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The D Word: A Reexamination of Diversity at Colby Opens the Door to New Possibilities

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The **D** Word

***A Reexamination of Diversity at Colby
Opens the Door to New Possibilities***

BY STEPHEN COLLINS '74

Colby, Bates and Bowdoin students listen to a speaker during one of the workshop sessions at the CBB Diversity Conference at Colby.





When Tennessee Watson '03 arrived at Colby two years ago from a suburb of Rochester, N.Y., she confidently threw herself into tough academic courses and settled on a double major in Latin American studies and government. In her first semester she played soccer on weekends with international students and made up for relative inexperience on the field with tenacity. In the winter she won competitions at Sugarloaf in the boardercross—a sort of snowboard-race-meets-roller-derby event. Almost instantly, Colby was her oyster. “I saw it as a pretty homogenous environment and realized it was comfortable for me,” she recalled this spring.

Allyson Hill '03 of Minot, Maine, arrived at the same time and spent much of her first two years wondering why she didn't feel she fit in. To fill her work-study requirement she took jobs in Dana washing dishes and cooking omelets and struggled to balance her work sched-

ule and a biology and art double major. She often wondered, “Why can't I be as positive as these other Colby kids?” Coming from a solid working-class family from a small town outside of Lewiston-Auburn, she found a code and sensibility on campus that she now characterizes as “suburban” and that she simply didn't get. “Everyone dresses a lot alike even though a lot of kids can't really afford to do that,” she said.

The two women have been roommates since midway through their first year. They're both bright, articulate, engaging, curious, white, progressive. And each now characterizes herself as having been “clueless.”

What led to this conclusion was not what they share but rather where they

differ. In the ferment of campus life, shared meals, forums about diversity and classic late-night dorm-room discussions, these two close friends discovered that what made their experiences at Colby so dissimilar was the difference in their backgrounds and, in particular, differences in socioeconomic class.

Navigating the affronts and frustrations that are part of day-to-day life, “I'd be amused, and she'd be enraged,” Watson said. “It [this realization] really broke down walls for me.”

Hill said, “Tenny was clueless, as in ‘Everybody's happy, just like me.’ I was like, ‘Who are these kids and where do they come from?’”

Now they both tell the same story as an example of how diversity at Colby has affected them and their view of the world.

This is not your classic case of diversity in action—in fact, social class has only recently been included in discussions of diversity. But it's

“TODAY WE CONFRONTED THE MOST DIFFICULT AND RESILIENT OBSTACLES IN THE FIGHT TO RID OUR COMMUNITY OF HATE AND IGNORANCE. TODAY WE CONFRONTED SILENCE. TODAY WE SPOKE. . . . TODAY WE CHALLENGED OURSELVES.”

Justin Ehrenwerth '01, an organizer of the first CBB Diversity Conference

Valuing Differences: CBB Diversity Conference

There was high voltage in the reception that Justin Ehrenwerth '01 received when he welcomed Bates, Bowdoin and Colby students to the keynote address of the 2001 CBB Diversity Conference. And there was a lot of whooping mixed in with the applause when he credited fellow students who helped plan the two-day event in March.

“We put together a conference together that we can be proud of for the rest of our lives,” Ehrenwerth told the crowd of about 900 people that packed the Page Commons Room to hear actor and activist Danny Glover. Despite an early-March snowstorm, hundreds of CBB students had showed up on a Saturday morning for 13 workshops—what Ehrenwerth called “the true substance of this conference”—with topics that included “A Panel Discussion on Sexual Preference,” “Racial Stratification,”



Danny Glover, the actor and social activist who delivered the keynote address at the CBB Diversity Conference, discussed issues with students afterward.

“Experience of Religious Students on a Largely Secular Campus,” “Origins of Hip-hop” and “The Challenges of Enrolling Diverse Students” (to see the complete conference schedule go to www.colby.edu/sga/diversity.html).

As the crowd enthusiastically acknowledged in turn organizers Ehrenwerth, Sounun Tek '03, Lee Rankin '03, Rob Tarlock '01 and Rob Henzi '01, it was clear that four months of planning had paid off.

Ehrenwerth, who is white, had been thrust into Colby's discussion of diversity as a member of the 1998 Task Force on Institutional Racism and one of the student group that occupied the president's office in 1999. He knew, he says, that a missing element at Colby was a forthright and intensive student-to-student dialogue about diversity, and he knew it couldn't be imposed by the administration.

an example of how diversity in the student body enriches the educational experience at Colby. Much of the conversation about diversity has been about race, and when you consider differences in race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation and religion that are increasingly part of the mix, it's a rich stew indeed.

Diversity is a term that gets used a lot these days, particularly around higher education. There is perhaps no single more important issue at colleges like Colby, and at the same time there are few words that have such a diversity of meanings. At Colby alone, diversity

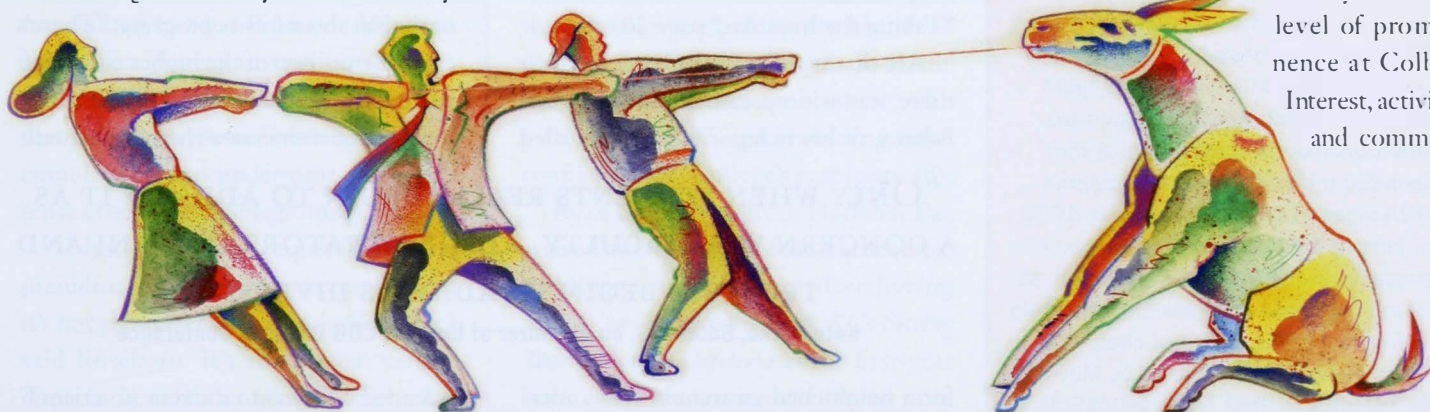
concerns include (but are not limited to) recruiting a diverse student body and faculty; expanding the canon of important, teachable works; making the community welcoming, respectful and comfortable for people from all backgrounds; and, as in the cases of Watson and Hill, learning how the world both looks and operates for different people who have different perspectives.

"The number one reason [for an institutional interest in diversity] is the educational benefit," said Associate Dean of Students and Director of Intercultural

Affairs Jeri Roseboro.

Some dimensions of diversity have challenged students and enriched Colby's educational experience ever since the College was founded in the early 19th century. But as America examined notions of equality during and since the Civil Rights movement, especially along racial lines, diversity has presented multiple and perennial challenges for liberal arts colleges, particularly those in northern New England. Now there's a strong sense on campus, based on events of the past year, that decades of interest in and work on these issues have brought

diversity to a new level of prominence at Colby. Interest, activity and commit-



Last fall, working independently from his role as Student Government Association president, Ehrenwerth and sophomores Tek and Rankin contacted students at Bates and Bowdoin to organize the joint conference. Kate Burke, a sophomore at Bates, recruited about 20 Bates students to help promote the conference because, she said, "I know people at Colby, Bates and Bowdoin who don't feel comfortable in their campus communities."

Thrilled with the success of the event, Burke said, "We'd love to host it [at Bates] next year or the year after."

Praise for the conference came from faculty, administrators and trustees as well. "It was by far the most positive and encouraging effort to address these difficult and important issues that we have witnessed in our ten years at Colby," professors Mark Tappan and Lyn Brown wrote to students who organized and participated in the conference.

"I think it definitely had a lot of impact," said Tek. "Diversity is a key to understanding each other and the world in general." An Asian American from Philadelphia, Tek said he was surprised when he arrived at Colby that it often seemed like "a strain for minority students to be on friendly relations with the majority students."

"I was just curious about how people felt about understanding

others—about understanding minority students in general. What was the bridge between them?" he said. He felt that different groups of students often didn't seem to understand each other and weren't even trying to talk. "That was one of the reasons I wanted to be involved in planning this diversity conference."

Rankin, an African American from Rhode Island, said he hopes the success of the conference will help Colby draw additional students from different backgrounds and races: "People will read about this and say there is a contact mode here and they really do care about my guys and what I'm going through."

More immediately, Rankin says he's seen positive results on campus since the conference. "Before the conference there was never any talk about diversity—only among some small homogeneous groups, amongst the black kids or the Asians or the Jewish students," he said. "Now, even within my own dorm, I've had conversations with people who I had never spoken to about diversity before."

"The conference did more to bring up the questions rather than solve problems," Ehrenwerth concluded when it was over. Between the conference and other diversity initiatives that have taken shape, "This year has been good in terms of starting dialogues," he said.

Diversity History 101

In 1871, when Colby admitted Mary Low, it breached the gender barrier a full century before most other New England men's colleges. Adam Simpson Green, Class of 1887, and Marion Thompson Osborne, Class of 1900, were respectively the first male and female African-American graduates. From the beginning, the Baptists who founded Colby ensured religious freedom. Before Bro Adams tackled diversity, Bill Cotter worked for 21 years to improve the climate for underrepresented minorities and to increase their numbers, and administrations before them actively recruited students of color.

But diversity can mean "disagreement" as well as "variety," and the history of diversity at the College includes periods of conflict. In 1970 black students took over Lorimer Chapel and demanded a black studies curriculum and changes in College policies. In 1994 Students of Color United for Change expressed its frustration with the status quo and called for separate multicultural housing. In 1998 a series of charges against the institution leveled by Mayra Diaz '98 led to a Task Force on Institutional Racism, and in 1999 a student group occupied the president's office for nine hours, presenting a list of 16 demands related to diversity and racism.

Working from the premise that a full accounting of the past is necessary for the College to move forward in its quest for inclusion and equity, several students plan to spend the summer researching and writing a history of diversity, racial conflict and activism at Colby. Jeff Calareso '01, Tennessee Watson '03 and Ryan Swank '03, all members of Students Organized Against Racism (SOAR), are working with Associate Professor of Education and Human Development Mark Tappan and others on the project.

"The process of uncovering this history and exposing it is important to the institution," Calareso said. The dominant historical record can erase people and events, and it's important that future histories include everyone, he said.

ment on the part of students, faculty and administration are at an all-time high.

Most visibly, in March, Colby students initiated and played host to a two-day Colby-Bates-Bowdoin Diversity Conference exploring race, religion and sexuality issues at the three colleges (see "Valuing Differences," page 16). In April, President William D. Adams issued a letter outlining the College's goals and objectives (page 19) and more than a dozen concrete initiatives for understanding, enhancing and welcoming diversity. And during the school year, students and faculty spontaneously started a variety of diversity-supporting initiatives and events (see "Taking the Initiative," page 20).

All of these developments suggest there was widespread agreement when Adams, in his inaugural address, called

openness of learners, while it also will promote understanding of the inevitable false starts and temporary setbacks of the learning process."

In the context of liberal learning, diversity implies openness to a broad spectrum of ideas, liberal and conservative, on the subject of diversity as on any topic, and it remains an underlying principle of the institution for people with wide-ranging philosophies to be heard and to be part of the debate.

Roseboro notes that diversity was high on the agenda of the Board of Trustees and the presidential search committee that recruited Adams, and she expressed optimism about future progress. "There's a quote from one of the higher education journals I read that says, 'Real change requires more than new rhetoric and well-

"ONLY WHEN STUDENTS REALLY BEGIN TO ADDRESS IT AS A CONCERN WILL FACULTY, ADMINISTRATORS, ALUMNI AND TRUSTEES BEGIN TO ADDRESS DIVERSITY."

Kate Burke, Bates '03, an organizer of the first CBB Diversity Conference

for a heightened awareness and understanding of diversity issues. "We are in this together," he said. "We cannot get to where we want to go unless we all understand ourselves to be pulling on the same rope." He charged everyone with putting diversity at the head of the agenda. "Everyone," he said, "needs to be on this train all the time."

Adams puts "improving the campus climate" first on his list of objectives, to ensure that every individual is a fully privileged, empowered, comfortable member of the Colby community. He also said there must be a "willingness to admit that all of us, regardless of our backgrounds or current commitments or places in the institutional structure, have a great deal to learn about this matter and its complexities. Seeing ourselves as learners will be helpful in at least two ways: it will give us the eagerness and

intended add-ons to current practices," Roseboro said. "That's exactly where he has taken us. The steps he's taken are the ones that had to happen."

So why are students catching fire and getting involved in diversity initiatives? Because "The world is a diverse place," said Tremaine Weekes '01, student co-chair of Colby's Multicultural Affairs Committee. "It's an integral part of your education to learn to work with people from different backgrounds."

"Diversity is a key factor for America," said Lee Rankin '03, one of the organizers of the CBB Diversity Conference. The results of the 2000 census underscored the fact that all Americans, today's students included, will have to be capable and comfortable dealing with people who are different from them in fundamental ways, he said.

Getting to that competence and comfort level requires confronting subtle and insidious forms of racism, sexism, homophobia and other prejudice that exist in societies, institutions and individuals—prejudices manifest in well-meaning assumptions about differences and in assumptions that differences simply don't exist when they do. "We can't continue to not address the issue," said Roseboro. "We need to look students in the eye and say, 'what does racism look like to you?'"

The prejudice and oppression are rarely flagrant or overt enough to make the news or cause a public stir, but they are often transmitted in what Professor Margaret McFadden (American studies) refers to as "micro-insults"—little things that by themselves don't seem worth fighting but cumulatively can undermine someone's sense of self-worth or legitimacy.

Valuing diversity requires fighting prejudice, privilege and oppression, but it's not about "what can we do for them," said Roseboro. It's about what can be done to benefit the whole society. It's about "the educational benefits, the understanding and exploring."

And it's not a problem that can be irrevocably solved and put to bed. "There's never going to be a point where we'll be able to rest content," said Professor Robert Weisbrot, a historian of the civil rights movement.

In the dining halls, classrooms, dormitories and the special forums, efforts to learn about diversity continue.

Jeff Calareso '01, from Sioux City, Iowa, recalls arriving at Colby and getting into a discussion with a gay African American. "I met him and I immediately started arguing with him," Calareso said. The two students had such different perspectives

that finding common ground was difficult. "He always responded with angry tirades and with how the world looked to him," Calareso said. "But I eventually started listening to him and it turned me around. I feel like [he] taught me how to do this."

The new insights helped turn Calareso into an activist on behalf of social justice. He did an internship at a Boston-area civil rights organization, Community Change Inc., which led to his participation in a national conference on racial profiling. He took an education course titled Revolutionary Multiculturalism last fall and decided to spend this summer researching the history of diversity at Colby, going back to the first African-American student, who graduated in 1887, and examining racial conflicts in the College's past (page 18).

Ryan Swank '03, from Holland, Pa., arrived at Colby full of anticipation for tackling diversity issues after having read *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* as the first-year book two summers ago. "Coming onto campus it was so exciting. It was a brand new way to look at the world," he said. After hearing author Beverly Tatum speak, he was disappointed when the conversation died down. Then he discovered SOAR (Students Organized

Adams Initiatives

In April, following meetings with a group of professors and administrators, President Adams shared a plan to broaden diversity at Colby and to improve the institutional culture on campus to better support diversity. The plan contained three principal goals and objectives:

- "First, we must improve substantially the campus climate for all under-represented groups and assist every member of the community in appreciating the value and challenges of an increasingly diverse community."
- "Second, we must enhance the vigor, consistency and effectiveness of Colby's recruitment and retention policies and practices (for students, faculty and staff) in light of our diversity goals."
- "Third, we must revise Colby's institutional policies and practices in ways that will support these goals."

Adams's initial plan contains 16 specific initiatives as well as the promise for an annual report on diversity. The memo containing the plan is online at www.colby.edu/president/articles/diversity.shtml.

Against Racism) as an outlet for his activism. "I feel there are a lot of students burning to get into these kinds of conversations," he said.

"Discussion is an integral part of change," Roseboro said. She recalled arriving at Colby in 1994, the fall following protests by Students of Color United for Change, and feeling that no one wanted to talk about diversity. That group asserted that students of color and their concerns were marginalized and ostracized at Colby. "I had a head resident tell me, 'Oh, you can't talk about that.' These were highly volatile issues that were best left alone."

She and others have worked hard to get past that. "Students still arrive naive,



but they're more receptive to listening," she said. "I'm not saying they're willing to change. But I try to put them in situations of creative tension."

When the Multicultural Affairs Committee held a public forum on social class, more than 50 people showed up for an 8 a.m. discussion and heard Professor Lyn Brown (education) explain how students who haven't

grown up with access to the middle-class code of how to speak, act and dress tend to suffer from "a sense of ill fit" when they get to college. When it comes to diversity, a lot of attention is focused on gender, race, religion and sexual orientation, she said; "Class intersects them all, and we don't know how to talk about it."

Brown said she came from a family

"AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF DIVERSITY INVOLVES THE ABILITY TO EMBRACE DIFFERENT STORIES IN A WAY THAT ALLOWS US TO EMBRACE DIFFERENT TRUTHS. . . . HAVING A RANGE OF VOICES AND A RANGE OF STORIES ENRICHES THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE, OUR SCHOOLS, OUR INSTITUTIONS, OUR LIVES AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF WHO WE CAN BECOME AS HUMAN BEINGS. . . . I AM SO CHARGED BY THE IDEA OF THE CONFERENCE, THE RESPONSE, THE IMPORTANCE THAT YOU'VE GIVEN IT. . . . YOU HAVE MADE AN IMPORTANT STATEMENT."

**Actor/Activist Danny Glover,
keynote speaker at the first CBB Diversity Conference**

of modest means in Down East Maine. Her father shoveled coal on railroad locomotives. When she went to college she found that her classmates and professors talked differently from what she was used to, using an unfamiliar indirectness instead of saying what they meant. "I didn't have access to the middle-class code of how to speak and how to act. I felt stupid," she

said, recalling how she had been ashamed of herself and her family.

She went on to get a doctorate at Harvard and has subsequently done pioneering research on the role of social class in child development. Her own experience gave her a connection to people in other marginalized groups in the culture, she said, adding, "That's what I bring to coalition building."

And to teaching, she might have added. As Brown spoke at the forum on social class, Allyson Hill and Tennessee Watson listened attentively, and a piece of their puzzle fell into place. Later Hill would say: "When I got to Colby I had no idea," referring to the role of social class at Colby. "I didn't know how to deal with it. I didn't even know what it was the first two years."

Taking the Initiative

In addition to the CBB Diversity Conference, a variety of events and initiatives sponsored by students and faculty this year addressed diversity issues. Among them:

- Volunteer faculty mentors will work with students of color to help ensure their success at Colby. The program was formed in response to a feeling among some faculty that there's a gap between recruiting students of color and providing sufficient support once they're on campus, Professor Julie de Sherbinin said.
- A Peer Mentors program run by the Dean of Students Office assigns interested first-year students of all races an upperclass advisor to help them navigate academic and social life.
- A proposal to revamp the academic diversity requirement has been sent to the Academic Affairs Committee for consideration.
- A group of students calling itself the Coalition for Equality met with President Adams through the year to seek additional support that members had found lacking for students of color.
- A petition was circulated among students, and the Student Government Association President's Council passed a motion, urging adoption of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered studies program, known in academe as "queer studies."
- On May 2 Dinesh D'Souza gave a lecture titled "Racism Is Not the Problem." The talk by the controversial conservative pundit was sponsored by the Colby Republicans and the Cultural Events Committee, and students who disagreed with D'Souza's views organized a teach-in.
- Concerned male students started a group called M*A*S*H, an acronym for Males Against Sexism and Homophobia.
- In the residence hall reading seminars, professors chose books dealing with issues of diversity, among them *Losing Matt Shepard* by Beth Loffreda, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *Me Talk Pretty One Day* by David Sedaris.
- Students and faculty want to develop and strengthen a gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgendered network of alumni, students and faculty so that, for example, a student might contact an alumnus or alumna to find out if a company provides a workplace where it is safe to be openly homosexual, according to Professor Margaret McFadden.
- Project Ally, which provides support to gay, lesbian and bisexual students, entered its third year.
- The Student Government Association passed a resolution to end the annual "Screw Your Roommate" dance, which had been identified as offensive to gay and lesbian students and to women.
- The College's Multicultural Affairs Committee held four public forums to discuss issues of gender, social class, sexual orientation and religious differences.