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Pride and Prejudice: Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students want increased acceptance and inclusion at Colby

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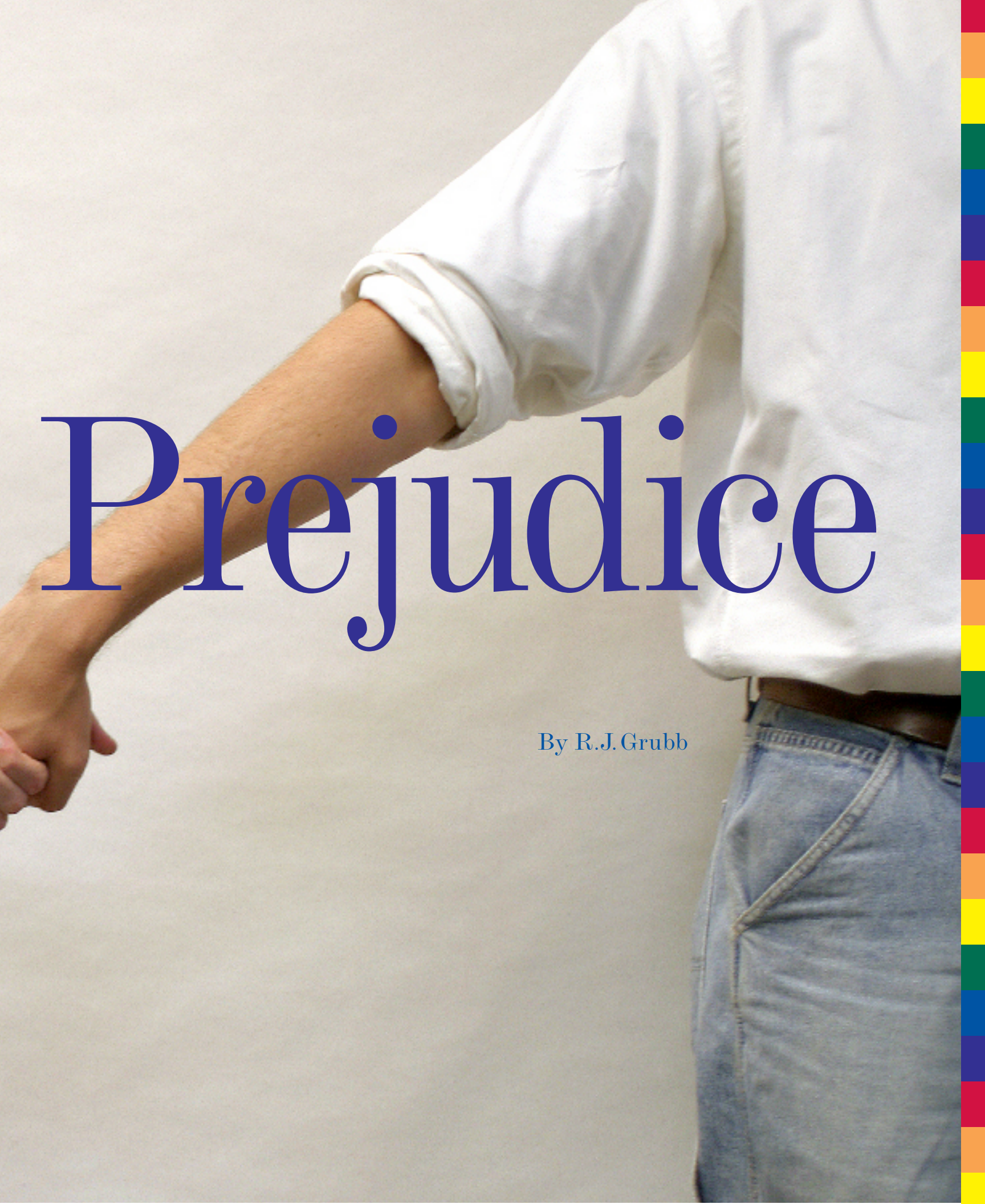
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Pride and

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students
want increased acceptance and inclusion at Colby



Prejudice

By R.J. Grubb

To wind down during the last week of April, a small group of Colby students gathered in the Pugh Center to enjoy a make-shift picnic—soda, hummus, pita wedges and chips. Some identified themselves as queer, others were friends and allies. The low-key affair, relocated indoors due to Saturday afternoon rain, marked the mid-point of Pride Week at Colby. It was a quiet, lazy lunch, which stood in contrast to some earlier Pride Week events that sparked a heated exchange among students and shifted the focus of the campus's ongoing discussion of diversity to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered (GLBT) issues.

Pride events, as celebrated around the world, mark a time when GLBT people come together to celebrate their diversity and to show their numbers. Designed as visibility writ large, celebrations range from tame parades to charged political marches. Though different in style and purpose, Pride events reliably agitate the status quo.

During Pride Week at Colby, 2,000 people packed Wadsworth Gymnasium to see envelope-pushing comedian Margaret Cho. Later the same week, New York-based author/performer and sex columnist Tristan Taormino spoke in the Pugh Center, and while the size of the audience was modest, the talk subject—a sometimes-graphic discussion of gender and sexuality—was less so and the reaction was downright contentious. As the controversy about Taormino's appearance moved through the campus (and eventually got attention off campus as well) the loudest complaints charged that Taormino was a sex worker who advanced pornography and that her presence offered no redeeming contribution to the student body. Event organizers countered that Taormino was a respected queer author and *Village Voice* columnist who had plenty to share about contemporary culture and sexual trends.

Exchanges that followed on the students' e-mail listserv "The Digest" revealed a healthy ideological and intellectual contest among peers—and then some. According to some, the flap spotlighted a persistent resistance to GLBT visibility and a growing divide.

"Beginning this year, queer students have become more visible, but also the resulting backlash has started," said Andrea Breau '03,

Student Government Association cultural chair. "If you read 'The Digest,' you'll see that some students don't like seeing queer visibility. The message is that it can be visible but not too visible."

Sensing hostility, some GLBT students say that they can "be gay" but they cannot "do gay."

These developments on Mayflower Hill mirror knotty issues affecting American society and particularly institutions of higher education. According to a May 2003 report released by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, GLBT students face a hostile environment on college campuses, even at ones with strong support groups. Called "Campus Climate for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender People," the report represents the largest-ever study that gives a national perspective on U.S. college campuses. It found that more than a third of gay college students nationwide experienced harassment in the past year and that 50 percent conceal their sexual orientation to avoid intimidation.

"While there have been significant improvements over the past decade, clearly harassment and bias are still major concerns for GLBT students," wrote Sean Cahill, the NGLTF Policy Institute director.

Heavy on stats and facts, the report omits real faces and real lives. But take a look around Colby and they are all there. Professors who hid their identities for years. Unsure 18-year-olds looking for answers and support. Confident, willful upperclassmen determined to make Colby more inclusive than when they arrived.

There's Allen LaPan, sometimes affectionately known as Auntie Al, in the mailroom. Stop and say hello and he'll tell you about numerous students he's mentored through the years. One was a 19-year-old man who came out to his parents. "His father started to cry," said LaPan. "The young student said, 'I'm sorry, Dad, I didn't mean to hurt you.' And the father replied, 'You didn't hurt me. I'm just sad that it took nineteen years for you to tell me.'"

Telling the truth—coming out—isn't easy. But at college, which functions as an insular cultural community, students are finally in charge of every aspect of their lives—from laundry to libido. After tasting these new freedoms, gay students slowly begin to confront their homosexuality, and many openly reveal their sexual orientation.

During the past decade, the numbers of students coming out at colleges has significantly increased, as have their demands for equal treatment. As these students become more visible, complaints are likely to surface that GLBT students are "in my face" or that they are constantly carping that they are not full members of the community. When GLBT visibility takes the form of provocative political activism, like inviting Taormino, a backlash is predictable, and Colby fits this pattern.

"I think the extreme left wing of the queer movement on campus are whiners," said Steven Bogden '05, president of Colby's Republicans, who criticized Taormino's appearance. "I want them to be able to live in society comfortably. However, I am not willing to change or break down every sexual norm in society and allow every taboo, specifically pornography."

Bogden hits upon a thorny topic concerning the civil-rights movement for gays and lesbians. National polls suggest that most people believe gay men and lesbians should be granted constitutional rights of equal protection and the right to privacy. The court of public opinion and the court of law sway, however, when homosexuals argue for sexual freedom. When gay rights advocates—or activist Colby students—raise larger issues of socialization, gender and society's taboos concerning sex, they tap into a well of cultural anxiety and hostility.



Students gather to raise the rainbow flag, a symbol of the diversity of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities, in front of Miller Library in May 2002. Some on campus objected to the displacing of the American flag, even for two hours.

According to Professor Margaret McFadden (American studies), that tapping has created a campus environment that advances an implicit “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy.

“There’s a lot of hostility and resentment to the new visibility,” said McFadden. “Students say, ‘It’s okay if you’re gay, I’ll still be your friend. But don’t ever make me think about it, and don’t ever tell me that this person is cute, and don’t ever tell me about your life.’ As long as you keep it on the down low, it’s accepted. But if you don’t perform it in a conservative way or look the correct part in gender terms, then you’re going to get a negative reaction.”

It’s a complicated debate because GLBT people are not unified in the pursuit of sexual and gender freedom. Many gay people are quite content living normative, traditional lives and do not wish to tell their peers about someone they find attractive or what they do behind closed doors. However, it is impossible to say that gay identity has nothing to do with sexuality. As cultural critic Michael Bronski explains, doing so “denies gay men and lesbians their full dignity as human beings.”

Colby has begun to tackle big questions: institutional accountability for the comfort and safety of all members of the community and the place of GLBT history, culture and theory in the undergraduate curriculum, for example. In significant ways, the College has begun the slow process of figuring out where it has come from and where it wants to go. Unresolved, according to advocates for change, is how to get more people onboard.

“There’s just a small group of people who are willing to be vocal and stand up for queer students, and there’s an equally small number of people who are visibly homophobic,” said Gretchen Groggel ’03, president of the Student Government Association. “But there’s a huge number of people who don’t speak up either way. Those are the people who are apathetic and don’t care because it’s not their problem. And that’s the bigger problem.”

President William Adams had lunch with a group of GLBT students in Dana last year and came away profoundly distressed by what he described as “the depths of their discomfort.” Adams charged a task force to draft a report that takes a hard look at life for Colby’s GLBT students. Task force members, including faculty, staff and students, renamed the project the Queer Task Force. They opted for the word “queer,” they said, because it’s a broader umbrella and reclaims the pejorative term by using it in positive contexts.

The thick report assembled by the task force documents a history of silence by students who were too fearful to come out compounded by incidents of harassment toward GLBT students and staff. Results were gathered using alumni and student questionnaires, interviews and reports that cited alleged hate crimes. While some GLBT students said they felt supported at Colby and major changes were not necessary, many cited problems, including:

- Invisibility of queer life, contributing to a sense that being queer is wrong.
- Verbal harassment and pervasive homophobic language.
- Insensitivity and a tendency to shun or avoid those who are different.
- Lack of support services for queer and questioning students.
- Absence of a vital queer community.

To create a more inclusive and safe campus, the task force recommended numerous steps for the administration to implement. Recommendations ranged from increased diversity training for coaches and professors to creating a queer studies minor. While President Adams



Comedian Margaret Cho performs before a full house at Wadsworth Gymnasium at Colby during Pride Week this year.

has responded to the top 11 concerns, many of the report’s conclusions await prioritization by the administration. “With this report, the ball is now in the administration’s court,” said Jason Bougere ’04, who was a member of the task force and helps staff the campus GLBT students’ group called The Bridge.

As at all colleges, an important arbiter is money. Requests in the report for new initiatives and new staff come as many colleges are suffering severe budget strain and, elsewhere, layoffs. Pressed by such constraints, Adams’s initial response communicated that some initiatives will likely be a partial loaf or a series of incremental steps rather than immediate fulfillment.

Adams sees the broad landscape. “It’s a process of deepening the sensitivities of the institution to those students’ concerns and being more supportive of them in their efforts to become full members of the community,” he said. “I’m hopeful that over the next couple of years that we will make some progress in the specific ways that they suggested, but in other ways too.”

His hope, he said, is that the College will be able to address the climate on campus and diminish the level of discomfort felt by GLBT students.

“I think we’re at a turning point,” said Groggel. “Since the task force report came out, we can either go one route, which is active, or the other route, which is passive. We’ll have to wait and see what happens, but I think we can start getting things done and keep the momentum going. I have a lot of faith in the people in charge.”

Colby has wrestled with these issues over the years. In 1992 a Lesbian Gay Subcommittee of the Campus Community Committee submitted a report. Now, though the Queer Task Force effort is moving some of the same issues to the front burner, the change of decades has brought change to Colby and to the world.

According to Professor McFadden, life for GLBT students and professors in the 1990s promised a closeted existence. “When I first got here queer was invisible,” said McFadden, who joined the faculty in 1996. “There were plenty of gay and lesbian students, but they would talk to you behind closed doors or maybe take Phyllis Mann-

occhi's Art and Oppression course or a course that Cheshire Calhoun was teaching that included gay material. There wasn't a lot of out faculty, and there were very few out students and staff."

That dearth of positive representation and gay discourse echoed American culture. However, aided by increased public acceptance of homosexuality, McFadden and others—like the co-chair of English, Professor Jennifer Finney Boylan, who identifies as transgendered—slowly came out to their colleagues. Witnessing an increased pool of mentors, students began to come out and request subjects that referenced queer identity. McFadden offered the course *Alternative Popular Cultures*. Since popular culture often presented ill-fated gay characters, the subject deliberately examined pop culture from the point of view of queer artists who told their personal stories through film, music, television and literature. The class also assigned students the task of creating queer-visibility projects. Projects ranged from promoting a well-attended drag show in Page Commons to posting fliers around campus. Buoyed by subject material that validated their identities, Colby's GLBT students

began to be more visible and more vocal. "All of a sudden there was this massive queer visibility that was going on campus, which got a lot of momentum," said Julia Steele '03.

Predictably, these out and active students began to butt heads with their heterosexual peers, especially when they questioned social events. One such affair was the annual "Screw Your Roommate" event, a college-sanctioned party. Alienated by the event, a group of 100 students successfully petitioned the Student Government Association for its cancellation. An ugly fight started, with those working to end the party called "Nazis" on "The Digest." Though the result was arguably a stroke for good taste and many students may have been relieved that they no longer were pressured to participate in the party, it was seen by some as an attack against a Colby tradition—instigated by queer students.

"When we did away with the Screw Your Roommate party, there was a huge uproar. People were threatened," said Breau, who identifies as straight. "They said, 'We want to have fun too. Just because

Content at Colby, One Student Discovers "A Drastically Different Experience"

But for an encounter with a protest at Colby during her junior year, Alyson Lindquist '03 might have done her honors thesis on some aspect of the Civil War.

The protest in spring 2002 was against racism and heterosexism at Colby. It involved a group of megaphone-wielding students called the Coalition for Institutional Accountability. It left Lindquist—a contented, hard-working student whom these issues hadn't directly touched—uncomfortable and confused. "I really didn't understand how I could be in a place I loved, getting a great education, and there are people here having a drastically different experience," Lindquist said.

She understands now, having spent a year researching and writing her honors thesis in history: *From Apathy to Acceptance: A History of Racism and Heterosexism at Colby*. Lindquist, working with civil rights historian Robert Weisbrot (history) as her advisor, began where she always goes for answers—the library. From there she went on to interview alumni, faculty and administrators as she chronicled more than a half-century of the Colby community's grappling with discrimination based on race and sexual orientation.

Lindquist notes that racial issues have been confronted in a series of high-profile events. "The fight against heterosexism has been subtler," she said.

An alumnus from the Class of 1948 told her that he knew of another gay underclassman who was harassed and later committed suicide. The alumnus said he coped with his own homosexuality by hiding it; his fraternity brothers were aware but let him know it was okay as long as he didn't flaunt his homosexu-



Alyson Lindquist '03

ality. This was at a time when the McCarthy-era U.S. Senate authorized investigation of "moral perverts."

"I don't think Colby was significantly more conservative than the society in which it existed," the alumnus told Lindquist.

Lindquist finds the first mention of homosexuality in *The Colby Echo* in 1971, in an article intended to explain what it meant to be gay at Colby and to present homosexuality in a positive way. It wasn't until the 1980s that the issue came to the forefront again as gay and lesbian students decried "the heterosexist atmosphere" on campus.

Lindquist also traced changes in the College curriculum, noting Professor of English Phyllis Mannocchi's first gay-lesbian-oriented course, offered in 1985. Amid outbreaks of homophobic graffiti and other, more subtle forms of harassment, faculty expanded course offerings to increase students' exposure to alternative lifestyles.

Lindquist said her experience was both discouraging and heartening. She felt it was

important to capture the history of these issues, to tell "the untold story." She also wanted to remain a historian, detached from her subject, but found herself moved by the stories she heard. Sometimes she was profoundly saddened by accounts of discrimination. "There were days when I said, 'I can't work on this today.'"

But she said she was encouraged when she received responses from every person she contacted about the project, that no one on campus asked her, "Why are you studying that?" Her father, a Massachusetts business owner she described as "conservative" and initially surprised by her choice of topic, urged her to forge ahead when she was discouraged. "He said, 'This is something that means a lot to people,'" Lindquist said.

She predicts that the protests of the Coalition for Institutional Responsibility in 2002 will not have been in vain and that future generations at Colby will benefit from that group and other pioneers. Lindquist quotes an alumnus from the Class of 1969 who told her, "Colby still struggles with its soul."

Lindquist, who will teach at the Taft School in Connecticut in the fall, also quotes Martin Luther King Jr., who said, "All progress is precarious. . . ."

Her thesis concludes, "Indeed, it seems that each time the College makes a step forward in fighting discrimination, another obstacle appears, daring us to keep fighting, to keep working for change."—Gerry Boyle '78

Alyson Lindquist's thesis is posted online at www.colby.edu/education/activism/files/papers/Lindquist.pdf.

there's queer people doesn't mean we should have to stop having fun."

Then came backlash, which included people ripping down posters and even replacing posters with antagonistic messages. Comments that derided queer students in public places and statements, such as "queers are everywhere," and "they're going to take over the school," were reported. As an advocate for homosexual issues, Groggel was criticized in the *Echo* and was reproached by the Colby Christian Fellowship.

The Queer Task Force Report says the backlash has not swelled into incidents of violence as it has on other college campuses. But with national reports documenting how prejudice can erupt into violence, concern runs high.

"None of us—especially college professors—wants to admit that we are in a state of ignorance," said Professor Boylan. "But I am here to tell you that there are a lot of things that people still don't understand and that lack of understanding isn't some abstract thing. It's something that puts people's lives in danger and it affects every waking minute of the day."

Some students know that fear. During the fall of 2001, Anna Carvill '03, then a junior, had her bicycle vandalized. Decorated with multiple Pride stickers, the bike's lock was broken and its stickers defaced before it was run over by a vehicle and abandoned.

"If they wanted to wreck or take an expensive bike, then there were plenty to choose from. Instead they ran that one over and scored through the Pride stickers, then left it right next to the bike rack," Carvill said. "I was upset and hurt and scared."

Vice President for Student Affairs Janice Kassman said the act of vandalism was fully investigated, but a lack of suspects precluded punishment and the incident was not recorded as a hate crime.

"I agree that if damage to a person's bicycle is motivated by issues of sexual orientation, then that is a hate crime," said Kassman. "If after a thorough investigation, however, there is no suspect, then there is unfortunately no one to discipline."

More recently there was an unwelcome entry and vandalism in three rooms reserved for minority student clubs—The Bridge, SOAR (Students Organized Against Racism) and the Women's Group. Intruders spilled beer on office equipment and deleted computer files. According to Kassman, the incident was reported as an alleged hate crime to the Maine Attorney General's Office and the local police. Soon afterward a rally was organized in Cotter Union, and students, faculty and administrators lined up to condemn incidents of harassment and vandalism



Top, students, staff and faculty gather at a rally in Cotter Union last spring called after computer equipment was vandalized in the offices of minority student clubs in the Pugh Center. Above, participants in the annual Pride Week drag show gather on stage in Cotter Union.

directed against queer students and organizations.

Students and faculty interviewed this spring said that they hoped to move past these episodes and implement structural change. High on the list of recommendations in the Queer Task Force Report is the creation of a queer studies minor.

As a young academic discipline, queer studies holds a controversial seat in the academy. Advocates argue that it is a rich vein of scholarly study. Other academics contend that, given limited resources for programmatic initiatives, there is insufficient substance to warrant promoting queer studies over other proposals.

That debate was aired most publicly when activist Larry Kramer offered \$1 million to create The Larry Kramer Initiative for Lesbian and Gay Studies at Yale University. Yale declined the offer, questioning the legitimacy of the program. Then, after years of dispute, Yale approved a donation from Arthur Kramer, Larry Kramer's brother, in Larry's honor. Now, according to art historian Jonathan D. Katz, the director of Yale's program, it is thriving and moving toward degree-granting status.

At Colby the Queer Task Force Report proposed a queer studies minor offered within the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program. Dean of Faculty Ed Yeterian and President Adams have said the proposal will need to go through the College's process for new program proposals.

"The administration needs to be proactive," said Groggel. Noting that the College has responded to past hate crimes and harassment, she suggested that "there's a way to prevent those things from happening, through education and implementing queer studies."

"At the flat-out level of academic excellence, queer studies is necessary," said Yale's Katz. "But I think we would be deluding ourselves to ignore the social and political component"—creating a campus that is more inclusive.

He suggests that making scholarly works that represent far-reaching sociopolitical analyses of the 20th century accessible to queer and straight students would encourage new campus dialogues and promote greater awareness.

"We can change policies and we can write reports but we have to get people involved and caring," said McFadden. "Often people think that 'it won't affect me.' But this is a community, and if something is happening to people in your community, then I want to argue that you should care and you should be involved and in the very least try to make it better." ▼