to get a well-rounded education, but sometimes GEs seem pointless to us. We have a hard time understanding how they relate to our primary interests or field of study.

Advice: The root of our problem is that we do not fully understand the basic premise of a liberal arts education. We come to Olaf knowing that we'll be taking a variety of classes, but when that variety is forced upon us through the GE requirements it becomes a burden. Help us first to understand the philosophy of a liberal arts education and then to see how that plays out in our own experiences. In classes that are predominately comprised of first-years, incorporate the mission statement, *St. Olaf College 2000: Identity and Mission for the 21st Century*, into your reading lists and class discussion. At the beginning of any course, especially those that carry a highly sought-after GE, explain to us why we study that discipline. Throughout your teaching, model the ideals of a liberal arts education for us. Incorporate materials from other disciplines into your classes, even if you feel like you're not an expert in that area.

3) You guessed it - we really are bored in your classes.

Ole Insight: We've all had our share of agonizing class periods - the ones in which no one talks, people nod off, and everyone is counting the minutes until class is over. These classes are bad enough for students; we can't imagine how frustrating they must be for professors.

Advice: The quickest way to ensure that you will have a classroom full of bored students is to inhibit their innate sense of curiosity. When you have a specific agenda that confines class discussion rather than allowing it to flow according to students' curiosity, you will promptly lose their attention. Furthermore, when we are not able to find meaning in what we are studying we will become disengaged. Because of these GE requirements, it is inevitable that we will have to take some classes that do not seem inherently interesting to us. However, if we see that you are enthralled with the subject you're teaching, whether that be U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East or Latin grammar, that will invite us to get excited about it as well.

4) We have better things to do than homework.

Ole Insight: When it comes down to it, if we have to write a paper or attend a meeting for an organization we are a part of, we will choose the meeting and start the paper at midnight. Our co-curricular activities often take priority over academic pursuits.

Advice: The mission statement of St. Olaf College states, "it offers a distinctive environment that integrates teaching, scholarship, [and] creative activity..." However, we often find it nearly impossible to integrate our classroom learning with the creative activities that take place outside of the classroom. These activities are important to us because they help us find the instant gratification and meaning that are sometimes lacking in classes where thinking takes priority over doing. But, instead of letting our co-curricular activities take precedence over our academic work, help us to integrate the two. Ask questions that will encourage us to think about the connections between them. Even better, give assignments that require us to engage with organizations and people outside of your class.

5) We know how to BS.

Ole Insight: Though we'll never put it on a resume, one of our prized skills is the art of bullshitting. We know what you like in a paper, and we know what we need to do to get an A in your class - even if we've never had you as a professor. We can write a ten source annotated bibliography without even reading the books, and we can write a semester's worth of journals in a night. Some of us can even wax eloquently in a class discussion about a book we have never read.

Advice: There is something about the college environment that turns us into procrastinators. Though we may diligently write rough drafts of papers as first-years, by the time we're seniors we sometimes don't even run spellcheck. We don't want you to spoon-feed us but we do need you to hold us accountable. Ask for rough drafts and require us to respond to the assigned readings, whether through emails to the class alias or postings on WehCT.

6) Advisors are only a formality. They're just here to sign registration cards.

Ole Insight: By the time we show up in your office for our bi-annual advising appointment, we've already talked with our friends and know what classes we want to take. If we haven't created a list of classes that meet the requirements for our major or fulfill GEs, we assume we can figure it out on our own later.

Advice: We as students are greatly influenced by an achievement-driven culture, as well as a student culture that values (on a superficial level) taking the easy road. It would benefit us if our advisors could force us to think seriously about the academic choices we're making. This might seem like a no-brainer, but ask us questions - and lots of them! When we come in with a list of classes we want to take, ask us why we want to take them. When we tell you what we want to major in, ask why. When we tell you we want more than one major, ask why - even louder. And with first-years, before you even get to these questions, ask them why they are at St. Olaf and what they're passionate about. Let your signature on a student's registration card punctuate the end of a good conversation, rather than rewarding them for trekking to your office.

The six insights that we've chosen to elaborate on in this letter are just a few of the thoughts on the minds of your students. They are not unique to St. Olaf students either. If you'd like to understand a bit more about students' perspectives, we recommend that you read *Alma Mater* by P.F. Kluge or *Making the Most of College* by Richard J. Light. And of course, if you haven't read St. Olaf's mission statement in a while, make sure to read it again.

As we filled out the paperwork for our independent study at the beginning of the semester, we decided to title it "The Impact of a St. Olaf Education." Our primary goals were to be confident in the education we've received and to gain an understanding and appreciation of how our time at St. Olaf has equipped us for the future. Not surprisingly, we met these goals early on in the semester, so our final project could have been a feel-good essay suitable for publication by the admissions office. Yet, while compliments make St. Olaf look good, they don't help it grow, and that is why we've offered this advice to you. As professors you have taught us so much, and we feel fortunate to count some of you as our friends. Though we'll be graduating soon we'd love to hear any of your thoughts on what we have written. Hopefully this will be of some use as you continue to invest in the lives of students as you've invested in us.

Sincerely,

Jenilyn Swett '04 and Luke Niermann '04