St. Olaf is a residential four year liberal arts college in Northfield Minnesota, with a student body of 3,000. Founded by Norwegian immigrants in 1874 and affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, St. Olaf is known for its strong academics and music programs, as well its off campus study opportunities. St. Olaf offers degrees in over 40 majors, along with 23 different concentrations that are earned by taking four courses in a linked field of study. The college has a comprehensive set of general education requirements that promote the study of writing, language, quantitative reasoning, oral communication, physical movement, history, multicultural studies, arts and literature, human behavior, ethics, science, and theology.

This project is an assignment for one of the core courses in St. Olaf's Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ethnographic Research Methods. Students read a series of texts that described the techniques of anthropological research and investigated its strengths and limits. They also learned about the ethical obligations of ethnographic work by studying the policies of St. Olaf's Institutional Review Board and receiving IRB guidance on their research process. The students then worked in pairs and researched a different academic department or program on campus. In all, the two sections of the course studied 17 different departments and programs. This paper is one of the results of that work.

A stroll through the dimly lit corridors of the English department after all have gone home leaves an eerie feeling in the pit of one's stomach. The liveliness of the students and professors from hours before leaves a reminiscent murmur in the classrooms whose doors remain shut as if keeping masterpieces protected. Only those who dare
enter feel welcome, unable to see beyond the frosted glass covering every window within. The spirit of Chaucer looms chillingly joined by the spirits of white male canonical writers who are no longer the centerpiece of the discipline due to the inclusion of worthy women and persons of color. Their shadows blanket the halls lined with relics and empty desks, serving as guardians to the ever-evolving art form that they still hold dear. As the sun rises and morning breaks, passion begins to refill the space with the students and faculty returning to their posts. We humble ethnographers do not strive to tempt the creatures of the night or day, but bring forth the valor of our English department and the souls who compose it through careful study.

The purpose of our project is to gain experience in the fundamental methods of ethnography through analysis of an academic department at St. Olaf College. The collective project covers a wide range of departments on campus each composed of a unique set of students and faculty with the added complexity of ethnographer students who are members of the St. Olaf educational community. As ethnographers of the English department our aim was to gain a better understanding of the experience of being an English major at St. Olaf College through participant observation, individual/group interviews with students, faculty and staff interviews, as well as a study of social and educational spaces within the department.

Corinne Dickey and Megan Fellows conducted the research for this ethnography. Corinne is a Junior So/An major from Minneapolis. She chose to major in Sociology and Anthropology because of her interest in people and travel. This class has given her insight into different methods of studying and analyzing people and cultures. Megan
Fellows is a current junior majoring in Biomedical Approaches to Health and Disease (CIS). She decided to take this course because of her interest in anthropology and because she will gain experience writing an ethnography/conducting research as a part of her senior capstone project. Our personal experiences as students of St. Olaf as well as young adults has shaped our perceptions of the St. Olaf community academically and socially, and in some manner or another, has influenced the information that we have collected about the English department. As Bohannan states, “...all ethnographers are limited by their own culture---including whatever anthropological culture they have learned” (Bohannan 46). For example, Megan has not taken an English course or stepped foot inside the English department since the last day of her first year writing course fall semester of freshman year. The courses Megan has taken to fulfill her major requirements are taught in Regents Natural Hall of Sciences and Holland Hall. Both of these buildings give way to a more integrative manner of study based on their location in proximity to other departments. These experiences have shaped her understanding of the St. Olaf academic community, and specifically the English department.

St. Olaf College has a long tradition of teaching the fundamentals of the English language to major and non-majors. Each student at St. Olaf is required to take a first year writing course. The topics of first year writing courses vary widely from year to year and can include classes that explore storytelling in the media, the cultural context of Australia, and race and power. In addition, students complete four other credits worth of writing courses (WRI) as well as one artistic and literary studies course (ALS-L) to fulfill
St. Olaf’s general education requirements. Many English courses carry the WRI and/or ALS-L credit allowing students from other disciplines to explore the English department.

Prospective English majors are required to take Literary Studies (185, level I). The major also requires students to take three level II courses, one from each the following areas: Cross-Cultural Studies, Literary History, and one from either Cross-Disciplinary Studies or Genre. The “1800 requirement” states that among all of the courses taken at level II, one must be in literature before the year 1800 and one must be in literature after 1800 (English dept. website). For example, students have the opportunity to choose between courses such as Asian American Literature, Folklore and Digital/Rhetoric Literacy. The expansion of the major to include the works of women and persons color is evident when looking at the course list. An English major must also complete a total of six elective courses, two of which must be level III and of the two level III courses, one must be in literature. The elective courses allow English students to pursue their individual interests setting the course for each major to develop a specialty of their choosing upon graduation.

The English Department has a long history at St. Olaf, as it is one of the oldest and most active departments on campus. One of the most emphasized parts of the history of the English Department is the focus on important alumni and faculty. The department website has two pages dedicated specifically to professors who have become important authors, even if they were not involved in the English Department while at St. Olaf. One of the most important figures in the English Department is Ole Rolvaag, after whom the library was named. Ole Rolvaag was a Norwegian native and a professor in the
Norwegian Department, but is important to the English Department because of his stature in the literary world. While the general history of the department is not easy to find, the department defines its history using the professors and alumni who have gone on to make a name for St. Olaf and the English Department through their literary works.

The St. Olaf English Department is based out of a building named for Rolvaag, St. Olaf’s main library. The classrooms are separate from the library, but the connection with the library stresses the importance of reading and writing within the major. Many of the majors work in the library at the circulation desk or at the writing help center located near the reference room of the library. The department and the majors spend a lot of time in the library and really cherish the building. The classrooms and offices used by the department are in the same building as the library but are located in a different area. We were able to analyze the space through the eyes of Mary Catherine Bateson, the author of *Peripheral Visions*. The location suggests the necessity of being close to English’s history as a discipline and the manner of “doing” English. “Doing” English requires a foundation of knowledge that can be found in books inside the library and a partial separation from the outside world. The windows that look into the library, out to the quad and to the football field, allow students and professors to observe students as they live their lives. Observation is key to Bateson and it is also key to the discipline of English.

The building is very old and has a lot of character, including wooden floors and fireplaces in some rooms. The most important room to the majors is room 525, with beautiful wood paneling and a large fireplace on the fifth floor of Rolvaag. The
classroom is located next to the department offices and many students study there when it is open. The room also holds an old painting of Chaucer that the English Department retains despite the attempts to put it in a museum because of his importance in the literary world. The offices of the department are often shared and not very large. The area is not quite large enough for all of the staff, but the building is very important to the department because of its history and connection to the library.

The reach of the English department on campus is wide. English professors teach in a variety of departments on campus including American Studies, Art History, Classics, and Women’s and gender studies. The professors also teach in academic programs such as Great Conversation and American Conversation. The English department can also be found online. The department website is used as a tool for current majors and prospective majors. There, students can find a brief overview of the English major, a detailed set of courses required to graduate with a major, course descriptions, potential career paths, contact and background information about the faculty, reading lists, writing contests, and more.

Using techniques from “Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method” by anthropologists Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor, we were able to conduct our research with a foundational knowledge of the art of ethnography. It was made clear in the handbook that science does not have to test a hypothesis in order to be deemed valid; for this method may lead us to find only what we are looking for. The goal of an ethnographer is to find patterns beyond the obvious that are not based on controlled experiments. We conducted scientific research by testing the
stereotypes of the English department that we gathered through past experiences by conducting interviews with majors, non-majors, and faculty members. The qualitative data that we gathered from these interviews adds another dimension to experimentation and quantification through the analysis of human experience and subjectivity. The authors of the handbook state, “Arguments that presuppose that only quantitative data are the stuff of science lack cognizance of the complex material and immaterial elements that constitute human life, which is best understood through qualitative and quantitative approaches” (Boellstorff 38).

When we began conducting research we allowed our intuition to guide us because as students of anthropology and sociology we have “developed an awareness concerning ethnography that cannot be duplicated by an individual with minimal experience, making it more than merely intuitive” (Boellstorff pg). Both Boellstorff and Ortner stressed the fact that ethnographers cannot rely on participant observation alone. With this in mind we spent time conducting participant observation in English department classrooms, hallways, and areas of congregation. Observation and interviewing go hand in hand and by using our observations as guidelines we asked insightful questions during our short interviews with students and faculty.

We also gained insight into the art of conducting good interviews through Sherry Ortner’s ethnography entitled, “New Jersey Dreaming”. Ortner examined how social class was lived within her own peer group at Weequahic High School in 1958 and in present form. It is from this ethnography that we are able to understand the difficulties that arise when conducting research among your peers. She stressed the importance of
confidentiality when working with such a small population of interviewees. Throughout our study and in this ethnography, we kept the confidentiality agreement with our peers by using a limited amount of identifiers when discussing the responses of our interviewees and we made sure to actively listen during interviews so that we had a better understanding of the expressed sentiments. With this, we believe that we accomplished our objective as ethnographers to take as much care as possible when conducting research while still staying true to our ethnographic methods (Boellstorff 129). With the handbook’s solid definition of ethnography in tow, Ortner’s advice on conducting research with our peers as subjects, and an understanding of the department’s history, physical space and major requirements, we began our journey to a better understanding of the English department at St. Olaf College.

Completing an ethnography is a long and complicated process because ethnographers do not always know what they are looking for when beginning the study (Boellstorff). The ultimate goal of our research was to “learn the craft of ethnography” through the careful study of an academic department at St. Olaf. Our methods for finding the information that we have gathered centered around talking to as many people as possible. Before we began conducting interviews and participant observation we spent time analyzing the English department’s website. The front page of the website provides a brief summary of the typical journey through the English department and beyond. An image of the word “Library” written in script, surrounded by red vines, appears within the front page text. Each tab located on the left hand side of the site provides tools for students and faculty. For example, the tab “The English Major” gives an in-depth
A description of the courses required for the English major including the rationale behind each topic. There are also links embedded in the page concerning topics such as requirements for the major, the creative writing program, information about how to use an English major in the professional world, and requirements for the old major.

The content of the website is kept up to date with the recent winners of the 2014 Nick Adams short story contest posted on the website bulletin board along the right hand of the page. Another indication that the website is kept up to date is the inclusion of the course list for the 2014-2015 school year. New things are added to the website, but older information is not necessarily removed. For example, the English department course offerings for the summer of 2010 are still posted. The department’s website is a good tool for students to use in order to gain a better understanding of the course requirements to complete the major, an introduction to the faculty and their specialties, guidelines for conducting research, as well as vocational tracks for a student graduating with an English major.

We began our fieldwork by conducting interviews with students that we knew were English majors. This group consisted mainly of our friends and friends of friends. After building up our interviewing confidence we branched out and began to approach students in areas where we expected to find English majors. For example, the majority of students who are employed at the writing help desk are also English majors. We found that if the student workers were not working with a student or did not have an appointment they were more than willing to be interviewed. The desk provides a list of worker’s majors and it was there that we found a wide variety of English double majors.
We also conducted interviews with non-majors to get the outsider’s perspective on the department. The interviews with students allowed us to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the department so that when it came time to interview faculty and staff members we weren’t getting caught up on surface level information. When our student interviews began to thin out we decided that we were prepared to interview the AAA and the Department Chair. We conducted these interviews as a team because we wanted to ensure that we got all of our mutual questions answered and to be sure to be cognizant of the time we were requesting from these individuals. We also gathered information from casual discussions and other conversations we heard that involved the English Department. Once we began the project everything was data (Ortner 49). Conversations with peers, observations made in the department and outside of it all contributed to our analysis.

We spent time digging through the archives to gain a better understanding of the English department’s history. The archivist took us back into the vault to see the stacks and stacks of boxes that house the entire written (typed) history of the college. We looked for documents that gave some information on the history, including self-studies, e-mails, anything explaining department activities, and other useful documents. We were not able to locate a self study, nor were we able to obtain one using other resources, but we did find an article entitled “A Faculty Key to English Department Strength” (Jorgensen 1984) and “The Rationale of the English Department Curriculum” (Johnson 1970), both of which proved useful when analyzing the evolution of the English major. We then combed through the website for interesting information and observations and drew a
cultural map of the spaces that the department occupies. Once we gathered the information, we analyzed the patterns that we found to find larger meanings for the department and its place at St. Olaf.

When we were not conducting interviews with the students, faculty or staff we analyzed the space of the English department. Many of our findings came from placing ourselves within an environment and making observations (Boellstorff 87). Students in our interviews stated that all of the English classes they have taken were discussion based. With this information in hand we looked for an opportunity to observe class periods. Due to time constraints we were not able to attend multiple class periods but we were able to make observations about the structure of an English course based on the time we spent observing classes, previous experience, and data collected from our interviewees. The information that was gathered in interviews led us down paths of research that we might not have explored as non-majors and our individual exploration of the space led us to ask specific questions to our interviewees such as why the department chooses to stay in Rolvaag despite the lack of office space and why the registration process is so frustrating. The interviews, participant observation, and research contribute to the complexity of each sphere and in order to obtain a more thorough ethnography all of these areas needed to be explored.

Time was the greatest challenge that we faced as ethnographers. Both participant observations and interviews take a great deal of work and it is difficult to know when enough data is truly enough (Boellstorff 88, Ortner 234-237). It is impossible for an ethnographer to learn everything there is to know about a culture because cultures
continue to change over time. However, most ethnographers spend many years studying a culture and complete many interviews. Sherry Ortner, for instance, completed over 100 interviews during her three years of research compared to our mere 19. She would have liked to dig deeper, for instance by interviewing the children of her classmates, but could not do that because of time restraints (Ortner, 209). Our interviews introduced us to so many interesting avenues to explore within the department, but we simply did not have the time and as a result our ethnography has some limitations. We were unable to see how the department changes throughout the year and we missed many important factors during first semester, such as department events and courses that are only offered during first semester. If we had had the time, we would have participated in more courses and gathered even more information. Time would have given us the ability to form more relationships within the department and create stronger bonds that could lead to more information. While we could not gather as much information as we would have liked, our findings give a brief understanding of the department and some of the aspects that make it unique to St. Olaf. Furthermore, our conclusions are not conclusive because departments are constantly changing, even within the time that we spent conducting research. This ethnography gives an overview of the department as it is right now based on what we have seen and heard during our study. The objective of our ethnography is to provide a glimpse into the structure, function, and individuals within the English major at St. Olaf.

English is not unique to one major at St. Olaf and therefore, it is fitting that there is not one way to learn or to teach the art of literature. This fact leads many students and
faculty down a path of specialization that greatly affects the sense of community among majors themselves and among students and faculty. The student experience is greatly affected by the registration game as well as identity and vocational stereotypes of English majors as a population.

I like to read

In “Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method,” Tom Boellstorff guides ethnographers to use open-ended questions because it is not known what answers we are looking for (Boellstorff, 97). Thus, the first question we posed to our English major interviewees was often, “Why do you want to be an English major?” Most, if not all, students mentioned that it was their love of reading and writing that led them to pursue English in college. We were not too surprised by this recurring response because English majors are commonly stereotyped as individuals who enjoy reading and writing, even our non-major interviewees predicted the English major’s answer. What we did not initially realize was how much passion for reading and writing was present within the majors. This passion drives majors to pursue English despite potential difficulties acquiring jobs after graduation. Due to the recent state of our economy many undergraduates pursue more “practical” majors such as majors in business, economics or the natural sciences. We had the opportunity to interview a current senior English major who is also majoring in chemistry. This particular major felt as though the future was filled with a lot of unknowns, but that having the chemistry major would allow the student a wider array of opportunities if his or her true aspirations within the discipline of English were not able to come to fruition. This student also experienced parental pressure
to graduate with a more “practical” major. The parental pressure mentioned by this interviewee led us to ask other majors if they had felt the same sort of pressure from their parents. Most only stated that their parents wanted them to be happy, but were slightly concerned that they would not be able to find a job in their area of interest after graduation.

While this love ties each major together, it does not create the community that you would expect it to. This is interesting because with that passion in common, one would expect conversations and relationships to develop. However, when looking at the size and organization of the department, it makes sense that there is not a very strong sense of community between majors. The department makes it easy for students to be involved in many different areas and to study literature and writing in their own way. It seems that because all students are very passionate about English, they are also passionate about studying it in a way that works for their unique interests within the topic. Because there are many ways to study literature and writing, it is easy to study it without taking classes with many of the other majors. The unique passions that English majors have allows them a very independent experience in the department, but also detracts from the sense of community among students.

Where the community among students was lacking, the community among professors was strong. Over the past few years the faculty and staff of the department have faced many hardships together. Just recently one of the Rolvaag custodians was diagnosed with cancer and the staff rallied to raise money for him. For example during
finals week, members of the English department faculty and staff held a bake sale in Buntrock Commons.

Due to the limited space in the English department many professors share cramped office spaces. We believed that there is potential for this constant contact to lead to a stronger formation of bonds, but we also thought that it could lead to the dissolution of bonds based on the faculty members. From the information that was gathered in our interviews the dissolution of bonds due to cramped quarters was not confirmed by the faculty and staff. Each faculty member that we interviewed spoke well of their English Department colleagues. There is a very nice faculty lounge located on the 5th floor of the department across the hall from room 525. During each visit to the department we checked to see if there were faculty members inside and each visit we found the room empty. With cramped quarters throughout the department we can see the need for a space where faculty members can relax, but we believe that it would beneficial and lead to a stronger sense of community among students and faculty if the room was open to students as well.

Professors in Training

A common misconception of English majors is that they all want to go into academia and if they don’t get a job they will end up working as a barista. As Sherry Ortner would say, English majors are tracked or even pinned to this career path as young adults based on family situation, gender, personality, experience at St. Olaf, and a wide array of other influences (Ortner 142-163). Unsurprisingly, many of our interviewees confirmed their knowledge of this stereotype and were frustrated by the
narrow-mindedness of their peers. There are a lot of other vocational opportunities for English majors to explore. One of our interviewees is pursuing graduate school for medieval literature at a prestigious university, another would like to pursue library science, and we were informed that many St. Olaf English graduates apply for science writing jobs at Epic, a medical software company. An extremely large bulletin board in the hallway on the fourth floor of the English department covered in flyers for graduate schools in journalism, graduate writing programs, the publishing industry, etc. opens the eyes of aspiring English majors by showing them that there are opportunities to be successful and happy within the discipline they are passionate about.

Similar to the many ways there are to study English, there are also many ways to incorporate it into a variety of vocations. As we see through the spread of English department faculty working alongside many other departments, the topic is applicable in many areas. The incoherence of the department is a metaphor for the malleability of the topic. While many English majors choose to pursue careers in academia and become professors or have other positions in schools, it is not the only option as an English major. One major that we spoke with said that she is going into academia after graduation because she believes that that is the only stable option available to English majors. The stereotype around the major about the instability in job opportunities, although untrue, is taken seriously by many. Stereotypes can influence a person’s decisions and lead them from opening the door for other opportunities. Working in academia is an incredible opportunity, but it is not the only opportunity available to English majors.

No tests, No Problem
Another common stereotype that we encountered was that our non-major interviewees described the major as “easy.” For example, one non-major interviewee believes the English major can be classified as one of the easier majors because the material is very subjective, the students rarely take exams and there isn’t a right answer. When we approached the majors with this information they confirmed that the material they were learning left more room for subjectivity than say, a math major, but this material was difficult in its own way. Some majors were equipped with an “English as a second major mentality,” like the English/Chemistry double major previously mentioned. Many of our interviewees expressed that their peers who were double majors in English and a major of their choosing, often considered English their “fun” major. We received this designation from English major double majors whose passions lie within literature, but they often chose another major to have a better sense of security.

Despite the popular belief that English is an easy topic, many of the majors we know work very hard on their material. There is a lot of reading and writing for classes and the material is not always easy to understand. Many non-majors who take courses within the department either take classes with simpler literature, such as “Children’s Lit”, but the majors take courses with more complicated material. When non-majors take the more complicated classes, they are often surprised by the amount of work they must put into the course. For example, one non-major we interviewed was surprised by the difficulty of analyzing some of the texts he was reading for an English course. We heard from many majors that they find the topic to be easy, but majors from most departments say the same thing because it is what they are naturally good at and most interested in.
Students choose majors that they enjoy and typically find easy because it is what they love to do, however when students take courses in a major that does not come naturally to them, they find it more difficult than their own major. One math major we spoke with briefly mentioned that he thinks his most difficult class is his class in the humanities that many think of as easy. Some peoples’ minds work well in subjects such as English, but to peoples’ whose minds are more math or science oriented, those subjects can be more difficult and vice versa.

Abandoning the Canon

While conducting interviews many students expressed the sentiment that they had a lot of freedom of choice when choosing courses to fulfill their English major requirement. They also expressed that there were times when they desired more structure so that they could get into more English courses. We too had originally wondered why the department had gone from a more structured major with about five core courses to an unstructured major with only one core course. We posed this question to a faculty member and they explained that the change was necessary in order to incorporate a wider array of authors and types of literature. In the 1970s the Canon Wars caused a lot of departmental stress. There were faculty members who wanted to remain loyal to the canon composed of works by white male authors. Others, however, wanted to incorporate works by women and people of color. The old English major required students to take core courses based on the old canon only experiencing the new canon texts through elective courses. Soon the department began to graduate fewer and fewer students because the students did not want to labor through those texts. The department decided
to abandon the old canon to some extent to allow students to take courses in areas that they were passionate about. English 185 remained in order to expose English majors to a wide variety of contemporary texts and teach “strategies of critical analysis and interpretation” (St. Olaf SIS), skills of which are necessary for the continuation of the English major.

With this in mind we decided to look into the structure of the English major at Carleton College. We conducted this research before meeting with the department chair and learning about the influence of the canon wars on the curriculum. Our neighbors across the river, have created a major with a little more structure than the major at St. Olaf. For example English majors graduating from Carleton must complete courses in the following areas: Requirements: Foundations, Historical eras (student must take one of each: lit before 1660, lit 1660-1900, lit post 1900), English 295: Critical Methods, English 395: Advanced Seminar, English 400 (able to choose from 4 different integrative study options eg. colloquium, research essay, creative writing, project). Carleton also implements prerequisites for their intermediate creative writing courses, which reduces registration issues for majors. More structure leads to less freedom for the students to choose areas of studies that interest them the most which is one of the main reasons English majors enjoy the structure of the major at St. Olaf.

The major allows the students to explore a wide variety of literary subjects, but many are unable to pursue their interests due to space. One solution could be to install a prerequisite requirement for some of the upper level writing courses that are most popular or allowing majors to pre register for five English courses toward their major once they
have declared. This will still give non-majors the chance to take English courses that
interest them while encouraging students to declare their English major to receive the
benefits of pre registration.

All Hands On Deck

The English department bears the weight of the entire student body due to general
education requirements. Each student is required to complete a freshman writing course,
four WRIs and one ALS-L course in order to graduate. The department is responsible for
teaching 15 sections of freshman writing this spring. Students are able to obtain their
WRI credits from other departments, but our research showed that all non-major students
that were interviewed took one to two of their WRI courses within the English
department. This means that nearly every single student who graduates from St. Olaf
College will take at least one course from an English professor before graduating. At a
liberal arts college requiring a large number of general education requirements this is not
surprising, but the English department simply does not have the bodies to continue
bearing this weight. In one of our interviews with a faculty member, we learned about the
St. Olaf Staff Plan. The plan was instituted in 1997 and resulted in the cut back of the
English department faculty from 33 professors, including adjuncts, to 19 professors with
an FTE of 12. This was a very big blow to the department especially considering the
workload did not decrease and many professors became involved in other departments.
We were not able to find additional information regarding the Staff Plan on St. Olaf’s
website.
Many English professors are involved in other programs and departments on campus. For example, English professors teach in the Great Conversation, American Conversation, Women’s Studies, and American Racial and Multicultural studies. Members of the faculty really enjoy the opportunity to be a part of so many programs on campus, but one faculty interviewee mentioned that the department as a whole does not have the faculty to meet their teaching commitments. The large amount of involvement by faculty in the English major has made it difficult for students to find coherence within the department.

The Registration Nightmare

As we continued our interviews with students, we found a common frustration with the registration process for English Majors. Because of the change in requirements, the students only have one specific required course, English 185. As the only course that all majors are required to take and that is solely open to English majors, it is also the only course that can be pre-registered for. Other English courses are open to all students and there is not an option to pre-register to those courses for English majors. Furthermore, these classes typically cover two important general education requirements that St. Olaf students need in order to graduate. Although these requirements can be received from courses in other departments, many students look to the English Department for them because it is the most clearly connected department to these requirements and offers the largest range of courses. Many non-majors enjoy taking their general education credits from the English department because the style of learning is very different from courses in the natural sciences and some humanities courses like economics. For example, many
of the biology and chemistry courses that Megan has taken are completely lecture based. The professor stands at the front of the class, writing on the dry erase board with limited interaction with students. However, in an English classroom we observed and heard from our interviewees that the classes were more discussion based and the faculty member facilitated the group discussions, but rarely lectured.

As a result of the high demand of courses, English majors have a very hard time getting into the courses that they want to take. There is a clear divide between courses that only majors take because students from other majors are typically not interested in these topics and, even though some majors aren’t very interested in the topics, they are forced to take these courses due to the high demand for the courses of their choice. Almost all students we talked with mentioned that this was their biggest frustration with the department and one of the main reasons some choose to drop the English Major despite their passion for the discipline.

We noticed this common frustration among students early in our interviews, so we were able to bring it up in each of our interviews with faculty in the department. Hearing this from so many majors could have been due to the timing of our interviews (we conducted them all during or right after registration the period), but it is still an important pattern to pay attention to. Each member of the department faculty and staff that we interviewed was not surprised by this frustration, but made it clear to us that it was beyond their control. It is a common belief among students that each department controls registration in their courses, but that is not completely true. The professors and AAA were equally as frustrated with registration as students because of the many
requests that they receive that they cannot truly do anything about. We really want to stress to students in the English Department, and all departments, that they should not direct registration frustrations toward the department faculty and staff.

The Women Will Rise

While walking through the hallways of the English department we couldn’t help but notice the abundance of photographs of noteworthy authors and faculty. The commonality that stood out to us was the abundance of men and the very few women. Five of the fifteen emeriti faculty whose photographs line the hallway on the fourth floor were women, but at first glance there seemed to be fewer. The college has a long history of being controlled by men. For example, of St. Olaf’s eleven presidents since the doors opened as a preparatory academy in 1875, the College has employed zero women as president. We have had a few important women teach and work at St. Olaf in the past that are now important figures around campus. The namesake for one of the dorms on campus, Mellby hall, taught English at St. Olaf and Agnes Kittlesby, for whom Kittlesby Hall was named, studied English and Latin at St. Olaf and graduated in 1900. Although St. Olaf honored these important women, they failed to attempt to hire an equal number of women and men until the 1970s. One professor that we interviewed has been working at St. Olaf for 30+ years and was the only woman in the department when she began working here. This was not only an issue within the English department, but throughout the entire campus. This professor mentioned that she was one of a few women hired at that time in an attempt to lessen the gender divide at St. Olaf. Since her hiring the male to
female faculty ratio has decreased and the department now employs seven men and fourteen women.

The English department now has a gender divide in the opposite direction. Like St. Olaf’s student population in general, the department has a hard time getting an equal number of female and male students. According to Forbes, US News, the St. Olaf College student population is made up of 44% male students and 56% female students. One professor has observed that there are many more female majors within the English department (about 60% of English majors), which has some advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage she mentioned was the different attitude that male students usually have in classes, specifically that men tend to bring more comedy to the classroom than women. While this is a simple stereotype, it does seem to hold some truth when also considering the stereotype of English majors as nerdy girls. Some non-majors we spoke with said that they thought of English majors as uptight girls who spend all of their time in the library. This is obviously a harsh stereotype, but it is not totally untrue when looking at the information we have found. Of course there are men who major in English, majors do not spend all of their time in the library, and they are not always uptight, but according to professors, women do bring less comic relief and more seriousness to class than men. It is interesting that the department and the school went from wanting more women to wanting more men. It is nearly impossible to get a totally even divide, but it is clear that both genders are needed in order to create balance not only in gender but also in attitude.
Ethnography is a complicated form of research not because of the many specific rules and questions that other forms of research include, but because of the lack of structure. When we started our research on the English department, we had no idea what we were looking for or what we were going to find. We conducted many interviews and analyzed the different aspects of the department such as the website and the space without any direction in mind. We did not know where our research would take us or even if it would take us anywhere, but that is also the beauty of ethnography. When you don’t know what you’re looking for, your mind is open to many different possibilities. Everything holds meaning whether intended or not and ethnography allows us to analyze many themes without limiting ourselves to one specific finding. What we found in our research is very useful not only for our project or the English department, but also for other departments at St. Olaf and other schools because those patterns are common in many places. Over time, we began to understand the English department as outsiders and finally felt almost like insiders. The information we gathered tells a lot about the students and faculty in the department and how the department fits in at St. Olaf. We found many great aspects and a few that could use some improvement, but the main thing we found was the ability to relate to the experience of English majors even as non-majors.

Our research led us to a few conclusions when it comes to the English department. We noticed a pattern of incoherence within the department due to the widespread need of English courses across the St. Olaf campus. The courses provided by the department are not only interesting to many people, but are also required for students to fulfill their general education requirements. This allows the department to be present in
many places on campus and to reach out to many different students, but also leads to a lack of community among the majors. The students are able to meet many different people in their classes, but do not bond with many English majors because they are often unsure of who is an English major because so many non-majors take English courses. This also leads to many frustrations with the registration process due to there being only one class that majors can pre-register for. On the other hand, the passion that each major has for the topic is unique and holds the department together. The English major is not a means to an end, but rather a major that one pursues purely for their love of reading and writing. Students truly enjoy what they are learning and, thus, professors enjoy working with them. Overall, the department is not only an important part of St. Olaf, but is also a department filled with passion and bright ideas. There’s room for improvement in every department and there is a lot more that is good about the English department than bad. As Bateson says, “Learning to savor the vertigo of doing without answers or making shift and making do with fragmentary ones opens up the pleasures of recognizing and playing with pattern, finding coherence within complexity, sharing within multiplicity” (Bateson, 9). This project allowed us to do just that and see some of the patterns within the department and the school as a whole and, especially with the English department specifically, to find coherence within a seemingly incoherent department. It is our hope that the knowledge that we have gained and shared through the careful study of this department will benefit the students and faculty of the St. Olaf College English Department.

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Works Cited


