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DON EZRA CRUZ PLEMONS

# Staff Governance at St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN

At the end of Summer, just as the academic year was unleashing its usual cannonade of events, excitement and stress, I was gifted an opportunity to unplug. While campus was engulfed by move-in weekend, student orientation, the hustle to find twin-XL sheets and door-mounted full-length mirrors, I escaped to the north shore of Minnesota and the wild coast of Lake Superior. I slept by waves beneath a cliff. I reflected on glaciers, granite, greenstone, greywacke. I sorted rocks and hunted agate. And since I can't really unplug: I thought about Staff Governance.

Staff Governance at St. Olaf does not exist. At least, not formally. But, as it does exist, it is a lot like the rocky beach up north: many individual pieces, composed of various layers and materials, set under extreme pressure and conditions over a long period of time. Some are worn smooth by the water, weather and currents. Others are younger breaks, still jagged and sharp at the edges.

Our work on Staff Governance began, as likely is the case on many campuses, as a reaction to trauma. For St. Olaf staff, we'd felt a steady decade of difficult events; In the past 10 years the community has directly experienced Title IX conflicts, anti-racism student protests, departmental reallocations, public departures of prominent staff and faculty. A global pandemic. The murder of George Floyd. And meanwhile, the balance between personal lives and work as staff were asked to stretch further than

ever to support connection and belonging and the worthy outcomes of student success.

It has been a convergence of many efforts, made crystal-line through common struggles and a shared vision: that staff would have a voice and seat at the table, alongside Faculty and Students, with the deciding leadership of the college. Affinity groups began providing spaces where staff could unite and speak freely. The Council for Equity and Inclusion investigated methods to improve promotion, retention and arbitration of complaints. The Task Force to Confront Structural Racism at St. Olaf unearthed the gaps in staff representation within the college and researched models of governance at peer institutions.

In 2022, facilitated by HR, members of these groups, plus others from across all divisions of the college, met in earnest to draft potential bylaws and committee structures. This new group consisted of hourly and exempt staff. The draft was completed and given to St. Olaf's new president, Dr. Susan Rundell Singer. After an early meeting with her we were encouraged to continue working as a community. This year we'll be communicating with staff to gather feedback and interest. We'll work with Faculty allies and



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learn from our peers who have also recently taken these paths. We wish to bring our work to the surface.

It no longer feels accurate to say that our development of a Staff Governance model is simply *work in progress* and instead is, with the power of a glacier, advancing steadily forward. I've been honored to work alongside so many dedicated people at this institution. What has

been a sustained effort by the staff community, now over 3 years, is a demonstration of some of the best qualities you would hope to see in any workforce: thoughtful in their approaches, resilient through difficulties, and possessing an intentional compassion for the most marginalized voices and underrepresented members of their body. It feels we can move, albeit slowly, and reshape the landscape of our work.