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The End: Divisive demise of Colby's fraternities was the end of a tradition and the beginning of a new era

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Divisive demise of Colby’s fraternities was the end of a tradition and the beginning of a new era.
By Julia Hanauer-Milne

Former Colby President Bill Cotter remembers well the reception he received when he called an all-school meeting to announce that Colby’s fraternities and sororities would be disbanded.

Gathered in Lorimer Chapel on a snowy Sunday in January 1984, seething fraternity members made confetti of the Report of the Trustee Commission on Campus Life and rained paper from a balcony onto Cotter and other commission members as they walked to the front of the packed room. “We expected there would be unhappiness,” Cotter recently recalled. “We were prepared for it not to be a cordial exchange.”

It’s hard to overstate the role that fraternities played in their heyday at Colby and at colleges like it. Today four of the 11 colleges in New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC) have fraternities. Those colleges point to traditions of community service and campus leadership associated with Greek organizations, as can Colby.

At what was then Waterville College, the organization of chapters of national fraternities Delta Kappa Epsilon and Zeta Psi was seen as one of the highlights of the tenure of President David N. Sheldon (1843-1853). When fraternities began to move off campus, in 1907, the College scrambled to keep the three remaining on campus by converting dormitories into fraternity houses. As the move was made from downtown to Mayflower Hill, it was a tradition that continued with the construction of fraternity houses as an integral part of the new campus.

During World War I fraternities were temporarily disbanded by the government because they were seen as incompatible with War Department activities on college campuses. According to The History of Colby College by Ernest Mariner, when the war ended and the military withdrew from Colby, the January 10, 1919, issue of the Echo reported: “Now that … we are all civilians again, the fraternities are returning to their natural existence. … It is a great relief to all fraternity men to be again in control of their residences.”

When the College was planning the move to Mayflower Hill, a commission formed to study fraternities voted 19-2 to include them
in the new campus plan. The Interfraternity Council, formed in 1938, became one of the most influential bodies on campus. It required a minimum grade-point average for new pledges, changed the traditional “Hell Week” initiation period to “Help Week,” marked, at least ostensibly, by community service.

In the 1940s and 1950s, an estimated 90 percent of Colby men joined a fraternity, most living in one of seven residential houses on frat row. Later, two more fraternity houses were added, one in East Quad and one in the Hillside complex. Colby also had four sororities over the years, but, without houses, sororities had less impact than their male counterparts.

The ranks of fraternities waned in the 1960s and 1970s. In his College history, published in 1963, Marriner, longtime Colby dean, contemplated their fate. “As this history goes to press, college fraternities all over the land are under attack as never before. Can they survive another century? Can the discriminatory constitutions, the expensive national offices, and some of the inevitable snobbery survive against the rising American demand for equality, for less bureaucracy, for less adherence to conformity?”

If the death knell was tolling for fraternities nationally, at Colby it was heard faintly, if at all.

Associations with athletic teams and other groups kept fraternities at the center of Colby social life. Indeed, some 80 percent of the College’s current trustees and trustees emeriti who are Colby alumni were members of either fraternities or sororities.

Frats provided vital elements of the college experience: community service on and off campus, a network of future business contacts, and irreplaceable lifelong friendships. “It was the most fun I ever had,” said Ben Lowry ’85, a Portland, Maine, lawyer and member of Delta Upsilon (DU). “Getting to know people and living with a bunch of guys—that developed a bond between us that is not being developed now.”

The social impact was not limited to fraternity brothers. One or more fraternities were hosts to campus-wide parties nearly every weekend. Two- to three-hundred students would pack into a frat house, make their way to the keg and socialize. Some students stayed long enough to check out the scene; others stayed into the early morning hours. “It was loud, the smell of beer was strong, you had to yell to talk,” Lowry remembers. “Everyone would be dancing in the living room. . . . Everyone was having a good time. It was a lot of people drinking a lot of beer.”

And all that beer, while an accepted part of the social scene, by the early 1980s was leading to problems: fraternity houses in disrepair, poor academic performance, men hurling inappropriate comments at women as they passed frat row. “You had to walk a gauntlet to get to the library or the student unions,” said Jane Eklund ’81. “They would drop nets on women; they would throw water balloons. There would be catcalls. It could be kind of uncomfortable.”

Admissions steered campus tours away from frat row so prospective students wouldn’t be subjected to heckling—or see the mess left after parties (which, fraternity members point out, was created by everyone who attended). Administrators in charge of discipline often found themselves dealing with fraternities. “[Fraternity members] brought me all my business,” said Earl Smith, Colby’s retired dean of the College and long the dean of students.

But it wasn’t just excessive partying that spelled doom for Greek life, Smith and other administrators say. Declining membership, sub-par grade-point averages, a need for more variety in the College’s social life, and a push for gender equity campus-wide all played roles. “[Fraternities] offered nothing to the residential-life system that couldn’t be provided by the College,” Smith said. And yet, he acknowledged, “Fraternities were an important part of the experience at Colby. There were going to be hurt feelings” if they were closed.

Fraternity members refuted the Animal House stereotype at the time, and they still do. Said Lloyd Benson ’73, a public relations executive in Massachusetts and member of Lambda Chi Alpha: “The most invigorating intellectual conversations I’ve had to date were in that [frat] house. It’s easy to pigeonhole people into
categories and that becomes very convenient.”

Fraternity members also dispute that frats were exclusive. They say members came from all walks of life and that there was a fraternity for everyone at Colby. “In any type of social environment, especially in a college, people tend to form social groups,” said David Rosenberg ’84, a former DU president. “Even if you didn’t belong to a frat and lived in a dorm, you had your own group of friends. Is that elitist?”

But, real or perceived, that exclusivity troubled outsiders in the frats’ final years. Fraternities excluded women as well as certain men, and they were insular enclaves with their own norms, some alumni and administrators say. Did those kinds of organizations belong at a liberal arts school that was supposed to be broadening horizons? Did fraternities fit into the College’s liberal arts mission?

“No,” said most faculty members, with 75 percent in one campus poll saying frats should go. Although the vast majority of students—75 percent in a similar vote—favored keeping fraternities, a vocal group did not. Some of these students began taking action.

Eklund, currently an editor at the Monadnock Ledger in New Hampshire, said she and a few friends began wearing “no fraternity” buttons and writing opinion pieces for the Echo in her senior year. Her group met with Cotter to make its case.

“One [reason] was, at Colby, unlike at most schools, the frats were right on campus,” Eklund said. “They had some of the best housing—and it was provided by the College. They had these nice double rooms with living rooms downstairs. I know some of them were trashed at the time, but I knew they would clean up pretty nicely. They were small, intimate housing situations that weren’t available to other people.”

Another group of students began meeting with Professor G. Calvin Mackenzie (government) to draw up an indictment of the fraternity system. Mackenzie, a former fraternity president at Bowdoin, ended up writing the indictment himself, which was published in the April 7, 1983, Echo just prior to a trustees’ meeting.

He wrote it, he says, because he was dismayed by what he saw happening on frat row and in his classroom. A staunch believer in gender equity, he thought frats should be co-ed and that their housing also should be available to women. He was the advisor to Alpha Tau Omega until that fraternity voted against admitting women, though ATO and DU had non-member women students living in their houses by the mid-1970s.

“Egregious” social behavior also irritated him, but not as much as the tendency for fraternity members to withdraw in his classroom.

“You’d have these bright freshmen, then they’d join frats and shut up,” Mackenzie said. “… That was just anti-intellectual. What they did at parties was their business. What was happening in my classroom was my business.”

The beginning of the end came in 1979, when behavior issues prompted the College’s trustees to ask administrators to draw up fraternity guidelines. Among the standards were grade-point averages that could be no lower than .25 below the all-College average and behavioral, community service, and housekeeping expectations. The following year trustees wanted a report card. That responsibility fell to then-Dean of Students Janice Seitzinger (now Vice President of Student Affairs Janice Kassman), who determined that six of the College’s eight fraternities were not meeting the criteria. “The trustees looked at that report and said, ‘This is not working’,” Kassman recalled. “They were concerned that the fraternities had fallen into disrepair. They weren’t the fraternities they remembered.”

Following the 1982 report, Kappa Delta Rho (KDR) was suspended and Delta Kappa Epsilon (DKE) was placed on probation.

Meanwhile, yet another report—the Select Committee on Housing—was poised to influence trustees. It recommended that all of the College’s housing, including fraternities, be available to all students. With that report in hand, the College decided it was time to take a comprehensive look at the issue.

In 1983 the Board of Trustees created the Trustee Commission on Campus Life and charged it with conducting “a comprehensive inquiry into residential and social life in order to determine whether contemporary arrangements sufficiently reinforce Colby’s educational mission and to recommend improvements.” The commission

“[Fraternities] offered nothing to the residential-life system that couldn’t be provided by the College.” However, “fraternities were an important part of the experience at Colby. There were going to be hurt feelings” if they were closed.

Earl Smith, retired dean of the College and longtime dean of students
In December 1983, after days of discussion about the alternatives, the commission recommended that, based on its investigation, the College withdraw recognition of Colby's eight fraternities and two remaining sororities.

It wasn’t an easy decision for Pugh, he says now. “I was sort of borderline” in the beginning, he said. “If I had to vote at that time, I would have voted to keep [the fraternities].” But a deeper understanding of a lack of diversity in the frats, coupled with “the disruption on campus” and the decline in membership convinced Pugh it was time for the frats to go. “Obviously almost all of us became convinced it was the right thing to do,” said Pugh, a longtime Colby trustee. “It was going to be one of the most important decisions we could make at Colby for a number of years.”

And commission members were aware it involved more than just removing fraternities. “It took me a while to come to the conclusion that this [eliminating fraternities] was the right way to go,” said Anne Lawrence Bondy ’46, a commission member and former trustee, who had been president of her sorority. “But we didn’t stop there. We had an alternative to offer. We had a plan to give more people more say about their food, their living conditions, and everyone on campus more say about planning programs.”

Cotter presented the commission’s report to the Board of Trustees in January 1984. The trustees then voted unanimously by secret ballot to accept the recommendations: to withdraw recognition of the Greek organizations, create a commons housing system, which would be governed largely by students, and to build a new student union. It was the only way, Cotter said, to create true gender equity on campus, give the commons system a chance to succeed, solve behavior problems, and increase academic integrity.

Many students were skeptical about the process. “A lot of the process that preceded the decision all of us thought was a sham,” said Hall Adams ’84, who nevertheless applauded the College’s action because he believed the fraternities isolated members on an already-small campus. The suspicion of a set-up, Adams said, was widely held by fraternity members and others on campus. The thinking went like this: “The president made up his mind,” Adams recalled, “and the process was a vehicle for making this look like there was more consensus than there was.”

Not so, Cotter says. “One of the first things we agreed to was that everyone coming in knew what the issues were and that they had an open mind to what the solutions were,” Cotter explained. “We would enter into a fact-finding process that would last into the spring, summer, and into fall. … We would not have any meeting to discuss possible outcomes until the fact-finding was complete. No commissioners would talk to any other commissioners until the fact-finding was done—and then only at the commission meetings.”

Critics of the process have voiced suspicions that the decision was made before the vote took place, but participants deny that. “I don’t think it was a sham,” agreed David Marson ’48, former president of Tau Delta. He added, “I think [commission members] truly felt this was a legitimate process. I don’t think they recognized their own biases. I think they felt it was truly to be an impartial investigation.”

“The frats,” Marson continued, “had done such a good job building a case against themselves, it did seem to be inevitable, but there was a high degree of passion among staff and faculty to resolve it” in a fair and thorough way.

Still, even Cotter was surprised by the outcome, he says. “I would not have predicted where we came out, nor that ... it would have been adopted by trustees unanimously by secret ballot.”

Questions of process aside, the fraternities did not go quietly. They quickly filed suit to try to stop the College from taking their buildings, which they lost in part because their agreements with
Colby stipulated that fraternity houses would revert to the College if the frats were no longer active.

Dozens of letters to the alumni magazine after the decision show mixed views. Some writers were pleased with the decision—including some fraternity members—while others were dismayed. Twenty-two years later, some fraternity members remain angry about the decision. But many are resigned to what has been done.

Lowry, the DU brother, said that although the fraternities’ relationships with administration had been tense for some time, the decision still seemed sudden. “We were all very angered by the speed of it all,” he said. “They should have tried some alternatives, move slowly. It just seemed like they moved and boom—that’s it.”

“It’s a very well-respected college in the U.S.,” Lowry said. “I’m proud of that, but it seems to me they’ve lost something socially that they haven’t recreated.”

But there are other ways to make friends, argues Adams, now a lawyer in Chicago. He declined to pledge even though, as a football player, he was recruited to join Lambda Chi, whose members included most of the football team.

He says his decision had more to do with wanting a broader experience than with anything against fraternal organizations. “I thought that Colby was small enough to begin with and it didn’t need to be made smaller by joining [a fraternity],” said Adams, who now serves.

in 1986, the College raised $30.5 million—$2 million more than its goal.

Still, some fraternity members say they only recently began to give money to Colby. “I didn’t donate to the school until Bill Cotter left,” said Bill Sheehan ’84, a DU. “That’s the only form of protest I guess you can really make.”

While Sheehan was furious with the decision for many years, he says he has now made peace with it for the most part and helps recruit students for Colby. “I interview for the school because I love the school,” says Sheehan, a Massachusetts venture capitalist. “But I think there’s a hole there that didn’t used to be there.”

And for some fraternity members, a bitter taste that still lingers. “All it would take is one gesture on the part of the College” to finally heal the rift between itself and fraternity members, said former DU president Rosenberg. He wants the College to acknowledge the existence and role of fraternities at Colby. A fraternity memorabilia room might do it, Rosenberg says.

There is a display of fraternity memorabilia in the new Schair-Swenson-Watson Alumni Center, created at the behest of donor Jack Parker ’76, a member of Lambda Chi. Fraternity history doesn’t necessarily need to be limited to that single display, said Margaret Felton Viens ’77, director of alumni relations. “If the right people came forward … and it was a documented need on campus,” a room might

as his class president. “I thought that fraternity life—and it did become the primary college life—stunted the development of many of the guys in the frat. It kept them from doing things and meeting people they otherwise would have met.”

There were other quantifiable costs. Frat houses needed to be renovated. The College needed a student center to house student programs and activities. In addition the decision prompted expensive lawsuits, as some fraternities opposed the decision, though unsuccessfully. All of this cost millions at a time when the College’s ability to raise funds might be jeopardized.

Fraternity brothers traditionally provide significant support for their alma maters, something they might not do if alienated. According to College records and current and former officials, the Class of ’84, the year most directly affected by the fraternity decision, has one of the lowest giving rates.

But the overall impact is less clear. Cotter says that some people gave more because they were pleased with the decision. In the capital campaign ending

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David Marson ’48, commission member and former president of Tau Delta

be created elsewhere, Viens said.

Current President William D. “Bro” Adams acknowledges that the elimination of fraternities was painful, but he says Colby is better off today without them. “All the reasons explained at the time were the right ones. . . . The risk was we lost or would lose that sense of identity, and that has something to do with institutional identity,” he said. “There are other ways to achieve that.”

Club activities, sports, and shared academic interests all contribute to a sense of identity and belonging. Administrators say the College has replicated other benefits of fraternities too. Community service has become an integral part of the Colby experience through the Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement. Students may live with the same people each year if they choose. The Office of Career Services maintains an alumni network for new grads and current students seeking jobs and internships.

“We want there to be a sense of belonging to the College as a whole,” Adams said. “There are other places and ways of finding that.”

More Online

• Sororities also were abolished in Colby in 1984, ending a history that began in 1874 and included the founding of a national sorority, Sigma Kappa, that flourishes elsewhere today.

• How have frats fared in the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC)? It runs the gamut, from recently abolished (Bowdoin) to never had them (Bates). Read more in Colby magazine online at www.colby.edu/mag/frats.

• Are liberal arts colleges better off with or without fraternities? Weigh in through our online poll or post a comment with the online version of this story at www.colby.edu/mag.