



In a challenging economic environment, St. Olaf embraces the responsibility to do what it can to help students discern their vocations and launch them into that work.

DEAR OLES,

THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE of the magazine all speak to the ways in which we prepare students for life after St. Olaf. Certainly, a liberal arts education is an end in itself, and there's no doubt about the intangible benefits it provides over the course of a lifetime. Nevertheless, the fact remains that after graduation students need a tangible result as well: to be launched toward a vocation that will not only fulfill but also support them. We are committed to assisting with that endeavor.

“Vocation” is a word you hear frequently at St. Olaf, often in the company of “discernment.” Vocational discernment is the process by which students discover their calling. One’s “vocation” includes not only a job but also, and more deeply, an understanding of one’s true gifts and talents and a plan for using them for the good of the world. Finding that vocation takes time, but it may be the most important outcome of a St. Olaf education.

Oles leave the Hill headed in many directions. About 33 percent go directly to graduate and professional school; another 10 percent volunteer full-time for organizations such as the Peace Corps, Lutheran Volunteer Corps, or Teach for America. But most students, the remaining 57 percent, enter the work force.

The process of vocational discernment begins at the Center for Experiential Learning. The CEL engages students as early as their first year in college, providing interest inventories, internships, opportunities for civic engagement and volunteerism, assistance with application for post-graduate fellowships, advice with resumes and interviews, and — most crucially — connections with alumni who can provide mentoring, open doors at companies and nonprofits, and support and encourage a student’s vocational quest. The article “Live and Learn” in this issue depicts how the CEL assisted five Oles in their vocational discernment. It’s an iterative process that begins with early engagement with the CEL, followed by experimentation, imagination, hard work, and careful thought. But the results are excellent.

Similarly, the portraits of family physician Dr. Jon Hallberg '88 and Foreign Service Officer Briana Saunders '00 provide two more extended narratives of the path from here to there. Both have a remarkable range of interests — science, music, languages, economics — and both excel in more than one area. Both have found ways to weave their varied interests together, shape fascinating careers, and find personal fulfillment, and in doing so, they do good in the world. Hallberg and Saunders offer two compelling answers to the question of what you can do with a liberal arts degree.

The journeys Oles take to their various destinations all begin with the fundamental work of the liberal arts as exemplified in the discipline of philosophy: learning to reason systematically, problem solve, listen and debate, and write well. It’s a sign of a healthy environment when the study of philosophy flourishes alongside the intentional exploration of vocation.

In a challenging economic environment, St. Olaf embraces the responsibility to do what it can to help students discern their vocations and launch them into that work. Our students certainly deserve that, and the world needs their gifts and talents. We are eager to see where their journeys lead.

*David R. Anderson*