

# OLIVERIAN

A school as unique as its students.

## "I'm Oli!" Latest News from Oliverian

### Olisophy: Try and try and try again

Message from Will Laughlin  
Head of School/CEO



Will Laughlin, Head of School/CEO

One of my heroes here at Oliverian School is our academic director, Abby Hood. She is charming and smart and kind and, as well, models the most Oliverian of qualities-an abiding love for quirky teenagers. Our students are the ones Steve Jobs celebrated when he exhorted the world to "think different." Everybody got excited when he said that. They thought that was a great thing to say and, ironically, all went out and bought the same computers as a result.

Of course, most continued to think the way they always had, which was not different. That's because what Mr. Jobs failed to mention is that thinking different makes you, well, different. And that can be hard. It means that you might not easily or automatically feel at home in most settings, since most settings-schools, programs, places of worship, fraternities, sororities, workplaces and, even, families-value sameness.

But our students do "think different," and Abby delights in solving the problems that our different-thinking, delightfully peculiar, smart, misunderstood, out-of-place teenagers routinely experience. Problems like how to be yourself without annoying others, how to do the usual things-like algebra-in unusual ways, how to deal with loneliness and anxiety, how to be a great friend, and how to feel at home wherever you happen to be.

A seven-year veteran of the school, Abby is a keeper of the Oliverian flame; she is deeply in touch with what makes Oliverian unique and powerful for our different-thinking kids. Last week I asked her to explain a deceptively simple, profoundly useful Oliverian heuristic (i.e. guiding principle) that we call "try and try and try again..." Following is an excerpt from our conversation.

Will: Abby!

Abby: Will!

Will: So one of your favorite Oli sayings is "try and try and try again." The definition of insanity I've often heard is to try the same thing over and over expecting a different outcome. So surely that's not what you mean by try and try and try again.

Abby: Well, sometimes it actually is. The reason that's not insane when you're working with people and trying to help them achieve significant change is that they often have to practice things a lot in order to internalize and do them naturally. So for instance a kid who's struggling to learn keep track of assignments and manage himself is going to need reminders over and over and over and over. It's very tempting as an educator to think, "well, I taught him the system and I reminded him three times, so why hasn't he mastered it yet?" But if the student has a deficit in that area and has never done it before and it's really hard for him, he's probably going to need to try it dozens of times before it really takes hold.

So sometimes, when you know you're on the right track with someone, persistence with a single approach and enough repetition to create a new routine is the key.

Will: So you said "sometimes" trying the same thing over and over is the key. What about other times?

Abby: In other situations, "try and try and try again" means being able to abandon the thing that you thought was the perfect solution to try something totally different.

For instance, we have a great and comprehensive planner system that we adapted from our work with NYU a few years ago; it works beautifully with many of our students. But for some it's just too much. We have one student we'll call "Joe" for whom that was the case recently. So we tried and tried and tried other approaches with Joe's input until we landed upon one that really works for him. Now he literally just opens his notebook and writes everything down on one list and crosses it off when it's done. For Joe, less is more, even though for most of our other students a more comprehensive approach works best.

Will: So is the real issue here that a different approach might actually push the teacher out of their preferred methodology and comfort zone?

Abby: Yep.

Will: So if trying and trying and trying again is so simple and works so well, why do we have to remind ourselves to do it?

Abby: Well, I think it's something that any good educator strives, or should strive, to do. Even the schools that haven't worked for our kids would agree that it's best to keep working with every kid until you find the solution. In some cases it's just that they just don't have the personnel to pull that off to the extent that our students need. It's easy for any educator's attention to drift away from certain students either because they are problematic or because they manage to make themselves invisible. So this heuristic is just a reminder that if things are not working for a given student, we need to try a new strategy. It's never just over in terms of our opportunity to innovate and find a way.

Will: In Japan when one of my university colleagues was faced with something difficult, we would shout, "Gambate!" which means, "Try hard!" and the person would reply, "Gambare mas!" which means, "I'll try hard!" We were cheerleading for them to keep at it and not give up. Is "try and try and try again" the same kind of exhortation?

Abby: Yes.

Will: Is this particularly important at a school like Oli?

Abby: I think you're onto it there. It's a pep talk we give ourselves and each other because many of our students have gone through a lot of schools without any of those schools being able to "figure them out," and without the student being able to put together the skills they need to be successful. These are the kids other educators have tended to stop trying with without having discovered what works for them.

So it's our mission to find a way to make it work where others have stopped trying. As long as a child is in our care here we have to be actively thinking about whether things are working or not and, if not, what else we're going to try.

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## "I'm Oli!"

### Q&A with Counselor Julie Tracy-Prieboy

Q: So, Julie, what's your story? How did you find your way to Oliverian?

A: My story? I am from New England originally and have always loved being outdoors with the change of seasons, so I always knew I would return. After college, it took me awhile to figure out how to be an adult but I did learn that I love working with people and supporting their growth in whatever way I can. I started out working in low income home repair, in shelters, non-profit organizations, and chaplain service learning programs. I struggled with the politics of business because I am a person who needs to express myself and not limit any part of who I am as a professional. At Oliverian, I can express myself as a person and continue my counseling work while helping students honor their true selves as well. That is really exciting for me.



*Julie Tracy-Prieboy, counselor*

Q: How are Oliverian students the same or different from other students you have worked with in the past?

A: Oliverian students' needs are the same but the intensity is much less. They still need support and flexibility, individual attention, but they don't need crisis care. Oliverian students need to learn how to make mistakes and grow from those mistakes. The world is messy and we help them deal with that and teach them how they can bounce forward.

Q: What do you love most about Oliverian?

A: I love that I am sharing my life with my students and that I get to see them in

all lights. I see them outside of the classroom, at afternoon activities, and weekend trips. I get to see all their wrinkles and they get to know me on a similar level.

Q: What has surprised you most about Oliverian?

A: My biggest is surprise that the school is willing and able to match the students where they are in life. Oliverian is able to change what is not working and adapt to what the students need and want. A lot of schools say they do this, but they are not able to really pull it off. How exciting that we are able to adapt to what our kids need!

Q: What does being an Oliverian mean to you?

A: Being an Oliverian is being able to show off your nerdiness while being passionate about who you are and not questioning it. Being an Oliverian is all about being authentic. My biggest nerdiness is that I love talking about philosophy and playing games like Settlers of Catan and 7 Wonders. I can do that with our students here and own it!

Q: If you were on a deserted island with one Oliverian faculty member, who would that be and why?

A: Hmm...I would have to say not Will because he would take the whole survival thing way too serious for me. Maybe I just needed water and a banana for the day and not an entire house for the next five years. He would also probably want to go for a 200 mile run and I would be like, "Umm, no thanks. I'm just going to lay out on the beach today." My first choice would probably be Stephanie because we know how to laugh together, although we likely wouldn't survive for very long, but at least we would have a lot of fun while it lasted. Micah would probably be my best choice because we would have great conversations, we could play nerdy games, and use all of our long hair to make nets to catch fish.

Q: Who is your role model, and why?

A: I love Eleanor Roosevelt because she was her own person, she was a powerful and intelligent woman. I always visit her memorial in DC every chance I can get. I love how her memorial acknowledges her as being the first US delegate to the United Nations, and not just revered for bring the first lady.

Q: When are you most serene?

A: I am most serene at sunset, on any body of water, and in a kayak because I love hearing the sounds of water and I am at total peace in nature where my brain can stop and I can just be.

Q: What is your superpower?

A: My superpower is that people want to tell me the truth. Now, that doesn't always mean they tell me the truth, but they want to tell me the truth. And I am pretty good at telling when people are lying.

Q: Are there any last burning questions that I missed or something you want to tell the world?

A: Oliverian is the adventure that just feels right. The seasons change here and I get to see how that affects our students whether it is meeting them in the fall

foliage at the horse barn or on the ski slopes in the snow. This place is really exciting!

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## Students Find Support at Oliverian

Student support is woven throughout all aspects of life at Oliverian. Each student is matched with a counselor, who oversees the student's overall well-being. Most students meet with their counselor once a week, while other students may meet with their counselor several times each week, or even several times a day! Our counselors are eager to help students develop positive relationships, gain confidence in themselves, and balance their academic and social lives.



*Counselor Julie Tracy-Prieboy advises an Oli student before the academic day begins.*

## About Oliverian

Oliverian is a nonprofit coeducational boarding high school committed to students who have struggled in more traditional settings. We take a unique approach to learning by striking a balance between structure and flexibility, support and challenge, and individual and community. Our faculty and staff guide each student toward intellectual and personal self-exploration and growth. We provide students with the opportunity to develop the skills, confidence, responsibility, and independence they need to transition successfully to college and life.

We also offer a seven-week [Summer Session](#) which combines six weeks of academic recovery and enrichment with a one week adventure trip.

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