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Asking Why: Campus activists question factors that lead to need

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Asking Why

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Serving meals at the local soup kitchen is just one part of the activist equation, says Jonathan White, visiting professor of sociology. The other is determining why people end up at a soup kitchen at all—and then doing something about it.

White is one of the catalysts of a renewed political activism at Colby, a movement that he jump-started by bringing separate groups of activists together when he arrived on Mayflower Hill almost two years ago.

Students have brought a growing roster of speakers, liberal and conservative, joined an e-mail list serve, established an activist newspaper, *The Difference*, and created a Web site that chronicles the history of activism at Colby (www.colby.edu/education/activism/). Several students have gone to work for a United Nations-chartered organization that educates children about the realities of war (see page 30).



Banding together in recent years, Colby students have tackled global issues. At left, students march at Colby in 1999 to protest the use of foreign child labor. Colby students (right) pause after being tear-gassed in Quebec City during protests at a trade summit last year.

“I think community service is one form of activism,” White said. “And it’s the most comfortable. It’s the most generally accepted and the most generally promoted, particularly by religious institutions. Somebody’s hungry, you feed them. Help them out. But don’t question why they were hungry. Don’t question the systems that allow that.”

“I found I need to do both. If I just do the local helping somebody out, then I wonder when the madness is going to stop. I can feed this person today but I’m still going to feed them tomorrow unless we change the policy.”

Changing the policy is what Colby activists are after, whether it be trade practices that allow exploitation of child laborers or arms deals that supply land mines that kill thousands of civilians.

Work at a soup kitchen?

Yes, they do, but they also ask how 120,000 people can starve to death every day in a world that has enough food to feed them three times over. “Community service recognizes a problem, but rarely the underlying cause,” said Jessica Kellett ’04, “whereas activism hopes to address the cause and the solution.”

If that rubs some people the wrong way, so be it, Colby activists say. Said Kellett: “Activism has been known to look outside the box, which may frighten Colby and its mainstream image.”

While activists tackle global issues, there is

also a need, as in community service, to address local problems. Kellett says Colby students should be more involved in issues that shape the economy and culture of Central Maine.

Like what? Kellett points out that Maine timber is exported across the border to Canada for processing, depriving rural Mainers of jobs. And national chain stores are pressuring locally owned businesses, threatening to turn distinctive downtowns into ghost towns.

Kellett envisions a Colby-community activist coalition that could be brought to bear on these problems and more. “Then, when a new Super Wal-Mart wants to come into Waterville, the Waterville community’s [and] Colby’s power and knowledge concerning the issue can, one, actually take shape, and two, have an effect which represents the active, rather than passive, interests of the area,” she said.

And Kellett isn’t the only student versed in these issues.

“These are intelligent kids who come to Colby,” White said. “If they’re smart they have to know somewhere, at least in the back of their consciousness, that if somebody’s starving and they’re throwing food out, even if they couldn’t have gotten that food to that person, then something’s going on with the world system. That they’re connected. They’re part of that.”

White points out that when students leave Colby as adults, many of them ultimately

assume powerful positions, whether in business, politics or elsewhere.

Colby’s responsibility?

“When they leave for us to have socialized them to be active participating citizens, who work, not just for their own good and the good of their family or their community, but for the good of society, and that means global society,” White said.

“What they’re doing here is important and has an effect in and of itself but also so they have the skills when they go out. Lots of graduating students are out doing human rights now. And I like that. Some of them are doing human rights in terms of doing programs to help feed people. And some of them are trying to affect policy. So it’s on both levels.”

And Colby students, who some see as sheltered from the world’s problems by both their social class and an idyllic setting, aren’t afraid to tackle daunting social issues, he said.

“You know there is racism and sexism and people kill gay people, and you know there are children making your clothes,” White said. “You know this stuff but you’re always told growing up, ‘That’s just the way the world is.’”

But it doesn’t have to be that way, Colby students are concluding after coming to an understanding of global connections.

“They know it,” White said. “Most students react to it very positively. It’s a relief, because they’ve always wondered.”