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Better to Give: A surge in community service reflects Colby tradition and national trends

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Better to Give

By Gerry Boyle '78

A surge in community service reflects Colby tradition and national trends

It was a sunny afternoon in January and, like a bus driver making a stop, Nick Snyder '05 pulled his Blazer up in front of Foss Hall. Snyder picked up Shawn Sato '05 and then drove downtown to the Albert S. Hall School, where, in the library, fifth graders were waiting.

Within minutes, Snyder, Sato and several other Colby mentors taking part in the Colby Cares About Kids program were talking about Play Station games, movies like *Dumb and Dumber*, the perils of having younger siblings. Snyder's friend Roy, who is 11, showed him his class picture. "There you are," Snyder said, peering at the tiny photo as Roy watched expectantly for his reaction. "Before you got your haircut."

It's a scene repeated at schools throughout greater Waterville as more than 160 Colby students fan out every week to play chess, tetherball, freeze tag, to listen as a kid reads aloud or just talk. The program got underway in September and by all accounts has been an overwhelming success. And it could have been much bigger, with enthusiasm at the College and in the community outstripped only by the limits of the 12-hour days of administrator Teresa Hawko '01. "I have more and more kids coming up to me and saying they want a Colby friend," said Moira Bentzel, a guidance counselor at the Hall School.

Christine Brennan '05 and Kristen Stewart at Albert S. Hall School in Waterville.

Of course, volunteering is nothing new on Mayflower Hill. The Colby Volunteer Center is and has been a conduit for hundreds of students who offer their services to everything from staffing the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter to coaching junior-high basketball. Students do service-learning projects from the Belgrade Lakes to Guatemala. CBB abroad programs like that taught by Associate Professor James Webb (history) in Cape Town, South Africa, last semester revolve around community service and service learning.

But is this sort of "giving back" to the larger community something automatically associated with Colby? Associate Professor Mark Tappan (education and human development) said, "I think it is not something Colby has institutionalized—that this is one of our central aspects, our identity—but I think it's there." Tappan, who for a decade has overseen Colby students working in area schools, said the inclusion of community service as a priority in the College's new strategic plan will help move the College toward making volunteering and service learning a more recognized part of the Colby mission.

He sees Colby as being on the cusp of a time when students will see it as their responsibility to make a contribution to the larger community while still undergraduates, to leave some sort of legacy that would make them alumni, not just of Colby but of Waterville and central Maine. "The energy is here," Tappan said. "The need is here. It's an ideal center here."

And the pace of change in thinking on campus is accelerating.

Yes, President Bro Adams [see page 22] has made community service a key element in the College's new Strategic Plan. Students now come to Colby with community service in their backgrounds and in their expectations, according to Parker Beverage, dean of admissions. Community service and service learning are becoming part of a Colby education as more students look for ways to contribute—and gain and apply knowledge—beyond the perimeter of Mayflower Hill. "It has a currency now that is accepted," said Tom Morrione '65, Dana Professor of Sociology.

That isn't the case only at Colby. In fact, the College is in step with a burgeoning trend toward service learning and "civic engagement" at America's colleges and universities.

Membership in the Brown University-based organization Campus Compact, a clearinghouse for community service in higher education, has nearly quadrupled since 1991, from 235 schools to more than 800. The percentage of college students involved in community service nearly tripled in just three years, from 10 percent in 1998 to 28 percent last year. Almost three quarters of Campus Compact's member schools have permanent community-service offices.

If the numbers aren't impressive alone, consider how far Colby has come in the past few decades and how that reflects changes in thinking on campus and in society at large.

In its early years, Colby took young men and women from Maine and beyond and turned them into ministers and teachers, and community service was done in a secondary school or from the pulpit. Later fraternity and sorority members as well as independent students pitched in to help the less fortunate in the community. That ethos was and is pervasive, as evidenced in the profiles that accompany this story.

But in the days before a Colby Volunteer Center, community service was less formalized and happened on a case-by-case basis as an extracurricular activity. Formal education was largely confined to the classroom, and that boundary would stand firm for more than 150 years.

"Thinning Down" for the Needle

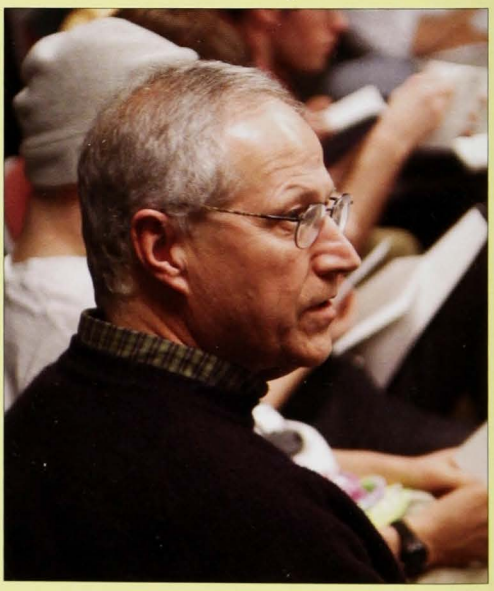
Colby Cares About Kids. That's not only the name of the mentoring program that matches 150-plus Colby students with youths in local schools, it's Peter Harris's mission statement. Or one of them.

"Kids have attention deficit because nobody's ever paid any attention to them," declared the plain-spoken English professor after his composition class volunteered literacy tutoring to Waterville schools last year.

"Eighty-six percent of the kids don't feel they can have a conversation with adults about drugs, alcohol, truancy, pre-marital sex. You see how tiny a window of opportunity they have to pass through. So why not try mentoring when you can?" said Harris, whose commitment to service learning—community service with a learning component—provided the push to get CCAK up and running. "The idea that somebody can talk with them about their lives has an effect on grades, on hygiene, on self-esteem. Just in these terms it's a big success."

CCAK is only Harris's most recent volunteer or community service pursuit. The list of ways he has served his community, including teaching, is a long one, and a theme of social justice permeates it. "I just get disgusted with the split between haves and have-nots. I came from great privilege. I have trouble with my conscience. 'It's time to thin down for the needle,'" he said, referring to a line in "Pre-Mortal," a poem by Franz Wright, on the biblical word to the wise that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

Harris came to Colby in 1974 to teach American literature. In the '80s he moved into teaching poetry writing and writing his



Peter Harris

As late as 1961, when Morrione arrived at Colby as a student, that remained the case. "What that meant," he said, "is yeah, you'd go to a prison, you'd go in the community, but it would be almost like a field trip. You'd walk around and you'd interview somebody and then you'd come back and talk about it in class.

"There was no direct longer-term involvement, and that's what was really lacking. Within the curriculum there was a relative unacceptance of the validity of this kind of learning as part of the historical definition of what academia thought valuable. 'This is not real learning. It's something you can do in the summers.'"

Jeff Lederman '05 confers on math homework with James Swan at Clinton Elementary School. Colby mentors visit with their 'friends' twice weekly.

Then along came something called "the flexible fifteen," a chunk of credit hours to be devoted to more experiential types of courses or projects. Still, most learning of this type was relegated to January Plans and was viewed as, if not second-class, then certainly as less significant than learning that took place in the traditional classroom.

"Gradually that changed," Morrione said. "And it changed by faculty building these kinds of things into their regular courses. As that started to happen, the students demanded . . . more of that kind of involvement. I'd see it in my course evaluations. Students would say, 'Just going down to the homeless shelter wasn't enough, dropping in once or twice. We ought to have it as an option in the course.'"

For sociology students, that meant more fieldwork. Morrione recalls an early foray that had an entire research methods class doing a house-to-house survey in rural Waldo County. "It truly transformed the way they saw life in Maine in general," he said. "The stories are wonderful."

Over the years community-based learning elbowed its way into the curriculum but still was seen as being outside the core of Colby's mission. It made its appearance early in science, with the now-traditional lake studies done by the Biology Department, but also appeared in courses like the documentary filmmaking still taught by Phyllis Mannocchi (English). In the early 1990s Morrione proposed making community service a graduation requirement, mirroring what was happening in many of the nation's high schools. That idea was defeated, but only after heated debate.

Still, community-based learning and service was gaining momentum

own poems, collected in *Blue Hallelujahs*, winner of the Maine Chapbook competition in 1996. The '90s saw him turn toward the downtown schools and community.

Early in March, Harris paused to talk on his way out the door to a weekend Zen retreat.

"They tell you to stop running your brain. Just attempt to concentrate on your breath. That stuff appeals to me," he said. "Separation is an illusion. We're not separate from one another. That's true on a molecular level, and that's what poetry comes to. Everything should connect in a poem, so why shouldn't everything connect outside?"

At Waterville's Inland Hospital Harris still leads a state-wide Maine Humanities program, Literature and Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Health Care. Hospitals are by nature hierarchical, he says, which keeps people from relating. "Literature has a way of illuminating that we're all the same. So it breaks down barriers," he said.

To improve town-gown relations Harris involved himself with the REM program, a volunteer organization that works to improve the economic and cultural life in greater Waterville. The redesign of the city's Concourse and creation of the Sterns Art Center were the best things to come out of it, he says, although he found it wasn't the way for him to go. He started paying attention to the Colby Volunteer Center.

Even though 200 students were involved in CVC, they still needed a faculty member to push for funds and a budget. "We've tacitly ignored students' idealism and their capacity for engagement," Harris said. "If truth is in action, they were the conscience of the institution."

He used his position as faculty representative to the Board of Trustees in 2000-01 as a bully pulpit: "CVC is housed in a broom closet! I kept saying that. They were responsive. I'm waiting for the shoe to drop."

He believes it's enlightened self-interest for the College to keep the CCAK and CVC programs going. And he'd like each academic program, from administrative science to physics to women's studies, to make at least one of their courses intersect with the community. "You can do this in any subject matter," he said confidently.

Making connections, overcoming separation, setting the College and students along the road of social responsibility . . .

"If I had a million bucks, I'd give it to people who needed it," Harris said. "It's what a decent society would do anyway."

—Robert Gillespie

at Colby. The Colby Volunteer Center was thriving and expanding, with dynamic student leaders at the helm. The Student Government Association started Colby Cares Day, an annual spring event that sent hundreds of students into area communities to do service projects.

Faculty members like Tappan and Associate Professor Lyn Mikel Brown (education and human development) understood that sending education students into the schools benefited both secondary schools and the Colby students. "We first started out thinking of it as more of a practicum experience for the students," Tappan said. "It soon became obvious that students were performing a very valuable service."

Teresa Hawko '01 with a student mentor. Hawko coordinates the Colby Cares About Kids program, which matches area children with Colby students.

Mannocchi has been dispatching student film crews into the community for more than a decade, creating documentaries on social issues that have included women in Maine with HIV, the dedication of firefighters and other unsung heroes, the lives of exotic dancers. Students develop relationships with their subjects. "It's the best kind of teaching for me," she said. "I really feel I'm teaching to create social change."

Of course, this overlapping of community and classroom hasn't happened in a vacuum, and emergence of a refired civic spirit does not contradict the tenets and traditions of the College or the country. Scholars who have considered the impetus for volunteerism in America go back as far as Native American treatment of early European settlers, Christian ethics and the frontier tradition of cooperation noted by Alexis DeTocqueville.

Brian O'Connell, professor of public service at Tufts University and founder of the organization Independent Sector, points out that in recent years it has been volunteers who have created everything from Hospice to Alcoholics Anonymous. Volunteer activists have pushed the environmental movement and reforms in health care, education and rights for the disabled.

While government has been driven by the people, the last two presidents—one Republican and one Democrat—both have made community service a priority. Bill Clinton, following in the tradition of Peace Corps creator John F. Kennedy, brought forth AmeriCorps. President George W. Bush followed with his "faith-based initiative" and his post-September 11 call for all Americans to combat terrorism by performing community service.

A Colby Friend When a Child Needs One

Editor's note: Meg Rieger '02 began mentoring a Waterville fourth grader earlier this year in the Colby Cares About Kids program. A Spanish major and education minor, Rieger plans to go into teaching after graduation. She was asked by Colby why she is a mentor and what she thinks she is accomplishing. This is an excerpt of her response.

I can devote my attention and interest to one little person who has . . . big dreams for herself and for her future. I can be someone who shows her that if she keeps the tough and persistent attitude she has at age 11, she can take down big challenges and hopefully improve her life.

Working with my "mentee" has allowed me to see beyond statistics and developmental theory and to gain a more real perception of what being an 11-year-old girl is like today in a community such as Waterville. It helps me to read and interpret the social constructions I have learned so much about in my education courses.

I think many Colby students really take for granted the position that they hold in society. Being a white, middle-class woman, and a student at Colby, has placed me in a position of power and privilege in society. By being a friend and role model to a child who comes from a less privileged background, I give my attention, encouragement and compassion to someone who really needs it. If I can make a difference in the life of one child, I have begun to fulfill the responsibility that comes with the comfort and safety I often take for granted in my life.

I want to add that mentoring has not been without reward for me personally. Twice a week, I get to be the "coolest person, so much fun and wicked smart" in the eyes of a fourth grader. To hear a child refer to me as "my Colby student" puts a smile on my face and makes me realize that I am something special to her. She shows me off in the lunch line and on the playground and writes about me in her sentences for language arts. We swing on the swings and talk about events in her life, problems she is having and what she wants to be when she grows up. She tells me she wants to be a Colby student like me, and then she wants to be a doctor.

After recess I walk her to class and say goodbye, and I return to campus and to being just an ordinary person again. I leave mentoring each day excited to be a part of the life of this child and excited by all the potential I see in her. She encourages me that even when faced with adversity, dreams can persist and hopefully will come true.

—Meg Rieger '02

"It seems as if there is a call for renewal and a call for community service that we've not observed before, targeted at this age group," said Patricia Nash, at Independent Sector in Washington, D.C. And the call has not gone unanswered. Applications for the Peace Corps, for example, increased about 40 percent in the weeks following the State of the Union address.

This call for volunteers to turn out on campus and elsewhere may be unprecedented in its scope, but it is also cyclical, following the nation's economic ups and downs. Associate Professor Bill Klein (psychology), who has studied the psychological causes and effects of altruism, says people are more likely to be helpful to others "when their basic assumptions are challenged—such as the veil of invulnerability that was stripped from us on September 11." Klein also points out that while altruism can be a result of an economic boom, it typically continues even when the boom has turned to bust because people have learned the benefits—for themselves and others—of community service.

This current interest in volunteerism was spawned during a time of tremendous prosperity for some Americans but not for others, said Sharon Daloz Parks, author and a director of the Whidbey Institute, a Washington-state-based nonprofit that is committed to addressing "environmental, spiritual and social challenges." But she maintains that all of us have a tremendous capacity for empathy, a trait that is accentuated when times are good.

"As we see a growing gap in our society economically between those who have relative easy access to economic resources and those who are more and more marginalized, those who have more feel some human obligation to those who have less," she said.

Parks, who has written extensively on the ways individuals can change and contribute to society, said people who work hard to ensure they remain in the "top of the economic hourglass" turn to volunteering as an expression of their humanity. Colleges and universities, she said, with their upwardly mobile populations, are fertile ground for volunteerism. But working in a soup kitchen as an extracurricular activity can also fall into the category of people with money and privilege demonstrating that to one another by volunteering.

And while some cynics question whether volunteerism is about helping or résumé building, others say that isn't necessarily a bad thing. If doing something for others is tied to careers, networking and making contacts useful in a job search, so be it, said Patricia Nash at Independent Sector: "I think that's a fine thing. It can benefit the individual as well as the community."

But Parks wonders what message colleges want to send to their young community servers. "Yes, you should do this when you're young and then you have to get serious about an eighty-hour work week? Or do we want to say to our young, you are going to have these experiences because you are going to be living in a yet more diverse, complex society with new ethical frontiers and we see this as a critical part of your education?"

Parks says colleges can offer opportunities for volunteering, but they also need to be mindful of their broader public purpose as institutions.

Colleges and universities can find ways to engage in these activities in such a way that it merely helps maintain the status quo, she said. Or they can turn volunteer activity into a learning activity that leads to a dialogue between colleges and universities and the surrounding communities—and addresses root causes of social problems.

It's important, Parks said, "to ask what is the deep purpose, as individuals going through these schools, but also to ask that question institutionally. What do we mean to each other? How does the

A Good Shepherd for Colby Mentors

Think of what it takes to get yourself, your family, your children to their various appointments every week. Now consider what it would be like to get some 160 Colby students and area kids together.

That's why Teresa Hawko '01 often is the one who turns out the lights in the Eustis Building at night. When Hawko, who coordinates, schedules, adjusts, fine-tunes and generally shepherds participants in the Colby Cares About Kids mentoring program, talks about commitment, she knows of what she speaks.

Hawko became interested in service learning as a student and this year is an AmeriCorps*VISTA worker at Colby and the CCAK site coordinator. Her work began weeks before the volunteers went one on one last fall with children in Waterville, Benton, Clinton and Vassalboro. Three hundred sixty people expressed interest in the mentoring program, although the number of participants dropped after the requirements were explained. Many students can't do both CCAK and a sport, for instance. And anyone considering participating was warned that they must be ready to make a firm commitment.

"Hanging out with a kid is going to be a definite step to take," Hawko said.

Though the benefits for the children are expected to emerge over a period of years, some positive effects are already being felt. "We do see a difference in truancy," Hawko said. The kids are always in school the day the mentor comes. Reading levels rise when a mentor reads aloud and goes through a book with them. They gain confidence "and can at least try to keep up with the academic pace," Hawko said.

As of last January, according to Moira Bentzel, guidance counselor at the Albert S. Hall School in Waterville, there hadn't been a single dropout on either side.

Critics of service learning raise liability issues posed by uncertified volunteers. And faculty have to give up some control when students' experiences don't fit into course paradigms. "But it's a myth that you'll lose academic rigor," Hawko said. "Service learning can fall into any discipline and be relevant."

"We're not looking to remodel Colby," she added. "We want to make it stand out."

And after Hawko goes her own way?

Colby has applied for another VISTA position, sponsored by Maine Campus Compact, and it was expected in March that the position would be approved. Two candidates (current seniors) already had expressed interest.

"Service learning is up and coming," Hawko concluded. "If we don't get on the wagon, we're going to miss the big bus."

question of the surrounding communities change the work of the college? How does the presence of the college potentially affect the surrounding communities in positive ways?"

Colby students who serve as mentors in the schools are less self-conscious about why they volunteer and tend to answer questions about their motives with a shrug and a smile. Snyder said he helped his mother, a resource-room teacher in Bangor, when he was in high school but had limited time for community service because he played sports and had other obligations. "When I got to college, I wanted to give back a little more," he said.

Sato, who volunteered as a student in Iowa City, said he expected to do as much or more at Colby, and not only for the benefit of his fifth-grade friend. "I never had a little brother so it's kind of like that," he said. "I just enjoy hanging out with him."

Colby may supply the mentors, but for college students who live in a community of 18- to 21-year-olds, the younger kid may be a welcome change. "It's a really good opportunity," Snyder said. "I get to work with Roy."

And have an impact.

Emily Hoberg '99 (top) and Kathryn Reber '00 spruce up "Old 470," an historic steam locomotive in downtown Waterville. Hoberg and Reber were among students taking part in the first Colby Cares Day in 1997.

While the Colby Cares About Kids program still is in the formative stages, other Colby students have been working in the schools for years and their contribution can be measured.

Mannocchi's daughter Jackie Mannocchi for example, is dyslexic, and Colby students have tutored her for three years through Waterville Junior High School. "They make her feel special," Mannocchi said. "That's exactly where a Colby tutor helps. It's somebody who can really relate to kids."

Meanwhile, in area schools some say the seeds of a long-lasting legacy have already been planted. Hall School fourth-grade teacher Donna Richardson said the Colby mentors offer children precious undivided attention, that the college kids are role models and that in an ideal world every child would have a Colby friend.

"I was enthusiastic and I'm still enthusiastic," said Bentzel, the Hall School counselor. "I think it's going beautifully. I can't think of any drawbacks. "They have just been a wonderful presence in the schools."

Roy, the 11-year-old paired with Snyder, offered his endorsement. "I'm very hyper on the days that he's not here," he said. "The first day, I'm like, 'Hey . . . Look at my bodyguard.'"

Trash Talk Over the Chess Board

Nick Snyder '05 is sitting at a round table in the library at the Albert S. Hall School. With him is Roy, a fifth grader with dark, wide-set eyes and a puckish grin.

The following is a snippet from the ongoing collaboration that is Colby Cares About Kids.

Roy: I'm very tired.

Nick: Were you up late?

Roy: No. I'm just tired.

Nick: Well, school can do that to you.

Roy: Especially when you're doing so much science. We talked about everything back from the beginning of school.

Nick: Oh, yeah. You're reviewing. Well, that's not that bad. You get to touch up on what you missed the first time.

Snyder yawns.

Roy: You're tired, too. I only stayed up until 9 o'clock. My sister went to bed at eight and she's a four-year-old. She doesn't fall asleep until I go to bed. I fall asleep and in the morning I get up and I walk into her room and she has some of my stuff.

Nick: Oh, no. Taking your stuff.

Roy: She goes into my room and my brother's room, gets out stuff and plays with it in her room.

Nick: You know, my little brothers, they take everything of mine. They wear all my clothes.

Roy: Now you know what I'm doing? I'm leaving all my noisy toys out so when she goes in there and tries to take them—

Nick: It'll set them off?

Roy: And mom will know she's up.

Nick (to a visitor): We have a good time.

Roy: No, we don't.

Nick: No, we have a horrible time. He beats me in chess, too.

Roy: No, I didn't. We had a draw on the first two. You beat me on the third one and the fourth one I beat you.

Nick: Yeah, but in the fifth one I beat you. Payback. Want to play some chess? I think we have time.

(They start a game. In five or six moves, Roy has the edge.)

Nick: I'm done. I should just forfeit now.

Roy: What are you trying to do? Save yourself?