

# Competitive Spirit

## Partners in Annual Giving gets a boost from the Twin Cities Corporate Giving Challenge.

By Suzy Frisch

By nature, most people who work in corporate America are competitive. They strive to top their rivals in results, customers, or product quality and work tirelessly to make sure it happens. So when St. Olaf decided to reach out to more alumni working in the Twin Cities business community, a little competition was in order.

St. Olaf launched its Corporate Giving Challenge in 2008, aiming to boost the number of alumni donors from Twin Cities companies. The college initially teamed with five businesses that employ large groups of St. Olaf alumni; it gave each firm one month to motivate their Oles to participate in Partners in Annual Giving, the college's annual fund. The corporation that saw the biggest increase in percentage of alumni employees who contribute to St. Olaf earned bragging rights for the year.

"The whole idea behind the Corporate Challenge was to use some good-natured competition and bring out people's competitive juices for St. Olaf's benefit," says John Haugen '86, vice president of health and wellness at General Mills, who helped coordinate the Challenge. "People are looking for inspiration, a reason to get involved."

This year's seven participating companies — Ameriprise, Cargill, General Mills, Health Partners, Thomson, Thrivent, and Wells Fargo — named team leaders who reached out to their Ole coworkers and asked them to donate any amount to St. Olaf. Despite a tepid economy that widely suppressed philanthropy across the country, St. Olaf still saw an increase in alumni donors at these companies.

In the competition's first year, some of the businesses saw

significant increases in the percentage of Ole employees who contribute to the college. For example, General Mills increased its employee participation from 38 percent to 70 percent between 2007 and 2008, while Ameriprise experienced a jump from 36 percent to 52 percent.

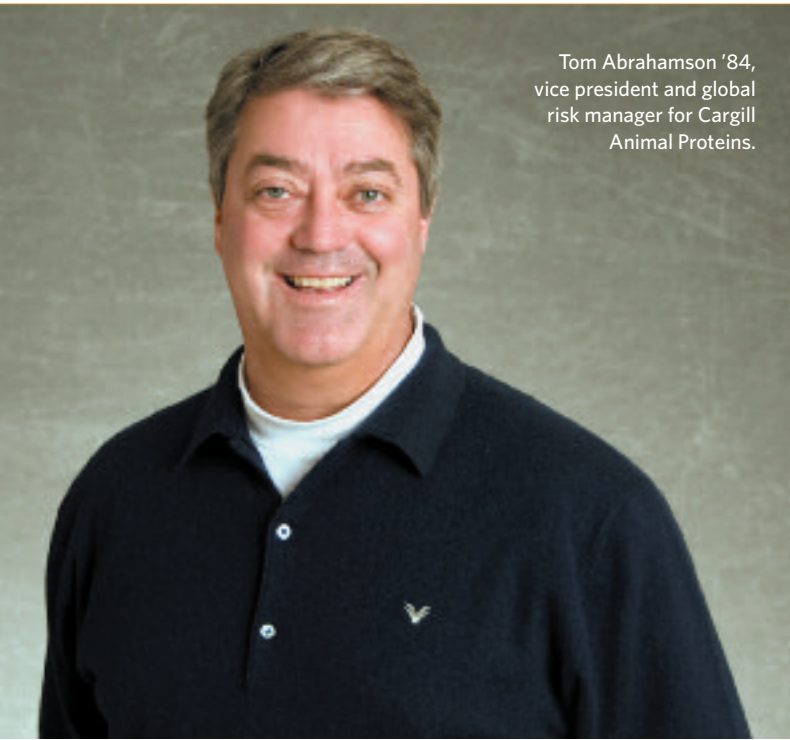
Increases from 2008 to 2009 were smaller, a reflection of the hard-hitting recession. Yet during the campaign's first two years, St. Olaf boosted the percentage of corporate donors from these seven companies from 167 people in 2007 to 185 in 2009. Together, the contributors increased their total giving from \$82,917 in 2007 to \$98,787 in 2009.

Tom Abrahamson '84, vice president and global risk manager for Cargill Animal Proteins, says his competitive spirit took hold when he heard about the Corporate Challenge. He was also inspired to help St. Olaf increase its overall percentage of alumni who donate to the college. Cargill joined the Corporate Challenge in the program's second year, and Abrahamson went to work connecting with the fifty-one Oles at the company. He was able to boost Cargill employees' giving participation from 27 percent to 37 percent in one year.

BILL KELLEY



John Haugen '86, vice president of health and wellness at General Mills.



Tom Abrahamson '84,  
vice president and global  
risk manager for Cargill  
Animal Proteins.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CARGILL

“I think many of us feel we are fortunate to have been given the opportunity to work for a great company, and we’ve been rewarded over the years,” says Abrahamson, who has worked at Cargill for twenty-five years. “A lot of the credit goes back to graduating from a good school that provided us with a strong education and experience. Many of us feel we should go back and support our college for helping us achieve some level of success.”

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This spring the Challenge will continue, and St. Olaf intends to enlist several new major employers. Eventually the college will launch Corporate Giving Challenges in other cities with big clusters of Oles, such as Chicago, Washington, D.C., or Seattle. It’s all part of a larger effort to spread the word that St. Olaf students need help shouldering the cost of a higher education, and that every gift assists St. Olaf in keeping its standards of excellence high for students, faculty, and resources.

“The spirit of the Corporate Challenge ... was to drive higher levels of engagement over time and [be] ... an inspiration for other people to get off the bench,” says Haugen. “We all have a lot of gratitude for our college and a lot that we can give back.”

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