

SCSU Survey student directors manage all aspects of the survey research arm of the Political Science Department. Pictured are Luke Hofstad, a senior from Andover; and Renee Helm, a senior from St. Joseph



# TALKING POLITICS

Student pollsters practice passion for politics  
SCSU Survey takes Minnesota's pulse

SENIOR RENEE HELM, LEAD STUDENT DIRECTOR FOR THE SCSU SURVEY THIS FALL, IS KEENLY AWARE OF THE ELECTRICITY SURROUNDING THE 2008 NATIONAL ELECTIONS – AND THE ENVIABLE POSITION SHE’S IN TO WATCH THEM UNFOLD.

Eight student directors are selected annually for the SCSU Survey, a respected and increasingly sophisticated statewide arm of the St. Cloud State Department of Political Science. They help develop the questions and lead polling and analysis for about six surveys a year. Taking part in the fall omnibus political survey – especially in a presidential election year – is prime time for these involved students.

“I have to admit I’m a tad jealous,” said former Survey director Jamie Kirsch ’07, who was deployed to Iraq just two months after graduating with a degree in political science. “How exciting to be part of the survey at such an intense time in U.S. history!”

The SCSU Survey usually generates considerable public attention with its fall statewide survey – most famously in 1998. Survey leaders circulated a news release three days before that election heralding the trend toward a Jesse Ventura win in the Minnesota governor’s race. Two of those leaders, political science professors Steve Frank and Steven Wagner, followed that coup with a book about the Ventura phenomenon, “We Shocked the World: A Case Study of Jesse Ventura’s Election as Governor of Minnesota.”

Frank, who started the SCSU Survey 28 years ago, has an infectious passion for all things political. “I’m intensely interested in politics – following it, teaching it, measuring it,” he said. “I think elections matter. Just when you think you’ve got everything figured out, something new comes up. Wow!”

This year is especially a “wow” time in national politics. “I think Americans realize this is a critical election,” he said. “If people can’t see the difference between Barack Obama and John McCain, then there’s no hope.”

Part of the Survey’s success is the

integrity of the Survey team. Clean methodology is crucial to Frank and his colleagues.

The clients who come back to the SCSU Survey – only government or non-profit organizations are accepted – count on the team to poll a representative sampling with good questions to gather the information they need. Don Feeney, research and planning director for the Minnesota Lottery, calls the annual survey the St. Cloud State group has done for the Lottery for 14 years the “gold standard” of gambling surveys.

But while the SCSU Survey’s bread-and-butter clients help pay the bills, the omnibus fall political survey will be the main course this fall for Helm and her fellow student directors and pollsters. And one of the most interesting aspects will be the “feeling thermometer,” Frank’s invention that measures whether people know a candidate well enough to rate him or her and how they feel about the candidate on a scale from 1-100.

How warmly a voter feels about a candidate’s personality and likeability is a big deal, according to Frank. It’s what wins or loses elections. “One of the reasons George Bush won was that he was a better candidate than John Kerry, who came across as aloof and not somebody you could have a beer with over the fence.”

Helm and her colleagues are looking forward to finding out how much that “feeling thing,” as well as the issues Americans are grappling with, will affect this fall’s election. “We’ve been guessing about the outcome of the presidential election since last year,” she said of prognostications based on survey results and historical campaign analysis. “We’re just so excited to see if we’re right.”

Helm, a public administration

major from St. Joseph who’s been a student director since spring 2006, appreciates the opportunity her position offers to delve into political hot-button issues and hobnob with faculty Survey leaders. “I just think it’s an awesome experience.”

“Many say the survey was the kind of experience that helped them get into grad school or get jobs or the kind of experience they normally wouldn’t have gotten,” said Frank.

Student directors have gone on to significant positions in government, education, law – even the business of polling. Chas Anderson ’96, who majored in government relations and is currently deputy commissioner for the Minnesota Department of Education, is typical of the bright, motivated students who pass through the SCSU Survey. She was hired right out of college as an aide to then Gov. Arne Carlson. “Chas has a passion for public policy, but she’s also politically astute, which goes back to her work on the SCSU survey,” said Bernie Omann ’90, Sartell, director of Community Relations for St. Cloud State and former legislator. He was chief of staff for Gov. Arne Carlson when Anderson joined the Carlson team.

Other notable student director graduates include Justin Wedeking ’00, now a political science faculty member at the University of Kentucky, Lexington; Dave Kleis ’89, a former legislator and now mayor of St. Cloud; John Baker ’99, who recently opened what’s believed to be the only U.S. law firm dedicated to veterans’ needs in the Twin Cities; Aaron Amic ’99 ’02, an executive with Ipsos Public Affairs; and Laurie Hokkanen ’02, assistant city manager for Chanhassen.

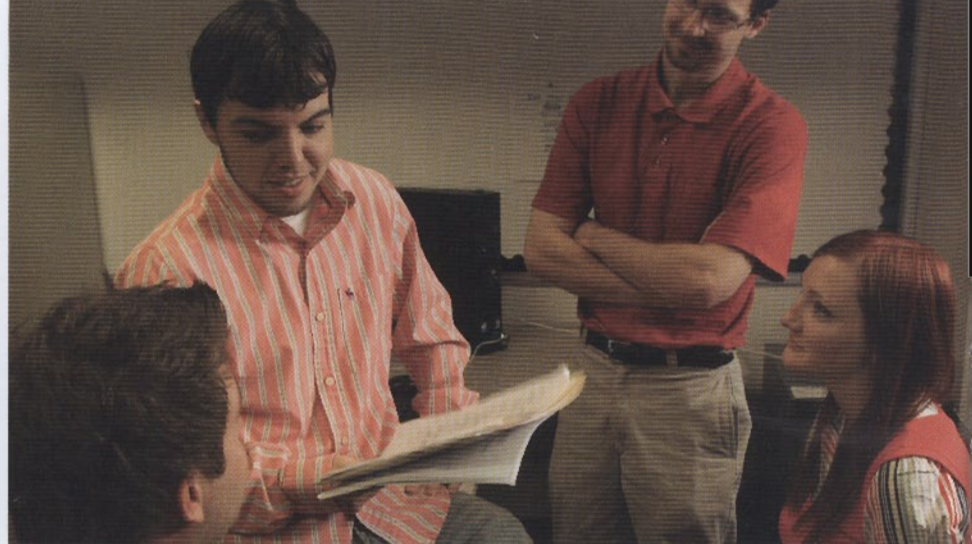
The SCSU Survey was born out of Frank’s desire to develop a hands-on teaching tool to help his students understand more about public opinion. He spent two summers at the University of Michigan’s survey research center as a visiting faculty scholar before launching the SCSU Survey in 1980.

In the Survey's humble beginnings, said first student director Jeff Wood '81 '87 '95, Web content director for St. Cloud State, "I sat at the political science department secretary's desk in Brown Hall to make survey calls on her phone. We looked at questions on a paper list and wrote the answers down," he said. "Back then it took two to three weeks to get results."

Wood recalls Frank taking him to a downtown marketing call center run by SCSU alumni Larry Meyer '71 and Peg Ford Meyer '70 to view the sea of desks, telephones and interviewers taking the pulse of Americans on politics and products. "There I got a glimpse of the future," he said.

In the mid '90s, as student director Anderson helped oversee the Survey's transition from a "paper/pencil" to computerized operation. "You can't get that kind of experience out of a classroom," she said.

Last year the SCSU Survey moved into a new and expanded space in Stewart Hall with 19 calling stations. Each has a computer fitted with computer-assisted telephone interviewing software. The system



offers instant results. The Survey is one of the University's centers that generates revenue for its operating costs – \$80,000 to \$100,000 a year for computers, phones, servers, printers and technical support services.

"The hands-on experience I was afforded through the Survey is invaluable," said Army Staff Sgt. Kirsch, who plans to pursue a master's degree in conflict resolution and peace studies when she returns from Iraq. Part of a St. Paul-based Minnesota National Guard unit, she is a battalion nuclear, biological and chemical non-commissioned officer in charge, tracking helicopters throughout the

theater of Iraq. She has received an Army Commendation Medal and Meritorious Service Medal for her service and leadership.

Kirsch said working with the Survey during fall 2006 gave her insight into a process few take the time to understand or appreciate. "We all come to rely upon the statistics that are fed to us as we prepare for elections or determine what products are preferred. Because of my experience with the Survey, I understand and appreciate the purpose behind the polls and surveys that are used in practically everything we do."

**CHAS ANDERSON '96**  
FROM SCSU SURVEY TRAILBLAZER  
TO MINNESOTA EDUCATION POLICY LEADER

Her first job was aide to Gov. Arne Carlson, and in less than a decade government relations graduate Chas Anderson has risen to the position of deputy commissioner – second in command – for the Minnesota Department of Education. She credits her SCSU Survey experience with helping prepare her for her extraordinary advance into state government leadership.

"I was exposed to research methodology and the public policy side," said Anderson of her Survey role (1994-96), which gave her the skills she would hone first as a constituent services and legislative relations aide for Gov. Arnie Carlson. That led to a position as lead administrator for the Minnesota House Ways and Means Committee from 1999-2003. Then Gov. Tim Pawlenty appointed her deputy education commissioner, a position that gives her responsibility for day-to-day operations of the department, including agency management and human resource operations, oversight of the legislative agenda and accountability issues.

"I grew a lot in my four years at St. Cloud State – academically, socially and in ways that helped me handle management and research into issues that have been critical to my work," said Anderson, St. Paul, who is focusing more on policy than finance issues, including improving the quality of teacher preparation. "My leadership role as a student director helped me establish those skills."

Anderson recalls being given responsibilities with the SCSU Survey that became



valuable to her education. For example, she helped oversee the Survey's transition from a "paper/pencil" to computerized operation. "I learned to work through those changes," she said. "You can't get that kind of experience out of a classroom."

The in-depth examination of issues and political questions to be included in any survey was excellent practice for the policy work Anderson has done for various state government offices. "We'd do a lot of research on issues before we'd put together a survey instrument," she said. "The methodology was right."

Anderson has maintained her friendship with Professor Steve Frank in the 12 years since her Survey days. "I still come up and talk to his classes. He was a good mentor in college, and I still go to him for advice. He's just a very solid professor."

Left: SCSU Survey student directors, from left, Luke Hofstad, a senior from Andover; Trevor Lynch, a junior from Maplewood; Mike Loehlein '08, St. Joseph, and Renee Helm, a senior from St. Joseph, discuss strategy for upcoming surveys. Helm is lead student director for this fall's omnibus political survey.

### JOHN BAKER '99

#### VETERAN'S SURVEY DIRECTOR EXPERIENCE LEADS TO UNIQUE LAW PRACTICE

Attorney John Baker credits his SCSU Survey professors with giving him the confidence to pursue a law degree and help launch the groundbreaking Minnesota firm that deals exclusively with veterans' legal needs.

Baker had come to St. Cloud State after 22 years in the Marine Corps, a disabled veteran. Professor Steve Frank said Baker was an excellent student who had put a lot of experience between the problems of his youth and his newfound interest in politics and public policy issues.

"Professors Frank and (Steven) Wagner use the SCSU Survey as a way to work with students and give them hands-on experience working with issues," Baker said. "The work helps shape you. The Steves absolutely influenced me. My experience with them prepared me for law school. As a student director (1998-99) I learned about political science and survey methods, but more importantly the experience gave me the ability to really dissect issues of public policy." He graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor's degree in political science and economics.

After law school and another year of active duty in the Marines, Baker joined a Minneapolis law firm. But in January he opened the firm of Baker, Wadd & Williams LLP, along with his wife, Sharon Clark-Williams, and Adam Wadd, who had gone to law school after serving in the U.S. Navy and graduating from the University of Minnesota. All three are graduates of the Hamline University School of Law.



Their innovative firm is believed to be the only one of its kind in the nation, with the partners focusing only on the legal needs of veterans, from untangling military red tape to child custody and divorce cases to criminal problems. "I've been through most of that," Baker said. "I know the process. We do a lot of pro bono work and family law. It's full service."

Baker said he learned a lot about being there for others from his favorite professors in political science. "I had Professor Frank for five or six quarters in a row," said Baker. "He was always available to me. I would get e-mails from him at 1 in the morning."

### AARON AMIC '99 '02

#### RESEARCH EXPERIENCE WAS FOUNDATION FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS EXECUTIVE

As a vice president for one of the five largest research firms in the world, Aaron Amic, Albertville, says he is "doing what I did as a student director (1997-99) of the SCSU Survey – only on a larger scale."

Amic developed an understanding of what constitutes good research methodology during his two years as student director. "I wouldn't have moved up in my company without that good foundation."

His company is Ipsos, an international research and public affairs firm, for which he serves as vice president of omnibus research services for North American public affairs. "The group I run does \$7 million a year," said Amic, whose undergraduate degree is in public administration and master's degree is in public and non-profit institutions. "There are few Fortune 500 companies I haven't worked with."

Amic's involvement with the Survey started with a political science class he took from the Survey's founder, Professor Steve Frank, his freshman year. "As with most classes with Dr. Frank or Dr. (Professor Steven) Wagner, survey research would make its way into the class," he said. "We all had to put some time in with the SCSU Survey." He took the job as student director because he "had always been interested in polling and seeing the nuts and bolts of what was happening. I did it through the rest of my college career and came back and kept doing stuff with them even after I graduated."

After college he worked with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency with



an environmental firm in Edina before joining the company that eventually merged with Ipsos. With Amic's knowledge of sound polling practices, he was well prepared for the challenge, crediting the professors who lead the Survey. "Dr. Wagner was my mentor. Without him I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now."

"My career path has been 100 percent determined by my decision to work as a student director," said Amic, who added that he'll be watching for this year's big Survey election polls.