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From the President

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Colby College

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A Year of Self-examination: Academics and Student Culture

Each year the Annual Report of the President affords me the opportunity to highlight events and accomplishments of the recently concluded academic year. In a break with tradition, I want to focus this report on the current year, which is proving to be one of self-examination in both Colby's core academic program and the culture of student life on campus.

The promise of Colby is that students who enroll will have access to the tools needed to fulfill their potential. We count among those tools an exceptionally gifted and dedicated faculty, fellow students who are bright, curious, and accomplished, a physical environment that ensures students' comfort and safety, outstanding facilities in which to learn, and the necessary material and technological resources to facilitate scholarship. Further, as a liberal arts college focused entirely on undergraduate education, we understand our mission to include the provision of opportunities for students to develop morally and socially so they may take their places as responsible citizens in a world that needs their talents.

This year we have two important opportunities to assess how well the College is delivering on its promise: the faculty's ongoing review of Colby's curriculum and the final report of the Campus Culture Working Group, focusing on the prominence of alcohol use in Colby's student culture.

Rethinking a Liberal Arts Education

The curricular review process began as Colby prepared its self-study for reaccreditation in 2007. As a result of that study, and out of a desire to reexamine our understanding of how a contemporary liberal arts education should prepare Colby students for success throughout their lives, three faculty committees were created to study curricular oversight, academic engagement, and student communications skills. These faculty committees looked broadly across the curriculum, with particular attention paid to the quality of student-faculty engagement, which has long set Colby apart from its peers, and the critical importance of defining learning goals and outcomes for our students regardless of their chosen area of study.

Of all the learning outcomes possible for Colby students as they sample from the College's wide variety of programs, three stand out as especially important for each student to achieve. First is the ability to communicate—to write and to speak with clarity, conviction, and power. Second is the ability to think about and through complex problems and issues—to analyze, criticize, synthesize and integrate. And, third is the ability to exercise one's imagination and creative powers. These basic capacities are among the most enduring and fundamental goals of a liberal arts education, and their mastery prepares Colby students for lifelong success in whatever discipline each one chooses to pursue.

In the next phase of the curricular review, our faculty colleagues are moving from broad, institution-wide themes to defining specific learning goals and outcomes for each department and program at Colby. Central to this process is an articulation of the precise ways each course integrates into its syllabus the fundamental teaching and learning goals of the College. Students should graduate confident they have acquired the skills they will need to succeed, and our goal is to establish a means for all students to assess whether Colby has helped them do so.

Re-imagining Campus Culture

After a year-long examination of data on student drinking behaviors, including a survey that netted more than 3,000 students' responses to a wide range of questions about social life at Colby, the Campus Culture Working Group (CCWG) presented its report and recommendations to the Board of Trustees in October. The CCWG, made up of trustees, students, administrators, faculty, parents, and Waterville officials, was formed at the direction of the board in May 2008 and was charged with identifying and proposing "the means by which the College can address the more systematic abuse of alcohol in student social life at the College and how Colby students, trustees, faculty, and staff can assist the College administration in addressing the issue of excessive drinking at Colby."

Chaired by Vice President for Student Affairs Jim Terhune, the CCWG met eight times through 2008-2009 and produced a series of recommendations designed to address the culture of excessive drinking at Colby. Foremost among the recommendations is the creation and adoption of a "Statement of Community Expectations" aimed at clearly delineating Colby's expectations with respect to "intellectual engagement, civility, and social conduct" among all members of the campus community. This recommendation is not intended to promote specific policies but to serve as a declaration of what we value as a campus community and what we all can, and should, expect from each other in the way of conduct and behavior, particularly with regard to alcohol use and abuse. The full CCWG report and recommendations are available at www.colby.edu/ccwg.

Also under Jim Terhune's direction, a smaller group of students, faculty, and administrators has begun developing a plan to implement the CCWG's recommendations by the start of the 2010-2011 academic year. Fully implemented and wholly embraced by the campus community, the work of the CCWG will result in a reshaped campus culture in which abusive drinking ceases to play a central role in student social life.

The Budget: This Year and Beyond

It is tempting to fall back on the cliché "what a difference a year makes" in discussing the College's current financial situation. Colby is in a much better place financially than many of us a year ago thought it would be. The endowment lost nearly a quarter of its market value during the fiscal year ending June 30, 2009, but recent estimates show it is recovering, albeit more slowly than we'd like. (A fiscal-year-end endowment report by Chief Investment Officer Douglas Reinhardt '71 is at www.colby.edu/finances.)

Budget planning for 2010-2011 is underway, and we anticipate another year without a real increase in spending except in the area of student financial aid, which we will continue to support as fully as possible. The real challenge lies three to five years from now, when the full impact of the endowment's losses are factored into our budget model. If we did nothing to address the shortfall, Colby would face multimillion-dollar budget deficits at

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that time. But, of course, the College cannot operate with a deficit, and we have devised a variety of options for addressing the situation that the Board of Trustees will consider this year. Though we know there will be tradeoffs and difficult choices to make, I am confident that the board and administration will find solutions that have as little impact as possible on the College's core academic mission or its financial aid programs.

Notwithstanding these financial challenges, the College continues to prepare for its future. Planning continues for a new academic building to house the psychology, mathematics and statistics, and computer science departments and for an addition to the Colby College Museum of Art to house, display, and provide scholarly access to the Lunder Collection of American Art.

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As we weather the effects of the recession, we know we will not fully recover from those effects for some time to come. A storm has blown through higher education, and we who now survey the landscape are acutely aware that we must rebuild our institutions with care. But, as members of the Colby community, all of us can be proud of the willingness to tackle tough issues—Does our curriculum serve our students' needs? Are we facing up to the responsibility to move alcohol off center stage in campus culture?—in tough times. It's a Colby tradition, of course, and one I am proud to continue.



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