

Facets of Fun: Deconstructing the Complexities of College Fun

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I have fun every day at college. No, I am not a wild sorority girl or a drug-addicted cultural rebel. I may attend parties on the weekend; I may behave like a “typical” collegiate student on occasion. But college fun involves much more than alcohol, sex, or drugs, and it results in more than a hangover or a hookup. College fun is multifaceted. It follows the cultural scripts of parties and relationships, but it can also be spontaneous. College earned the reputation as “the best time in life” not just because we have little responsibility and lots of fun, but because it is a time to develop our individual identities and our roles within a community. College is conducive to building social capital—within the close environment of a college campus, students work and play together. We don’t just work on papers and play drinking games. Some of us work towards our goals of justice and equality; some of us play with ideas about making the world a better place.

We religiously follow American fun-damentalism, but do not all belong to the same denomination.

1. The Methodists obey the doctrine “work hard, play hard,” methodically separating their worship of Fun from their responsibilities of work. They view fun as a reward from the work of college academics, not their most important job.
2. Then there are those who follow the teachings of the More-man (and More-woman) faith. The playgirls and playboys find fun in “playing” each other, spreading peace with love. Or at least lust.
3. The Party-stants reformed college fun by preaching to followers that passing grades on Judgment Day come with faith, not works. They rest on the Sabbath, and play the rest of the week, believing success in college in no way reflects their schoolwork, but their schoolplay.
4. The Pentecostals worship fun through rituals performed during their daily, consumer-driven lives. They believe in idolatry, spending money—whether it is to attend movies or concerts, to eat out, or to go shopping (a ritual of double rewards)—as devotion to the divine.

5. The Orthodox followers place their faith in the mainstream American leisure activities, like reading or hiking, and resist the temptations of modern college parties.

But there are no Atheists; all college students believe in fun. And that is a good thing.

No matter how you worship the divine, fun is not a waste of time. Even Aristotle agrees, contending that humans work so that we may enjoy leisure.¹ Fun is required for college success as students define it. College freshmen enter college as concerned (or more) with learning how to work with peers than they are with books. Fun gives some students a much needed break from academic work, time where they can gain a fresh perspective or rest their active minds. Fun allows others an escape from the boredom associated with the weeks of the mundane, the routine of sleeping through class, typing meaningless papers, skimming dispassionate textbooks.

College fun helps us determine who we are, what we value, how we work and play. It also tells our peers and friends and significant others all of these things about us, which can lead to meaningful relationships. The skills developed within these relationships transform individuals into resources for doing good work within a community.

College fun sends college students into the so-called real world with experiences in social capital. We have learned the skills of social interaction, communication, and networking, all of which we can use later in life. We know how to work together, how to communicate our ideas and ideals, how to forge alliances that lead to changes we want to see in the world. And while the majority of college students use these skills in the business world, hoping that college brings individual (monetary) success, college graduates could apply lessons learned in fun to the efforts of social or environmental change, change that contributes to the common good.

Fun is different for different people. Most people assume college fun means college parties. While a lot of college students choose to partake in college parties, and it is fair to assume they have a lot of fun, the fun of parties relies on more than just beer. College fun depends on college friends. Most college students define fun as social, so friends, and people in general, are an expected component of fun. The people you are with seem to matter more than the setting or actions that encompass the fun. Spending time with a boyfriend or girlfriend is fun, and incorporates the expectations of romantic conventional fun. Sports are fun to play, but they are also

¹ *Waiting for the Weekend*, 21

fun to watch. And in our increasingly mediated world, it is fun to watch television and movies or play video games. Fun can simply be an escape from the expected routine. It can be spontaneous or planned. College fun can even come with work.

We have these different kinds of fun all at one time. Whether a college student is watching their favorite television show with a group of friends or attending the big game with their significant other, he or she is probably having fun. More important than the fun itself, however, are the positive results of fun. It is time for college fun to be understood and appreciated, not only for what it is, but for what it can, and does, do.

How Fun Builds Social Capital

I walked into my first class at St. Olaf College terrified. Would I fit in? Would anyone here like me? Little did I know, I would meet someone who would, through friendship and—to be honest—fun, help me think critically about my views and redefine my perspective on this world.

We spent the first half of the semester at the friendly acknowledgement stage. I quickly realized we had a similar sense of humor—we both tried to stifle our under-the-breath giggles at our witty (and eccentric) professor. Communication started out through eye contact across the classroom, quickly followed by the quintessential friendly St. Olaf smile.

I “friended” her on Facebook because I was too shy to befriend her in real life. She responded to my pseudo-initiation of a friendship with face-to-face conversation in class. We lived in the same freshman dorm, so we waved and said hi when we saw each other walking in and out of the building. As we became more comfortable with our developing identities in this new world of college, we became more comfortable with each other.

About a month into the semester, she brought our relationship to the next level. Class was dismissed at 11:40. She approached me and asked if I would be interested in going to lunch with her. My stomach agreed with my heart, so we eagerly walked through the chapel and up the stairs to the Caf.

Meal times bring fun into the routine of an academic weekly schedule. Conversation replenishes college students as much as food. I see that we both eat reasonably healthy food, as piles of fruits and vegetables cover both of our trays. One thing missing from her tray, however, is meat. I asked her about life as a vegetarian. When did she decide on that lifestyle? What are her motivations? How does she deal with the challenges of a limited diet?

Over cucumbers, spinach, and grapes, we finally talked about things that actually mattered. Before, I often asked her in passing how she was that day. Now, I actually waited to hear her response. We talked about our friends and family, our hopes and hesitations of college life, our pasts and our futures. Our conversation was personal but superficial, making sure we followed cultural expectations and manners. We did not reveal our deepest values, but instead stayed with the conversations college students are supposed to have. We talked about our religion class, but not about our thoughts on religion as an institution or our faith. We could express frustration with roommates, but did not ruminate on the tools of conviviality found in dorm life.

Lunches became a regular occurrence, not just because they were convenient, but because they were conducive to growing friendship. In the forty five minutes we spent consuming and conversing a few times each week, our honesty grew exponentially. Our “Caf dates” became a habit, an enjoyable part of my routine. *Routine*. Our relationship needed spontaneity. We needed spontaneity; we needed fun that wasn’t just part of our weekly routine.

We finally had fun on a weekend at a highlighter party (where everyone wears a white t-shirt and colors on other party-goers with highlighters at a party lit by black lights). Her interactions with her friends, and with people she had never met before, showed her approachable and attentive personality. Even though she may not have been in an ideal state of mind, she treated everyone with respect and compassion. She valued the opportunity to be with people, not because she wanted to see and be seen, but because she celebrates humankind and the possibilities of positive alliances. I have seen this friend in the classroom, in the Caf, and in the common spaces of St. Olaf. But the circumstances of a college party brought out an increased understanding of who she is, what she stands for, and what she values. She didn’t have to explicitly tell me she values people and relationships because our fun times together say that for her.

Our night ended back in Hoyme Hall, sprawled out on the floor of a mutual friends’ dorm room floor. The eight of us in the room talked about the night, laughing about all the crazy (intoxicated) things that had happened. But we also appreciated the sanity of each others’ sober company.

My relationship with my friend from religion class is important on an individual level. But our relationship is fueled by a common pool of friends and recharged by the energy of various personalities within our group of friends. I know she is a good friend not just to me, but to all the people she cares about.

College admissions literature (those countless pamphlets and letters that overflow high school seniors' mailboxes) often advertise the high quality of student life with a picture of students sharing pizza and some laughs. They don't explicitly advertise alcohol consumption because they don't have to. It is expected that college students drink on the weekends. High school students mentally replace the label on the pop can pictured.

Living out the picture in real life with these eight girls, I realize that the beverage is not central to college fun. The fun I had with my friend that night included a beer can, but fun did not come pouring out. Fun poured out of one another. The night was fun because we lived in the moment. We repressed the distractions of everyday life; the party distracted us from everything else going on. We focused on strengthening connections with each other, not our individual worries of finishing homework or finding someone to hook up with.

Over a year after that first night the eight of us spent together, I now call them all roommates. Living together adds a new dimension to our relationship. I appreciate each octet member's quirks and habits. I know who to say hi to in the bathroom at seven a.m., and who to avoid at all costs. I know who will want to watch a t.v. show before bed, and who would never take a break from the books. Because many of my friendships with my roommates grew from my relationship with that one friend in my religion class, expanding my web of social connections, I appreciate the interconnectedness of college friendships and recognize the importance of college fun in that process. Fun is not just an event; it is not the conventions of parties or television or sports. Fun is also an instrument; it is a way to bring people closer. At the root of college fun is college friendships. Relationships that are fun in all surroundings, in all conventions.

Together, my friend and I educate our roommates about sustainable living habits, a value we both share. We use social pressure and the ability to be honest with close friends to persuade our roommates to live in accordance with our own personal convictions and goals for society. We verbally reprimand roommates who haul in cases of bottled beverages to the octet; guilt has nearly eradicated the purchases of wasteful packaged goods. We hung a sign on the wall above the garbage can we all share, reading "Non-recyclables only, PLEASE...(cough: *Name* (made anonymous for her protection): cough)" in response to our discovery of a notebook resting uncomfortably among a nearly always bare plastic bag.

American social guidelines tell us to avoid talking about politics and religion, but we do it anyways. We definitely do not agree on everything, but our open relationship

allows us to articulate what we think and feel. We listen to each other's ideas with respect, which can help us justify or redefine our own opinions.

We never would have had these conversations if we hadn't had conventional fun, if our relationship had not developed over time with the incorporation of both work and play. I trust her with my inner-thoughts (even though it is culturally unacceptable to do so) because I know her on a multitude of layers. I know she is intelligent, both in a classroom setting and from outside conversation. I know she is grateful for her blessings, her food, family, friends, and health. I know she is compassionate and genuine with friends. I know she lives well in her space. I know she uses relationships and communication to promote her personal values of responsible and ethical lifestyle that respects the environment and all people. I know she cares about respect, love and justice. I know all of these things not after she raised her hand in class or after we had a late-night serious "heart to heart," but also after spending time together, after having *fun* together.

The Fun of Parties

Friday night. The pressure is on. Find a party that will be buzzing with people (and where people will be buzzed) and make an appearance. Ideally, I would want to make a positive impression. And subconsciously, I want to make connections that will lead to relationships within this community on the Hill.

College is pressure. There is the academic pressure from professors—constant demands for exceptional work that sets us apart from our peers. There is the pressure of the future—figure out what you want to do with your life. There is the pressure of money—make enough money to pay for tuition and housing and food and, most importantly, for fun. So while college fun is supposed to be a break from pressure, a relief from the constant demands coming at us in every direction, social pressure forces fun upon us.

Americans of all ages think of college as a fun time, and it is. College students supposedly spend their weekends consuming (and being consumed)—sex, drugs, and alcohol. Many college students live up to these expectations. College fun counterpoints college work, work that should not only contribute to intellectual growth, but also develop one's personal identity, self-worth, and capacity to serve the common good.

I walked down Ole Ave with a few friends to get to a house a few blocks off campus. Loud music and loud people overwhelm the introvert inside me, but I know that college students should enjoy this scene. So I do. My extroverted side takes the reins as I grab a red cup and weave my way through the house to see who I know.

I run into a guy from my History class and we start talking. While in class we have talked about deep matters, like the decline of personal fulfillment in the American workforce, our party conversation is rather superficial. What did you do last night? Where do you live? What's your major?

We team up for the beer pong tournament. Our relationship involves sharing high fives and a rack of cups, not our thoughts on politics or religion. We do not talk about our hopes or dreams or deepest values. We focus on our strategies for winning the game, not our strategies in the game of life. Yet, walking into class on Monday, I feel like I know that guy much better than I did before our Saturday night fun.

I know he has strong leadership skills, guiding me (at a novice ability level) in a respectful and helpful manner. He teaches me the specific rules and technical terms of the game, which tells me he is knowledgeable about a subject he finds important. Not only does he excel in the art of beer pong performance, but his intelligence and creativity help him devise a strategy that uses our individual strengths and allows us to accomplish our joint goals. And, despite his fluid state on Saturday night, he was impressively articulate. All these attributes of my beer pong partner make me want to get to know him better. I may want to team up with him again in a different exhibition of our ability to work together; I want to work towards our common goals of making a difference, of scoring for the team that works towards justice.

Many Americans may look back on college fun as just that—fun. Stupid. Drunken. Immature. But fun, nonetheless. With our cultural tendency to observe a strict dichotomy of work and play, we allow for no overlap. If something is to be fun, then no work can be involved. But at a wild college party, even though no one would admit it, we are working on building social capital and we are performing cultural work by living out the expectations of a college party, work that we are supposedly rebelling against at a party.

Parties happen every weekend, all over this campus, and all over campuses across the country. Most of them end up with empty beer cans and empty relationships. But it doesn't have to be that way. Parties can end up with something much more significant. For relationships to open lines of honest and personal communication, both parties need to reach a level of comfort and familiarity. College parties can do just that—they begin conversations, albeit shallow and usually intoxicated, that lead to establishing community.

Friendly Fun

Thursday was my roommate's birthday. So, Thursday night was fun. According to the cultural scripts of college fun, we should have celebrated her twentieth year with alcohol and loud music and lots of people, wearing tight shirts and lots of makeup. Instead, we celebrated with brownies and conversation and a close group of friends, wearing pajamas and "party" hats. Despite our cultural deviance, we still had fun.

Rather than the 8-5 Monday to Friday schedule of a typical American working adult, college students have more freedom in work and play. Despite our relaxed schedule of intermittent classes and part-time campus jobs, college students actually spend a lot of time working. It's not rare to see a college student hard at work on a Sunday afternoon or at midnight on any given night of the week. To carve three hours out of the week for a birthday "party" is an exception in our nights spent in the library. And it's fun.

We shared stories and a pan of brownies. Talking about summer plans and study abroad plans and life plans, this birthday party was not just to celebrate my roommate's past, but to celebrate the possibilities in our futures. College friendships can be about sharing beers, but more often than not, they are about sharing our hopes and dreams. Genuine friendships are fun on their own. They can exist outside of a party or consumer culture. College friendships transcend fun; they are the bond that brings a college student through each layer of fun—they are central to the enjoyment of party fun, and mediated fun, and sporting fun.

Many college students conform to the expectations of professors, peers, and parents. But, some of us are cultural rebels, not just because overwhelming societal expectations require us to challenge authority. We challenge the politics and societal rules of this country if we disagree. We passionately believe in the goodness of the human heart. And we see the potential to make change in ourselves and our generation. The Beastie Boys sing (more or less shout) that college students must "Fight for your right to PAAAAARTY!" but many more of us are concerned with fighting for justice and peace. When we get together to have fun, we not only catch up on each other's lives, but we share our ideas on larger issues that transcend our dorm rooms.

All of us at the birthday party have attended a typical college party and participated in the available activities. We had fun. And we will go again. But we unanimously agree that we can have fun without the classic college party ingredients. We only need each other—people we care about and the stories we share. And a pan of brownies.

The Fun of Social Studies

We sit in the Cage surrounded by piles of homework—accounting in one quadrant, Spanish in another, a computer or two in use, and three iPods undoubtedly playing three different songs. I have some private fun reading a satirical commentary on film noir, but I would never admit it. Eyes appear over the computer on my left. “How much longer?” the invisible mouth asks. My friends and I establish rules when studying in the Cage. We set a timer, and focus diligently in our studies for an hour or so, until the timer (usually a cell phone alarm—we make use of all available technologies) goes off, telling us its time to have fun. Deferred gratification. Sort of. College culture tells us that we must wait until the weekend to have fun, but we don’t listen.

For ten minutes following the timer’s announcement, we allow ourselves to talk with each other. We discuss the trivial, like conversations we had that day or who we saw on a Caf date. In a culture of complaint, we inevitably mention our revulsion for the dreaded homework surrounding us and vocalize our constant internal countdown to the weekend. Sometimes, though, the conversation leads to something of substance. As the future Spanish teacher empathetically shares stories of family joy and humor, my respect for her compassionate disposition develops. The circle tables are circles of trust. We talk about things that matter to us, what we want to do with our lives on the Hill and in the world.

A contagious giggle from my other side rings throughout the open air of Buntrock—and often attracts a number of eyes in our direction. Our academic façade of books and notebooks and computers clashes with our explosions of laughter. Our fellow Cage studiers insist that work cannot be fun. But, sometimes we simply laugh for the fun of it, because it feels good. Because it is just fun to have fun.

The outsiders may view our use of the timer as a sign of poor study habits. Maybe we should stick to the books. Lock ourselves in the library and not come out until May. Never have any fun. But college is a time to learn not only how the world works through study of calculus or sociology or physics or political science, but how we—the students—work in it. In biology, we learn our physiological needs are simple. Food. Water. Shelter. College students know best, however, that human beings are social creatures, and we need time with people, too. As Michael Schudson puts it, human beings are “social entities, not biological machines.”² Instead of feeling guilty about having fun while studying, we use the Cage to balance our collegiate goals of studying the books, studying each other, and studying ourselves.

² Schudson, Michael. *Delectable Materialism*.

The comedian on my right begins an anecdotal account of the twenty minutes she disappeared at the party last weekend. The “college fun” experienced on Saturday night was, of course, fun. Because the fun of college parties derives from a combination of beers and peers, parties are more fun when shared with people you already know and will talk to afterwards. Creating the memory on Saturday was fun, but it’s also fun, maybe even more fun, to hear stories of what happened in a sober (not somber) state on Monday afternoon.

Romantic Fun

Valentine’s Day is a holiday of conventions. While most college couples succumb to commercial expectations surrounding this season of love, college relationships are far from conventional. In a culture of hanging out and hooking up, physical fun often precedes emotional fun.³ The baggage of a monogamous relationship is work, but sexual play is just fun. Conventional dating fun is often nonexistent because it is equated with spending money, something college students just don’t have.

Still dating my high school boyfriend, I am the poster girl for unconventional college relationships. Social pressure tells those of us naïve enough to believe in the power of true love to grow up, get real, and move on. I listen to friends’ stories of evenings at parties leading to the bedroom, of the fun of hooking up that carries no additional baggage of an actual committed, monogamous relationship. At times, I wonder if that would be more fun.

Forty five miles and a night class prohibited a conventional Valentine’s date night of dinner and a movie, but Thomas sent flowers to fulfill his role as caring, responsible boyfriend. While we like to think that our relationship defies the social rules of dating in a consumer society, we occasionally succumb to the publicized romances of the movies or Hallmark.

The flowers arrived at the post office in Buntrock, and I somewhat sheepishly carried the package through the student center and back to Mohn. Somewhat reluctant to admit that I am a hopeless romantic, I am slightly embarrassed at the impracticality of flowers—a fleeting symbol of endless fidelity and affection. I carried my flowers up to my dorm room before reading the attached card.

“Loving is not about looking at each other, but looking in the same direction.” I smile, and am reminded once again that the fun of my relationship transcends

³ Title taken from survey...?

physical play with a different guy every weekend. It's more fun than the thrill of the hunt. Or the excitement of novelty.

In *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, Eva Illouz contends that products of market-based romance, like the flowers I received, "take into account, rather than exclude, people's own understandings of their practices." In other words, while the gesture may be a cultural expectation that results from capitalism, my happiness in receiving the flowers is still genuine. There was no reason for my internal battle. People buy flowers aware they will die, that they will soon pass away into memory. But they also know that they are beautiful, romantic, and a well-established cultural expression of love. Florists are not keeping the conventionality of flowers a secret; they are blabbing it all over billboards and internet sites. Conventional romance is not a bad thing, although it is not perfect, either.

Even though our relationship is well established, we still value the romance of dating. In today's society, dating has become the "symbolic and practical penetration of romance by the market."⁴ We enjoy the fun of participating in consumer culture: going out to dinner or to a movie are conventional dates, after all, because they are enjoyable. Other peoples' enjoyment of these activities does not detract from ours. And it doesn't make our experience together any less genuine.

Even when we try to avoid conventional romance and simply want to spend time together, devoting our complete attention to the simple pleasure of conversation, we fail. We know the distractions of school and work and home get in the way of that conversation, so we escape to somewhere quiet. Somewhere we know we can talk. So oftentimes, our dates take place in coffee shops. Coffee has been culturally promoted as the beverage of intellectual conversations. It is a drink for adults, so it complements our conversations about future life plans; it is a drug that seemingly helps us figure out what we want to do with our lives. Our fun at coffee shops depends on the conversation, not consumption, although these conversations take place within consumer culture. We hesitate to admit it, but culture is unavoidable.

Thomas and I enjoy spending time together outdoors; we run, walk, hike, swim, fish, and boat together. We think we are rebels, but all of these activities are cultural constructions, too. Recreational running and walking have no practical purpose—we are not going anywhere—but they make us feel more fit and attractive according to our cultural conception of beauty. And, like a coffee shop, nature provides a setting for good conversation. After spending all day inside at work or school, we love going outside. We like to spend weekends or holidays at his parents' cabin in

⁴ *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, 14

northern Minnesota. The romance of being alone, of escaping distractions, of sharing our love for nature is a lot more fun for us than the conventional romance of candlelight dinners at fancy restaurants. But romance in nature is not our own idea; it is just a cultural construction of another sort.

Culture gives us labels to things and emotions and patterns that take place in our everyday lives. As a "seamless web of meanings people draw on to make sense of social situations," our culture helps us figure out the world around us.⁵ It provides a context through which we can see the world. As much as we want to be non-conformists, we cannot help but succumb to the pressures of American culture. And that is okay.

Those Valentine's Day flowers came with a message that speaks to the heart of my relationship with Thomas. At this point in our lives, we use each other to work through personal thoughts that we would not feel comfortable talking about with other people. Our closeness allows any reservations, any self-consciousness, to take a break. We reveal our true selves to each other. Right now, we talk a lot about how we want to head into the world after college. What we want to do. And how we want to do it. Our relationship looks out more than it looks in.

This stage of our relationship grew out of fun. We did not talk about the complexities of politics or religion or culture on our first date. Superficial fun is necessary in dating. Following cultural scripts of dating (which are probably the most well-versed scripts in American culture) is not a bad thing. It brought us to where we are today. And it will benefit others besides the two of us. Indirectly, fun made us better people. It helped us articulate our hopes and dreams, and it gave us the courage to express ourselves to another person. Because we continue to encounter new experiences and develop new thoughts on love and life, we continue to have superficial fun together. Even though sometimes we just enjoy the fun of going out and participating in consumer culture, sometimes the superficial fun goes deep. We keep going out to dinner or coffee to have these conversations. Whether over dinner, coffee, or a run through the woods, conventions of romance, and of fun, benefits my relationship with Thomas and my relationship with the world.

Mediated Fun

Life on the Hill, literally and figuratively, feels far above the world below. As an academic institution, we like to think of ourselves above the masses. Above pop-culture. Above the trash. Despite our global-consciousness, our small community often seems consumed with itself. We live out our routines, following the scripts of

⁵ Illouz, 19.

college culture. When college students actually take the time to contemplate or analyze present American culture, we focus on the negative. We complain that Americans are increasingly competitive, materialistic, and individualistic. But Tuesday nights, I allow myself the pleasure of joining the masses. Even though it may be trash, I watch *American Idol*.

I enter the Pause a few minutes before seven on Tuesday night, filled with anticipation. I probably should be working on that paper due on Thursday or reading for class tomorrow morning. I could have signed up for an extra hour of work during the week, using this time to make money. Or I could go back to my dorm and spend time with my closest friends. Of all the other things I could or should do, I choose *American Idol*. I know, week after week, I will not be disappointed.

As the over-the-top cheesy host, Ryan Seacrest, introduces the finalists for *American Idol*, my heart skips a beat—I cannot wait for them to walk out of the metallic set lit by flashing laser beams and mesmerizing disco balls. What will my favorite wear? How did she do her hair? The top five emerge to a crowd of screaming fans. Inside, I am screaming, too. This rush of excitement is fun for me because of my mixed expectations. On the surface level, the show is always the same. Ryan introduces a contestant, a video introducing their song choice plays while the singer moves to center stage, she sings her song, the judges bash her or shower her with praise (or some of each), and then the show moves on. But as a true fan, I know the unpredictability of a ride on *American Idol*. I know the highs and lows of performances, the compassion of some judges juxtaposed with the cruelty of another. It is fun to sing along, to hear a new voice sing a familiar song. It is fun to live out my childhood naiveté of my own singing and dancing abilities when I put myself up on that tacky stage. When the song is over, my true clumsy, awkward self comes back. Taking revenge, I criticize the performer for any flaws that may have showed up during the performances. Although this hour is my break from the routine of my daily life, I find it incredibly taxing. No other show is able to give me this thrill ride into the world of musical competition.

An unofficial weekly fan club of strangers has formed in the Pause. We bond over our passion for *American Idol*. But really, we only gather here because we cannot get television reception in our individual dorm rooms. We ride the rollercoaster of emotions of this inevitably dramatic show together, and we get to know each other along the way. Our reactions to the contestants vary as much as our personalities, so we talk about what we like and don't like. The social construction of taste helps us articulate our reactions to the contestants; it tells us that each performer can appeal to the variety of opinions in the audience. The show educates me, not only on a variety of musical artists, but also on a variety of fellow St. Olaf students.

It is possible to ride a rollercoaster alone, but it's a lot more fun to ride it with others. Hearing the screams of laughter or terror builds your anticipation as you come to the great drop; watching the community of hands thrash through air as you are tossed around each corner makes the turns feel sharper. In the same way, riding *American Idol* is a lot more fun when I watch it with others. The silence that overcomes the Pause during a moving ballad; the smiles and bouncing movement that accompany an upbeat pop song; the harmony of off-tune voices during an infamous classic. These communal reactions heighten the overall *American Idol* experience.

American Idol is a gift that keeps on giving. When I see fellow fans on campus throughout the week, we talk about the show. Who will be next kicked off? What song should everyone sing for "songs from the year you were born" or "The Beatles classics" theme nights? There is fun in competition and strategy because it allows us to carry out our thoughts and opinions without real consequences, because (unlike in the real world) life can be as simple as right and wrong, and because there is a clear winner. While it may be rare for the show to bring fans together in a literal sense such as it does for the Pause fan club (since most Americans have their own televisions), at the heart of the show is the desire to bring Americans together in conversation. *American Idol* discussion takes place on the radio and in the newspaper, at the breakfast table and around the office coffee pot. Pop culture, after all, is whatever is popular and reflects the interests of the masses. In an individualistic society, we all too often deny the things that bring us together. We emphasize our differences in hopes of standing out from the crowd.

On Tuesday nights, while the live feed from Hollywood reaches our small fan club in Northfield, Minnesota, I leave behind my critical self-consciousness. If I put my American Studies mind to work, I can think about all the reasons why I shouldn't watch the show. I can see its use of conventions and corniness to capture the attention of the American audience. When I see in the weekly report of television reports that *American Idol* is the top-rated show, I am fully aware that the popularity is equated in advertising dollars, not emotionally moved fans. I know that the judges make millions of dollars to do the same thing the rest of us do from our living rooms (or student unions).

All those criticisms are undoubtedly true. For me, however, they do not take away from the joy of *American Idol*. The contestants have an unprecedented opportunity to share their talents with millions of people. Our mediated world may be to blame for a perceived over-exposure of sex and violence or the loss of cultural identity in the spread of American movies and television and music across the globe. But it also

has allowed for mediated fun, a fun that not only brings pleasure to the individual, but that brings people together in a shared media experience.

Sporting Fun:

A few friends and I went to the men's basketball game against Carleton. Many of us played basketball in high school, so we go to watch our team play the game we all love. But we also know that, because we are playing our rivals from across the river, the game will draw a huge crowd. College sports, after all, are not just about the fundamentals of the sport. They are about the *fun*-damentals of college.

Before the game, we dug through our closets for anything black and gold. The players are assigned uniforms as members of the team, but as fans, we have to pull together our own uniforms. Some of us wore sweatshirts with "St. Olaf" across the chest or t-shirts that said "Um Ya Ya." Others chose apparel we received from participation in other sports, advertising not only our school pride, but also our contribution to the efforts of athletic competition. Just like the team, we wore our unofficial uniforms to look like we belong. To look like Oles.

We walked up the bleacher stairs, waving to people across the way, stopping to talk with a few others. Going to college basketball games requires more than just watching the action on the court below. We have to understand our role as fans, and work together as a cohesive unit to support our team. The brief greetings around the stands may seem superficial since they are fleeting interactions, but they contribute to our sense of connection to one another. It's fun to go to sporting events because they are social—they bring people together into Skoglund, where we can all wear the same color scheme and cheer for the same team. We play off each others' energy, but we perform cultural work.

While many Americans think they maintain a strict separation between work and play, sports challenge our hypocrisy, even though no one would ever admit it. After the National Anthem at a baseball game, the crowd yells an emphatic "Play ball!" But, we refer to the interactions between the *players* "teamwork," practices are often referred to as "work outs," and the coach yells for his players to work the ball around the perimeter while looking for a good angle into the basket. If athletes are doing all this work, what are they getting out of it? Social capital, among other things.

The athletes work as a team towards common goals of scoring and winning. Along the way, they work on their relationships and try to understand how their individual roles contribute to the community. They depend on each other, trust each other. They all individually have fun with a basketball and a hoop, spending countless

hours shooting around throughout the week. They have fun at practice, but it is a lot of work, too. The real fun of the game comes on game night, when they play with each other. And because it is more fun to win than lose, they have fun when the team works together.

Due to the spectacle of sport as events that draw crowds, the fun of attending games is work. As fans, my friends and I join the crowd in supporting both the team's work and play. We cheer (working so hard that we may strain our voices) for them to win because we think a successful basketball team is a reflection of the quality of our school. They are not just competing for the higher score tonight; they are competing for bragging rights over our arch-rivals. Rights that extend off the court. We live vicariously through our team; we experience the emotional highs and lows of competition; we celebrate victory and grieve defeat.

Sports give all of us a sense of belonging, despite the range of knowledge and interest in basketball in the stands. We all have different majors, live in different dorms, and are involved in different activities on campus. But at the game, we are all Oles. And we all want our team to win.

The fun of sports is not limited to the athletes, but neither is the work. True, none of the hundreds of students in the bleachers tonight go to daily basketball practice. We don't spend the off-season running or weightlifting with this game in mind. But, as we cheer for the team and sing the school song, my friends and I are having a lot of fun. We work hard to make sure all the Carls hear the words. The game drew a huge crowd, and the mobs of Oles in Skoglund came together with pride to sing a rousing version of "Um Ya Ya." Playing sports, or just watching others play, is fun. But the work of sports, the demands placed on fans to cheer and sing together, is fun, too.

The Fun of Escape

Countdown. Ten minutes until study break. Four days until weekend break. Three weeks until Spring Break. My whole life is a countdown. A countdown to fun.

I sit in the library, anxiously tapping my pen as I read about the Norwegian modern welfare state. I think about all the things I would rather be doing (an itemized list much longer than the pages I have left to read this afternoon). My eyes glaze over the page. I wake up to catch my head before it bangs the hardwood tables in the reference room. I realize how futile my efforts are at the moment, and I grab my Nalgene and take a break.

Study breaks are an escape, albeit brief, from my imprisonment in the library. I walk to the Cage to refill my water bottle—an errand I use as an excuse to move around;

an errand inspired by my hope of running into someone I know. The fun of escape is not just physical, but also emotional and social. I take study breaks because I need spontaneity, a break from the habits I practice in the library. I take breaks to escape the silence of studying.

With a full water bottle and a renewed sense of motivation (barely), I turn from the water cooler, only to find a familiar face a few feet away. I approach my friend, hoping she is willing to talk for a few minutes. On a campus of academic perfectionists, it can sometimes be hard to coordinate study breaks with others. But this time, we were both looking for the same thing. Fun.

Even though it is Tuesday afternoon, we talk about weekend plans. College students like to think of college fun as wild. Crazy. Spontaneous. But really, it is all planned out way in advance. Our fun follows the cultural scripts of college fun; it mimics fun had by college students all across the country.⁶

Attempts to define “fun” often include the perception of choice—fun occurs in our free time. The social construction of time governs our activities so that we perceive our days to be broken into work and play, into the meaningful and the superficial, monotonous and spontaneous, boring and fun. Dichotomies are easier for us to understand, so we categorize everything into series of opposites. But really, all those dichotomies are just opposite ends of a spectrum; most of the time you are experiencing varying degrees of both notions at the same time.

As my friend and I are talking—as we are having fun—that book in the reference room nags at the back of my mind. The constant pressures of a college student to work through texts we read for class, to work through ideas in essays, to work together in group projects, to work through review materials to perform on a test are always there. In times of fun, I cannot help but think about work. Even though this study break was my momentary escape from the demands of work, I never fully escape the pressure to work.

The pressure to work, however, is constantly overshadowed by the pressure to have fun. As a culture of complaint, society allows students to agonize over comparisons of work to be done. But we can never complain about fun. The assumption that we should never want to work and always want to have fun controls our perception of college life. Most of us simply live a life of countdowns—a constant countdown to

⁶ The search for original fun is pointless, because all experiences follow cultural scripts and are perceived through our culturally-defined sense of common sense.

fun—because we think it is only natural. College fun performs the cultural work of making us think that we are imprisoned by work to affirm the concept of free time and the rule that fun takes place in that so-called “free” time.

The Fun of Work

I came to college with the hopes and fears of any other first-year student, nervous and excited about everything from navigating the Caf to making new friends and doing well in my classes. I knew college would be a lot of work. I hoped it would be fun. I know now that it is both, often all at the same time.

I walked into my assigned classroom on the first day. Everyone seemed to know each other, hugging friends they didn’t see all summer and laughing when reliving past jokes from previous years. I thought I was the only first-year in the class; I was overwhelmed with fear of the unknown and surrounded with experienced upperclassmen. I didn’t know what to expect. So I took a seat and prayed I didn’t make a fool of myself.

My dread of going to that first class was quickly replaced with sheer anticipation once the semester began. My schedule for the first semester of my freshman year was nearly filled with classes that fulfilled G.E. requirements but not my personal sense of fulfillment. Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, however, served as my reprieve from the monotony of all that college academic work. It was my opportunity for college academic play, a concept foreign and exciting to me.

Throughout the semester, we talked about things I actually cared about. We read books that helped me articulate how I feel about the state of American history, politics, education, economics, religion, environmentalism, and cultural norms. We talked about our hopes and values—something I found challenging in the foreign waters of the college classroom. I wrote journals that connected classroom conversations to my own personal experiences. This process made me aware of how college academics can transform my perception of my daily life; that the things I do and think and say are influenced by cultural constructions. As a whole, the reading and writing and discussing in this course were a lot of work.

Although Americans religiously follow the dichotomy of work and play, college is not fun simply because there is the absence of work. The American Heritage dictionary defines fun as “a source of enjoyment, amusement, or pleasure.”⁷ That is what academics should deliver. The college classroom can be the setting for students to make connections between what we think and what we know, what we see and

⁷ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/fun>

what we dream, what we say and what we do. It is hard work to challenge the preconceived notions of college academics. But using the college classroom to bring together all those connections, to discover who we are and what we care about, is fun.

A lot of the time, college classes are really boring. Students can spend college sitting through (or maybe sleeping through) a few hours of class each day. Most of us do enough to pass the class, get the credit, and move on with our lives. We cram in facts and figures and philosophies for a test, and forget it all as soon as we can. College can be just about the attainment of the degree. It can be work. But even with all that work, college students can graduate learning nothing.

College can and should teach us about ourselves, our world, and how the two work together. When that happens, the work becomes fun. Because it matters. Because we care. So really, fun is more valuable than work. Or at least, work that is fun is more valuable than work that is not.

The American Heritage dictionary definitions of “academics” include “scholarly to the point of being unaware of the outside world” and “having no practical purpose or use.”⁸ These definitions reflect the hypocrisy in our understanding of academics as work, and not fun. They tell us that academics are not *supposed* to be fun, so most of the time college professors assign work and college students do work. College fun happens at weekend parties or late night gatherings or the big game. It stays where it belongs—in consumer culture of restaurants or movie theaters or clubs. It depends on the stuff we can buy, like beer or pizza or a basketball.

Writing a paper about college fun, as part of an academic exploration into the history and cultural norms of such a large part of the American daily life, was a lot of work. I read books and discussed theories. I took notes. I received a course credit and a grade. But somehow, I managed to have fun. This exploration into the complexities of fun connected my daily life as a college student with the fun of college academics. I challenged preconceptions, cultural definitions, and social constructions. I discovered the limits of American dichotomies and the hypocrisies of our social expectations. I acknowledged the value of popular culture and convention. I praised the desire of belonging and conversation. As an American fundamentalist, all this work was in honor and devotion of Fun.

⁸ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/academic>