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David Greene Is Called to Action

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An aerial photograph of a campus featuring a central flagpole with an American flag. The flagpole is situated at the intersection of several paved walkways that branch out into a large green lawn. A person is walking on one of the paths to the right of the flagpole. The text "called to ACTION" is overlaid in white on the lower-left portion of the image.

called to ACTION



David A. Greene takes office July 1 with the background, inspiration, and drive to catapult Colby.

By Ruth Jacobs @ruthatcolby

Photography by Fred Field and Anne Ryan

Not long after the Board of Trustees named David A. Greene Colby's 20th president, in September 2013, word spread that Greene wanted to increase the number of applicants—by a lot. Doubling applications, which he suggested, would be a dramatic shift for a college that typically sees single-digit growth in applications.

The University of Chicago, where Greene recently served as executive vice president, has tripled its number of applicants since Greene's (and President Robert Zimmer's) arrival in 2006, resulting in a more diverse student body by key measures—socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and geographic. It has also soared in the rankings, from 15 to number five in *U.S. News & World Report* (under only Princeton, Harvard, Yale, and Columbia), created three major institutes, and opened two academic centers in Asia. Could growth like this be possible for Colby with this new president at the helm? By all accounts, yes.

Greene's record shows that he doesn't just talk big. He does big.



David A. Greene meets students in the Pugh Center during a campus visit in February.

But even a few conversations about the power of education make it clear that to Greene these accomplishments are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Colby wouldn't be increasing applications to grow the student body, but rather to ensure that more people are aware of the opportunities available here. Strong numbers reflect an institution's ability to attract and educate the best students from all over the country and the world, regardless of their family history or financial resources. As one of seven children who worked his way through college and later through master's and doctoral programs at Harvard, Greene views his work as his calling.



Every time you're able to alter the life course of a student in a positive way, you have the chance of altering the life course of many thousands of others over time.

—President David A. Greene

"Education is the route to changing your life. It's the route to changing the lives of many who come after you. There is nothing in the world that we've seen that has the same power," he said. "Every time you're able to alter the life course of a student in a positive way, you have the chance of altering the life course of many thousands of others over time."

Greene is quick to note that Colby does this extraordinarily well, pointing specifically to the lifelong connections between students and faculty. His job, he says, will be to harness Colby's strengths and unique characteristics to turn the College into "an even better version of itself." According to many who have worked with Greene over the years—at Smith College, Brown University, and University of Chicago—he is just the person to do it.

As summarized by former White House advisor David Axelrod, with whom Greene worked to establish the Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago: "He's a great strategist. He is great in his interpersonal relationships. He gives his full attention to people and to problems," he said. "I think the president of a college sets a tone, and he is just a palpably decent, warm, thoughtful, caring person. ... To get those qualities with someone who also has the ability to drive a strategy, to drive initiatives to completion, is really a great gift. You don't find that combination."

Or, as former Secretary of the United States Treasury Henry Paulson said of Greene: "He's a unique talent, and I've never run into anyone with his range of abilities at any academic institution."

Paulson's knowledge of Greene comes from working closely with him to establish the Paulson Institute at the University of Chicago, which, under Greene's leadership, went from concept to reality in four months. Partnerships with Paulson and Axelrod were just two of Greene's many programmatic accomplishments in Chicago—accomplishments that Greene says serve as a glimpse into the type of initiatives he might pursue at Colby. Greene led the university's affiliation with the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole and worked with faculty to create the Becker Friedman Institute for Research in Economics. He led efforts to create a government relations presence

David A. Greene ■ Education and Career

- Doctorate, Administration, Planning, and Social Policy, Harvard University (2002)
- Master's, Administration, Planning, and Social Policy, Harvard University (1994)
- Master's, Human Development and Psychology, Harvard University (1991)
- Bachelor's, History, Hamilton College (1985)



- Executive Vice President, University of Chicago, 2011-2014
- Vice President for Strategic Initiatives, University of Chicago, 2006-2010
- Vice President, Campus Life and Student Services, Brown University, 2003-2006
- Assistant to the President, Brown University, 2001-2003
- Assistant to the President, Smith College, 1996-2001



in Washington, D.C., and teaching and research centers in China and India. And he oversaw a wide-ranging effort to revitalize parts of the University of Chicago's surrounding neighborhood, Hyde Park.

The Hyde Park accomplishment was one that kept Waterville leaders hanging on Greene's every word during lunch with him at Colby in February. While the event served essentially as a meet-and-greet, it didn't take long for Greene to launch into ideas about how the College, other key stakeholders, and the city could work together to build on the area's assets. He spoke with great specificity about the challenges of bringing retail establishments and a hotel to 53rd Street in Chicago and how the right incentives stimulated additional investments. But



He will have a well-defined vision, ambitious goals, and an uncompromising commitment to achieve them.

—Mary Lou Gorno,
UChicago trustee

 [More on David A. Greene](#)

more than anything he talked about the fundamental importance that partnerships and collaboration would have to play in a revitalization effort. Ultimately his interest in building on Waterville's strengths—like most, if not all, initiatives he's likely to undertake—relates directly to providing the best possible experience to Colby students and faculty.

Where he has been most successful in his career, Greene said, has been in “working with faculty and students in developing their ideas and bringing them into even a much greater reality than they might have imagined themselves.” Former colleagues from Brown and Chicago talk about his direct and impassioned involvement, about his ability to motivate others, and more than anything about his problem-solving mentality. He has an inquisitive mind, said Lina Fruzzetti, a professor of anthropology at Brown, “but also a mind that understands problems and can work them out. He can untangle them in ways that are very effective.”

Greene's work to develop academic centers in China and India for the University of Chicago tested that ability, and he approached it intellectually and culturally as well as practically, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty, a professor of history with whom Greene developed the center in India. “He would often ask me ... what was going on in the streets of Mumbai, for instance,” he said. “I could see that he was using time in India to understand the place so that he had a perspective, he had a sense of the context in which he had this project of building a university center there.”



President Greene, who worked to revitalize parts of Hyde Park in Chicago, is eager to create partnerships in Waterville.

At Home on the Hill

The Greene family arrives eager to become part of the Colby community

What does David Greene want the Colby community to know about him?

"I'm going to live and breathe Colby College," he said on a visit to campus in February. "That means it's going to take everything I have. My family's extremely important to me,

They both believed in the power of education to change lives. "He has an unbelievable passion for education," said Carolyn Greene. "He believes that every student should have an opportunity, even people like me" whose family histories didn't include higher education.



From left, Nora, Madeline, David, Declan, and Carolyn Greene

my work's extremely important to me. And those will be the two loves of my life."

So who is this other love—the Greene family?

While in graduate school at Harvard, David Greene met Carolyn Umphries, a University of California, Berkeley, graduate also pursuing her master's degree. She was a first-generation college student doubting that she belonged there. The son of a college president (his father, Richard Greene, was president of St. Thomas University in Miami and of Goddard College in Plainfield, Vt.), David Greene was a staunch advocate for educational access who worked three jobs—including waiting tables at Legal Sea Foods—to make ends meet. "He never complained about it," Carolyn Greene said. "He is one of the hardest workers I've ever known."

Fast forward 24 years. The Greenses have three children, Madeline, 16, Nora, 14, and Declan, 13. Expect to see them all over campus, their mother says. "Campuses have always been a part of their lives," said Carolyn Greene, "and to actually have this as their backyard—I think is going to be a great merger." They might even bring their 5-year-old French bulldog, Rhody, to a lacrosse game. ("I think he's the real boss of the family," she said.)

Despite the obvious challenges of moving three teenagers from Chicago to Waterville, the Greenses were eager to start the next chapter, Carolyn Greene said. "I had some families say, 'Are you going with him?'" she said. "Are you kidding? You don't get it. The Greenses move as a unit."

According to faculty and administrative colleagues in Chicago, Greene applies this approach—immersing himself in a subject and talking with stakeholders to develop a deep understanding that informs his actions and decisions—throughout widely differing projects with diverse players. “His ability to listen and figure out what your concerns are, as well as his very pragmatic view about ... the best way to get things done—I think that combination is what makes him very, very valuable,” said Nobel laureate, Professor of Economics, and Director of the Becker Friedman Institute Lars Peter Hansen. “And he appreciates academics. He understands what they’re about. He wants to nurture their strengths.”

Early this year Greene spent days on Mayflower Hill gathering information so he could do just that. He visited multiple times to meet with students, faculty, and administrators. And although many were eager to hear him talk, he was eager to listen. “I want to know everything,” he said to a group of student government leaders over dinner. “What’s really important to you about Colby? If you could change some things, what would they be?” The students were measured about sharing areas in need of improvement, and it sometimes took a little prodding on Greene’s part. “What’s most important to me is your candor.”

At a meeting with student leaders of Pugh Center clubs, Greene got candor. Students launched into complaints about the campus shuttle (the Jitney) and spoke passionately about concerns that the College wasn’t doing enough to recruit students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds or geographic areas. “My view is we’ve got a lot of work to do on this,” said Greene, adding that he values a community that includes not only people from diverse backgrounds but also people with differing political viewpoints. Winston-Salem State University Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Brenda Allen, with whom Greene worked at Smith and Brown, said Greene has the background to get that work done. “I think he has had a lot of experience watching the diversity conversation take off in places where people probably never thought it would happen,” she said.

As the Pugh Center dinner and dialogue progressed, students seemed energized. “You have a lot of amazing views,” said Victoria Falcon ’15. But Greene wasn’t looking for praise. He was setting the tone for a presidency that he says he hopes will include honest, open dialogue at every turn. Sometimes, he said, that means having difficult conversations. “There are ways of critiquing one another, there are ways of critiquing ideas, there are ways of really working together to find the best way forward where it’s not personal,” said Greene. “It’s really about doing the best thing for this institution.” Carolyn Greene, his wife of almost 19 years, said, “He’s completely open to listening to everyone, talking with everyone. Debating back and forth—he’s not afraid of that.”

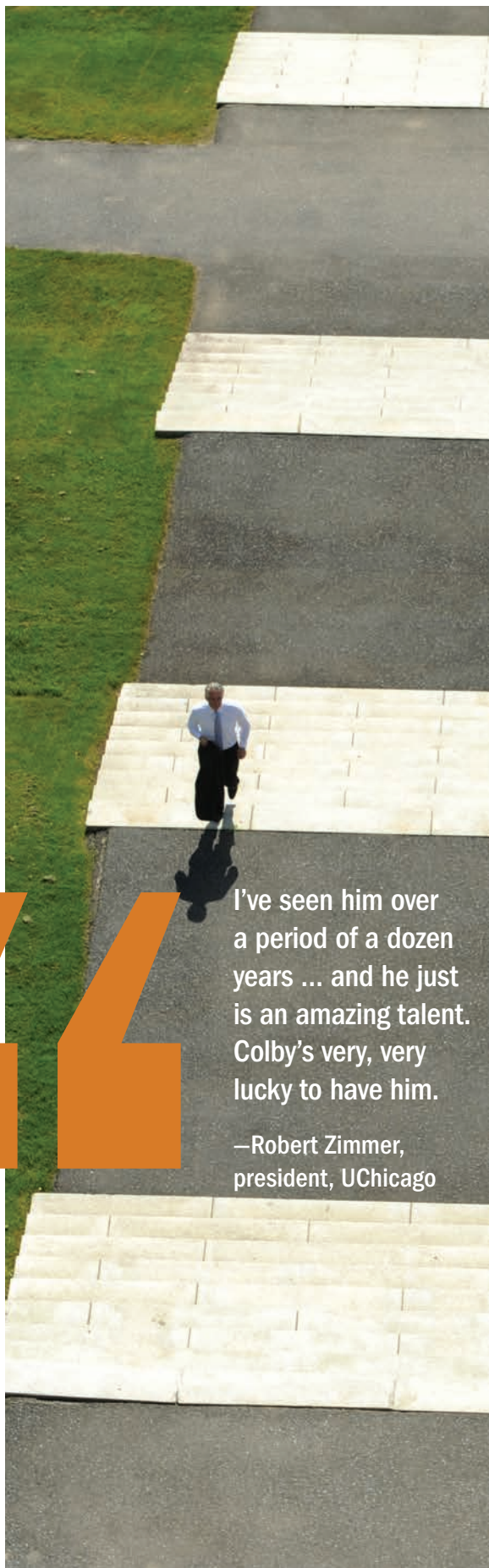
Also prior to taking office July 1, Greene spoke with dozens of faculty members, some of whom have recently expressed concern about governance at Colby. Around a boardroom table with administrators, he stressed the importance of supporting the strong ideas of staff members. And after a meeting with student athletes, he reported hearing from yet another constituency about how tightly Colby holds its resources. “It’s a more common theme than I would like at Colby. Too many people feel like they’re stretching too far, [like] they don’t have the resources to be able to do their very best work.”

“He’s completely open to listening to everyone, talking with everyone. Debating back and forth—he’s not afraid of that.”

—Carolyn Greene



Pralakscha Gurung '16 and David A. Greene chat before dinner in February.



I've seen him over a period of a dozen years ... and he just is an amazing talent. Colby's very, very lucky to have him.

—Robert Zimmer, president, UChicago

Greene is eager to address this issue of frugality. “We need to be a place that’s always creative, always innovative, always in the lead. And to be able to do that I think we need to free up some of this sense that there’s too much constraint. That’s going to be a real challenge for us,” he said. “We’re going to need support from our friends to be able to do that. And we’re going to have to take some risks to be able to do that. But if we ... provide the right incentives for people to really let their minds go about what’s possible here, then we’ll see great things. And that would be worth the investment.”

“He has a very high bar for excellence,” said University of Chicago Vice President for Communications Julie Peterson, who has worked closely with Greene since 2007. “He will always challenge you to make it better, aim higher.” And he will also be right there, with his sleeves figuratively rolled up, ready to go. The academic centers in Asia are one example, said Peterson. Greene met with foreign leaders, navigated government processes, put together the proposals, worked with the architects, met with donors. “He made that happen through the sweat of his brow.”


Said University of Chicago President Robert Zimmer: “There are many, many steps to doing these complicated projects. And again, because he’s so talented, he’s able to do all of these things—from working with the faculty, working with the students, to [navigating] real estate issues and the fundraising and the facilities—he did it all. And this required an enormous amount of determination.”

Greene’s work ethic was one of many reasons Zimmer brought him from Brown to Chicago when he returned to become president. Another was Greene’s ability to understand institutional culture. “I think that’s one great advantage for David going to Colby,” Zimmer said. “I’m one hundred-percent confident that he will be attuned to understanding fully the culture and values of Colby and how to proceed inside that environment and do great things for it.”

Accomplishing great things for Colby will mean doing some things differently, Greene told administrators. But like the admissions application numbers, changes will be a means to an end, not an end in themselves. “We don’t just make Colby a better place to make Colby a better place,” said Greene. “We do it because the students who are here can go on and do unbelievable things if we provide them with the rigor, and the training, and the kind of academic experience that will allow them to do extraordinary things in the world. And it’s the same thing with our faculty.”

“My job is fundamentally about enabling the excellence of the faculty, enabling the excellence of the students,” he said, “so that Colby can meet its mission at its absolute highest level.” Or, as he asked rhetorically of students in the Pugh Center, “What can [Colby] be? What do we want it to be—and how do we fight for it?”

He smiled and said, “I can’t wait to get here.” ©

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