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Striving for Balance: Dialogue on Race Leads to Civil Protest Action

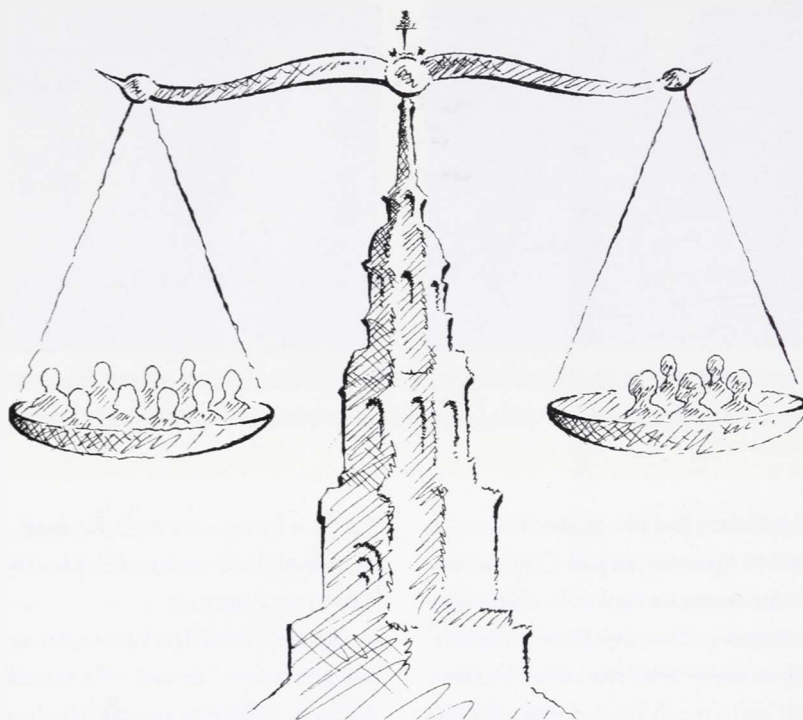
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Striving for Balance

Dialogue on Race Leads to Civil Protest Action

It was mid-morning on Friday, April 16, when two dozen students mounted the stairs to the third floor of the Eustis Administration Building chanting "racism must go." Many of the students had gotten up early on Wednesday morning, two days before, to attend the 8 a.m. Campus Community Committee meeting in the Pugh Center, where the Task Force on Institutional Racism had presented its final report. Many also had been up late Thursday night at a Student Government Association (SGA) meeting advocating creation of a minority affairs representative on the SGA's legislative body, the Presidents' Council.

The chanting group was a coalition of white students joining students of color, with a few faculty and staff members as well. They all shared a commitment to rid Colby of any and all residues of racism that still insidiously infect institutions and society in America, including Colby, they said. And, they said, they were frustrated.

The students requested and got a meeting with President Bill Cotter, who was attending the April Board of Trustees meeting across campus in the Roberts Building. When Cotter arrived, they presented a list of 16 demands and vowed to remain in the president's office until they received answers and assurances. "We are tired of the same old rhetoric," their statement said.

Cotter, needing to get back to business with trustees, agreed to see students at 6:30 p.m. The students decided to stay put until that time, and the sit-in of 1999 began.

By Stephen Collins '74

Student frustration was brought to a head by several developments on campus in the week leading up to April 16. An opinion piece in *The Colby Echo* had contained remarks that they characterized as racially insensitive. The presentation of the Report of the Task Force on Institutional Racism the previous Wednesday had refocused attention on several issues, including how minority students feel burdened by the role they feel compelled to take on to improve issues of diversity and equality on campus. And on Thursday an initiative to get a voting minority-affairs representative approved for the Presidents' Council achieved what some proponents considered less than half a loaf—a non-voting representative of the Pugh Center Alliance (a coalition of multicultural clubs and organizations with offices in the Pugh Center).

These events and the students' assertion that it is the job of Colby's senior administration, not students and faculty, and particularly not students and faculty of color, to root out and redress inequities, led to a late night strategy session on Thursday. Plans for the march were hatched.

"Dialogue is good. Talking about these issues is important,"

The students traced their protest to the black students' takeover of Lorimer Chapel in 1969 and to a 1994 student action that took the name Students of Color United for Change and demanded separate multicultural housing on campus. This year's protesters, as did the authors of the report of the Task Force on Institutional Racism, referred to and restated demands and complaints lodged by a 1998 graduate who charged that she had been racially harassed by another student and claimed she had not received a fair hearing or adequate apologies from the College.

Protesters and authors of the task force report focused on "institutional racism," which they differentiated from individual racism. Invoking the term introduced in the late 1960s by Stokely Carmichael, Laura Eichelberger '99 read the following definition to a Campus Community Meeting: "While racism in one sense may describe the beliefs or ideas of individuals, in its institutional sense it refers to the anonymous operation of discrimination in organizations, professions, or even whole societies." Textbook examples in Eichelberger's definition included excuses for lack of diversity in hiring, discrimination in lending based on neighborhood restrictions and seniority rules that create "first in, last out" and "last hired, first let go" policies.

At Colby, students said, institutional racism takes various forms. It is evident in the assumption that students of color will put in the time and effort required, above and beyond their normal workload as college students, to bring about social justice and equality, they said. Responsibility for campus programs, for minority recruiting strategies and for diversity training too often fall on the shoulders of students of color, they said. "I'm tired of being a member and a co-convenor to create something that other students take for granted," Sanders told Cotter at a Campus Community Committee meeting. "It's not my job. Something should be done by senior administrators." Later she

said Kyle Potter '99 afterward. "What I'm saying is, I've talked about them for four years."

Students said they decided to test Cotter's open-door policy and intended to remain in his office until they got a satisfactory response. In interviews held afterward, there was near unanimity among student leaders of the protest: "We're not condemning Colby. We're saying that we feel Colby can be a better place and we have some ideas that I think are really good ideas," said Potter. "We're not calling anyone racist. We are in no way calling President Cotter racist. Anyone who knows his track record knows that he cares. We just went to his office to say to him, 'look what can be better.' He's the guy who can get this stuff done."

"The system here is not perfect. If you work on it, it can be better," said Kenya Sanders '00, student convener of the Task Force on Institutional Racism and a spokesperson during the protest. "It wasn't a personal attack, but as president of Colby College, he is not doing everything he could be."

"Colby is not any worse than Bates or Bowdoin or most other schools of its rank," said Stephen Murphy '99. "But Colby needs to take the challenge and go beyond its peers and be a leader."

pointed out that the protest capped a week when she had attended a racism task force meeting on Monday, a Society Organized Against Racism (SOAR) meeting Tuesday, the Campus Community Committee meeting on institutional racism on Wednesday and a Presidents' Council meeting Thursday to appeal for a minority affairs representative.

Students said it is institutional racism whenever a class or a professor turns to an African-American student to explain some subtlety of life in the innercity or something about Shakespeare's character Othello. Said Coy Dailey '01: "In utopian history, say, let's talk about slavery or let's talk about civil rights—the class tends to look at the person of color—this happens everywhere; I went to a predominantly white high school and this was the pattern—and he feels like he has to speak up for the whole race." It's uncomfortable, Dailey says. "I'm a student too. I'm trying to learn just like everyone else. A lot of people don't even have to think about this stuff. Everyone else can say, 'I don't see that' and walk away. We can't do that."

Institutional racism is evident in the lack of an assured role in student government, students said. "At the Presidents' Council, everybody sitting around the room was predominantly white and the dorm representatives, even if they weren't white, the dorms they were representing were predominantly white," said Christina Tinglof '00. "So it seems obvious to me that racial minorities don't have a very big say on the Presidents' Council."

When the Presidents' Council approved a non-voting representative, it, in essence, gave students of color "permanent guest status" in Colby's power structure, said Associate Professor of Philosophy Jill Gordon.

Gordon said another manifestation of institutional racism is the way Colby's harassment policies deal with sexual harassment but lack the specific language to effectively prosecute

instances of racial harassment. She described institutional racism as "the ways in which institutions further disadvantage people who are already disadvantaged." It can be traced to the policies, procedures and practices that institutions have and use that consciously or unconsciously reproduce racial inequities that exist in the larger society. "No one individually has to be racist" for institutional racism to function, she said.

Cotter took issue with the term "institutional racism" as soon as faculty and students used that term in the title of the task force last fall. He said Colby's tradition of affirmative action, with resultant numerical increases in minority representation in the student body, faculty and staff, is the opposite of the practices that perpetuate discrimination and exclusion and that define institutional racism. When Potter conceded at a Campus Community Committee that *all* institutions are infected with institutional racism, Cotter's reaction was that "it's a meaningless description. So let's concentrate instead on concrete objectives," he said—"things we can do to fulfill the commitments we've already made to affirmative action. Let's ask, 'Where are we? How are we doing? What more can we do?'"

As the occupation of the president's office continued April 16, numbers swelled and the protest spilled into the board room and the third-floor lounge. During the afternoon Cotter met in Roberts with protest leaders Potter and Sanders, SGA President Ben Langille '99, SGA VP-elect Jon Gray '00 and Assistant Professor Sandy Grande (education and human development). Gray, elected less than two days before, was asked to join that meeting as a mediator. "I had no honeymoon," he said.

"But that was a great meeting," Gray said of the afternoon negotiations. "It was back-and-forth discourse between Cotter and those three leaders. They didn't agree on everything, but there was give and take on both sides." The result was a revised list of 14 recommendations that students presented to Cotter and trustees that evening. (See students' list, center, left.)

At an evening meeting of protesters, administrators and trustees in the board room, Cotter responded to the list point by point, and he elaborated in a 30-page written response issued two weeks later. (See excerpts, center, right.) He highlighted progress Colby has made during his 20 years as president. In 1979 there were no African Americans in the entering class and only 2 percent of the student body were students of color. This year approximately 10 percent of the student population were persons of color, and there were 81 international students, he said. In Colby's Class of 2003 there will be 18 African-American students, who are among a total of 65 ALANA (African-American, Latino, Asian, Native American) first-year students; both record numbers. In 20 years the number of ALANA faculty members has risen from four to 23, Cotter said. More important than numbers, he said, are the contributions and outstanding achievements of both students and faculty of color.

During the four years that this year's seniors were on campus Colby opened the Pugh Center for multicultural affairs, started the Previews Program for prospective ALANA students, initiated an exchange with Clark University in Atlanta, selected two freshman books with diversity themes and initiated the Oak scholarships, which increase enrollment of African students.

At the climactic meeting on April 16 Cotter promised action on a wide range of student recommendations, but he clearly identified areas where he lacked authority or willingness to implement their suggestions. In his written reply, he reiterated: "I am not prepared to revisit the decision of the Trustee Commission on Multicultural Housing (composed of Trustees, faculty, students and staff,

Students' Recommendations

Following afternoon negotiations that included President Cotter, protest leaders, trustees and Student Government Association representatives, the protesters submitted a list of 14 recommendations (paraphrased here), which asked for:

- a response and action plan, with a timetable, to respond to the report by the Task Force on Institutional Racism and the letter from the aggrieved student;
- Cotter to support a racial-minority affairs representative on the Presidents' Council;
- a minority scholar's postdoctoral program to be revived by spring of 2000;
- new faculty positions for at least three minority scholars committed to confronting issues of race and racism and the systems of privilege and oppression, and an increased number of minority faculty in tenure-track positions;
- a review of the academic "diversity requirement";
- diversity training to be required for Dean's Office and Financial Aid Office staffs and to be available to faculty and other staff at no or low cost;
- the multicultural housing issue to be revisited by the trustees, in consultation with members of the Task Force on Institutional Racism;
- a social/academic support network to be established for students of color with student mentors in paid positions, and for a half-faculty half-administrative position to be created to direct the program;
- the College's commitment to affirmative action to be strengthened for all faculty, staff and administrative positions;
- a program to be created to increase enrollment of American Indian students, with special consideration for members of Maine tribal nations;
- Colby magazine to feature an article on the protest and the experience of students of color, written in consultation with them;
- diversity training to be a requirement for SGA leaders and Presidents' Council members;
- a Pugh Center coordinator's position (an assistant director of intercultural affairs position existed during the 1996-97 school year) to be reinstated and made permanent; and
- the president to address "the most recent racist statements and actions taken by the *Echo*."

Reply to Recommendations

The protest concluded with an evening meeting that included students, administrators, trustees and faculty. There, and in a 30-page written reply (copies of which are available from the President's Office), President Cotter:

- agreed to draft new language to better define racial harassment in the *Student Handbook*;
- committed funds for diversity training for faculty, staff and students (SGA President Benjamin Humphreys '00 has pledged diversity training for all Executive Committee and Presidents' Council members);
- commissioned a report for all personnel on harassment and hate crime statutes;
- put the diversity requirement on the agenda for the Academic Affairs Committee (noting that only the faculty can make changes to the College curriculum);
- agreed to find ways to strengthen Colby's already solid commitment to affirmative action for all faculty and staff positions;
- agreed to investigate Dartmouth's program for a Native American scholarship program (noting that Native Americans already are eligible for the Bunche Scholars program);
- agreed to attend the Presidents' Council to support diverse representation in all Colby organizations;
- agreed to a ceremony and installation of a plaque in the Pugh Center, by September if possible, recounting the history that led to the building;
- agreed to create paid positions for students of color and others interested in mentoring incoming ALANA students;
- agreed that it is desirable to have at least one person of color as a faculty member in residence on campus but opposed a rigid quota;
- committed to having artwork and posters representing people of color installed in residence halls by the opening of school;
- agreed to an article in the summer issue of *Colby* magazine; and
- agreed to address racially insensitive statements in *The Colby Echo* while upholding the newspaper's right to unabridged freedom of expression.

Cotter explained that he could *not* agree to:

- add faculty or administrative positions, because that would violate Colby's staffing cap;
- reopen the issue of multicultural housing, which was addressed by a trustee commission in 1995;
- separate race from other diversity issues handled in the Campus Community Committee by establishing a separate standing committee on race.

many of whom were persons of color), which unanimously recommended against separate housing at Colby. I do not know of any new arguments or facts that would likely cause the Trustees to alter their decision, which was based on fear of divisiveness, among other things." He did, however, agree to republish the report along with other steps taken since the report was adopted.

He said requests for new positions, including postdoctoral fellows, new faculty slots and new administrators, were in conflict with staffing caps that have been in place since 1988 for administrators and 1995 for faculty. "While these additions would be extremely useful," he said, the best he could do was ensure that they will be considered by a Trustee Planning Committee, which is mapping out long-range plans for the College as it faces a new century and prepares to welcome a new president. (The Planning Committee has a standing subcommittee on diversity.)

Cotter expressed reservations about a request for a standing committee that would deal only with matters of race because it would open questions about the status of other diversity issues (gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc.). He also noted that while it is difficult and problematic to require diversity training for faculty and students, the dean of student's staff already has engaged in various diversity training programs.

Cotter explained that Colby never had a "dean of minority recruitment." Staff turnover shifted the responsibilities from a senior admissions officer (an associate dean of admissions) to a more junior officer, whose title is associate director of admissions and financial aid and coordinator of multicultural enrollment.

Finally, having reviewed the harassment case brought by the student last spring, Cotter said, "we take her recommendations for new actions seriously," but, he concluded, "I do not feel there was any impropriety," and he declined to issue or order formal apologies from administrators. The student decided not to appeal the dean's hearing findings with the College's appeals board, and the Maine Human Rights Commission administratively dismissed her discrimination charge in February, Cotter said.

After an hour-long meeting in the board room, the Eustis sit-in ended. The protesters and a crowd that swelled to perhaps 100 students, faculty and administrators had listened as leaders discussed the 14 points with Cotter and with four prominent members of the Board of Trustees. Cotter and chair of the board Larry Pugh '56 held a press conference afterward. They called the dialogue productive and said the students were "articulate and passionate."

"It's unfortunate that students and faculty felt that it was necessary to get my attention by occupying my office," Cotter said later, in an interview, "because I think it's fairly well known that I'm always open to dialogue. These are important issues; a takeover wasn't necessary. While they were respectful as far as not going through my papers, it still was a violation. It's my office."

Students interviewed later in the semester expressed guarded optimism for future developments. Several said the protest wasn't about recruiting more students of color but rather was about improving the Colby experience for students of color and was about trying to find ways for white students to understand the issues of racial privilege without having students of color responsible for doing the work to educate their peers. "Some people are racist; most are just ignorant," said Sanders. "It's Colby's responsibility to educate them. You're making these people the leaders of tomorrow—get them now or it will be too late."

"We're happy the trustees met with us," said Potter. "Well, I wouldn't say we're happy—I think that we were heard. I don't think the College has ever had a problem listening to us. A commitment has been made to us and that was just the beginning. We know that's just a starting point." ☞