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A large, light blue, stylized letter 'B' that serves as a background graphic for the title. It has a thick, rounded stroke and a circular top loop.

What Does Bro Do Anyway

By Gerry Boyle '78

This is where you go and whom you see when you shadow the president: pre-convo-cation “robing” in Miller Library with a very colorful faculty; meetings in Eustis with senior staff and individual department heads (budgets, spreadsheets, sculpture); a fellow who wanted Adams to head an accreditation organization (he ultimately declined); a columnist for *The Colby Echo*; a student with a question; a student who spent last summer in China. . . .

A meeting with development officers to discuss potential major donor prospects. A session of the Waterville Development Corporation when area economic development people talked about proposals to redevelop the former Hathaway Shirt Co. factory in Waterville. All of that packed into a nonstop on-campus schedule, followed by a trip to New York City that included meeting with a new trustee in offices at a mid-town high-rise, tea at the Harvard Club with a CBS News executive (and alumna) who agreed to be an overseer, a blind lunch with a possible donor, a heady and far-ranging discussion at the Mellon Foundation about a Colby science grant proposal, the place of athletics in private liberal arts colleges, and study abroad, among many other topics.

“It’s like being a utility player,” Adams said. “You’ve got to be able to play infield, outfield, first base.”

From New York, Adams flew on to Boston, where he had more stops. I was tired. I went home.

William D. “Bro” Adams was a professor in humanities at Stanford when he made the move that put him on track to be a college president. Adams was a close friend of Bill Chace, then Stanford vice provost and English professor, who became president of Wesleyan. When Chace headed east, he invited Adams to become his executive assistant at Wesleyan, a chief-of-staff sort of job that allowed Adams to get an intimate look at what it was like to be a college president. From his new administrative post, he saw good times and bad times on what can be a politically tumultuous campus. (On one occasion, the president’s office was firebombed.) In general, Adams liked the world of college administration, and he inevitably wondered if he could be a successful president.

“I must say now that I understand that being two inches away from it and actually



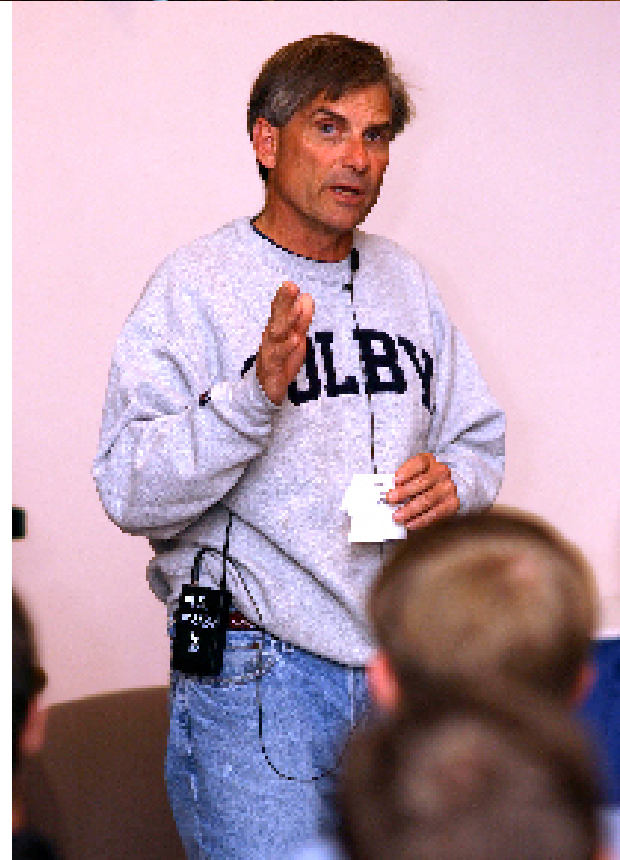
being in it and doing it are two very different things,” he said.

Adams was recruited to apply for the presidency of Bucknell University, went through the extensive interview process that the job entails, and was hired. It was only when he was actually sitting in the chief executive’s office that he realized that the job was fascinating, challenging—and never-ending. “The work didn’t surprise me,” Adams said. “The things that came along didn’t surprise me. It’s the pressure and that kind of ‘there’s-nowhere-to-flee’ feeling, that you can’t get away. You’re the person. Whatever happens, it’s on your head.”

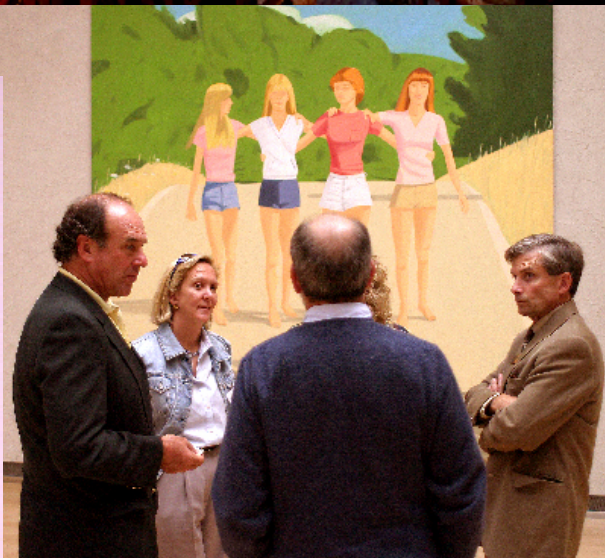
Exaggeration? Consider this from his predecessor, William R. Cotter, who was president of Colby for 21 years (and is the source of the anecdote in the opening of this story). “It’s never boring, but it’s wearing,” he said from Boston, where he now heads The Oak Foundation. “I don’t miss the twenty-four/seven responsibility at all.”

With that responsibility comes opportunity, of course. Robert E.L. Strider II, Cotter’s predecessor and Colby’s president from 1960 to 1979, was embroiled in the campus unrest of that time, a difficult period for the country, for students—and for many college and university presidents. Strider, now retired and living in Boston, recalls that restive period as tumultuous for Colby and sometimes personally painful, especially for his family. He also recalls reluctantly giving up teaching, his first love, because of the responsibilities of the presidency.

His reward, Strider said, was playing a part in shaping an institution that has continued



Clockwise from above, President William “Bro” Adams dons a mike for a Q&A session with students; chats with Meghan Kuhn ’08 and another student during a regularly scheduled lunch in Foss Dining Hall; runs the weekly meeting of Colby’s senior staff in his office; talks to colleagues at a reception for new faculty at the Colby College Museum of Art.



to grow and thrive. "Would I do it again?" Strider asked. "Sure. Absolutely. Honored to do so. No question about it."

A college president can set the course for an institution, a course that will irrevocably shape the college's future. Adams's charge when he became president was to help the College focus its strategic planning process and to articulate what became *The Plan for Colby*, published in the spring of 2002.

The product of many hours of intense deliberation on the part of Adams, trustees, administrators, faculty, and students, the plan describes Colby's mission for the coming decade. It calls for the College to preserve its culture of teaching and to highlight existing broad academic strengths, with emphasis on environmental studies, creative writing, the new concentrations in neuroscience, and creation of what has become the Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement, among other initiatives.

"Many of the important discussions occurring throughout the planning process were aimed, appropriately, at the question of institutional aspirations," Adams wrote. "Where does Colby seek to go in the coming years? What are the broad goals and objectives that will guide us as we make decisions about resources, programs, organization, and the physical evolution of the campus? What is our institutional compass?"

The goal was for the document to reflect a sense of collective goals for the College, Adams said. "I think a lot of it holds up."

A related part of Adams's legacy likely will be the Colby Green and the new buildings on and near the green, which together are the largest expansion of the campus since the College moved from downtown Waterville to Mayflower Hill. Part of the strategic plan and supporting the academic aspirations therein, the expansion calls for construction of several major buildings, including the Schair-Swenson-Watson Alumni Center, opening this summer, and the Diamond Building, which will house several social sciences and a number of interdisciplinary programs including the Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement. The center is expected to build on Colby's strengths in the social sciences and interdisciplinary programs and to connect teaching and research with contemporary political, economic, and social issues. The idea, say Adams and others behind the plan, is to provide a venue in which faculty and students can think and work across disciplinary boundaries on complex local, national, and global challenges.

The Plan for Colby was developed after long and intense consideration by Adams and others of Colby's mission and purpose as an academic institution. The result, he said, creates "tremendous opportunities for our students and the community," an outcome that corresponds to the importance Adams attaches to the academic experience at Colby and his belief in the moral responsibility borne by the Colby community.

At Colby there is relative unanimity on this next phase of the College's growth. That isn't always the case at colleges and universi-

ties, and presidents who commit to a minority view can find themselves short-timers. The same fate can befall presidents who are simply on the wrong campus at the wrong time.

"The thing about these jobs is that they're very high profile," Adams said. "People don't think about this except, I suppose, when they're in them. There's a lot of opportunity to do interesting and good things, to make a difference. There's also an opportunity to fail rather spectacularly. . . . It can be a combination of bad luck, bizarre circumstances, and a couple of slight mistakes, and all of a sudden, kaboom! The whole thing can blow up.

"When people who are thinking about doing this call me and say, 'Now, what's your advice?' I say, 'You've got to be ready for the possibility that it can not work and it won't be your fault. You're vulnerable to forces that are out of your control.'"

Adams said this during the hour drive to Lewiston for a meeting of the board of Maine Public Broadcasting, on which he sits. He spoke introspectively about the strengths one has to bring to the job, like political sensitivity, thoughtfulness, a genuine interest in the many different constituencies a college president must juggle (my word, not his).

"I've thought a lot about this one," he said. "You have to be able to separate your personal feelings and emotions and sometimes values from what you are called upon to do professionally. . . . And some people can't do that. If you can't, if you can't distance yourself a little bit, I think it would be very hard [to do this job]."

"You have to control your emotions. You can never be visibly mad, you've got this kind of vigilance about yourself. That's probably not hard for some people. I have to think about it."

And sometimes that control means more than concealing annoyance or frustration. The murder of Dawn Rossignol '04 in September 2003 left Adams, college president and dad with two young children, struggling to maintain the emotional control his job demands. A U.S. Army veteran who saw comrades die in combat in Vietnam, Adams still was unprepared for the feelings provoked by the tragedy and its aftermath for the College and the Rossignol family. "I found it very hard to control my emotions, in a different way," he said.

As those feelings threatened to surface again, the president changed the subject.

Request to tag along with a college president and you may find yourself reciting an old adage: Be careful what you wish for.

In my case, the process began with a brief discussion with Adams, who listened intently (he seems to have no other way) to the pitch and signed on. That led to a series of e-mails and phone calls from Adams's able administrative assistant and scheduler, Jackie Person, who sent along possible opportunities to see the president at work. The opportunities—days and weeks entirely blocked out by meetings, events, and travel—were continuous.

Here's one I accepted.

Seven members of Colby's senior staff assemble in Adams's office in Eustis at 9 a.m. sharp on a Tuesday. The lighting is subdued; Adams sits in a wing chair, the others on chairs, on the couch. The incoming e-mail alert chimes on Adams's computer like something on a game show.

Adams and staff discuss an analysis of the latest *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings. Colby is 19th, where it generally hovers. Some staffers explain that some colleges have become very sophisticated about manipulating their data to try to boost rankings. "It ought to be the message to the trustees that we don't engage in silly games," said Dean of Admissions Parker Beverage.

Adams concludes that if it continues to pay attention to its business, over time "a college gets the reputation it deserves." The message: stay the course, and don't chase ratings.

From there the meeting moves to a report on the planned renovation of Cotter Union, the second phase of the repairs to the Miller Library tower, talk of a request from students who want to meet with trustees. "Who is asking?" Adams asks. A breakfast for trustees and students is scheduled in Dana.

Arnie Yasinski, administrative vice president and treasurer, reports on budget and finance. There is a surplus in the operating budget, he says. Adams wants to know "where the variances are." Yasinski is bound for London the next week for negotiations relating to the closure of the London Center, part of the Colby-Bates-Bates consortium. Costs relate to terms of the lease, severance for employees. "You got a ballpark?" Adams asks. "You got a number in your head?" Yasinski does.

Discussion moves to possible trustee visits to other colleges, who would go where. Assignments are distributed. Adams reports that student leaders invited him to game night at

the Blue Light Pub, which he attended and enjoyed. "The students were great," he said. "I was bad at 'Taboo.'"

When Bill Cotter was asked how he spent his time as Colby president, he responded with a rough breakdown, complete with percentages of time devoted to each area.

Faculty-related (hiring, relations, curriculum, promotion and tenure decisions) got 10 percent. Business with trustees and overseers (recruiting them, preparing for multiple meetings with them) got another 10 percent. Fund raising and alumni relations (meetings with individuals and foundations, travel) got 10-15 percent. The same amount of time was devoted to students (teaching a class, advising first-years, meeting with student leaders and individual students who call up and make an appointment). Slightly less time went to things like budget and personnel issues, committee chairing, capital campaign activities, and working on building projects. "... [P]articipate in endless committee meetings until the building is occupied," Cotter wrote. "... Had at least one project underway at all times." And, he noted: the list "adds to slightly more than 100 percent."

Having tagged along with Adams, I'm not surprised. In fact, there is a blurred quality to both my notes and my recollections that reflects the pace and variety of a college president's day, week, month.

A meeting about goings-on at the museum of art merges with Adams's matriculation address to the assembled Class of 2008. Before heading over to Lorimer Chapel, where the first-years were filing in two-by-two, like college students boarding the ark, Adams took 20 minutes to rehearse his speech privately in his office. In the talk, based on a single page of notes, he spoke of one of his favorite themes—civility, or the notion that we can discuss and disagree with mutual tolerance and respect. In the talk, Adams made a reference to the incivility of the presidential campaign. Afterwards, someone came up and complimented him on that, praising him for giving it to the Republicans. "I didn't mean it to sound partisan," Adams said later, genuinely concerned.



"Did you think it sounded partisan?"

It was a moment of hindsight in a flurry of days that seem to leave room for nothing but looking ahead. Addressing the faculty in Lovejoy 100. Mulling fund-raising strategies with development officers. Prepping for a reception for Tom Curley, president and CEO of The Associated Press. Discussing the fate of Waterville hospitals as a member of the MaineGeneral Medical Center board.

Want more? Discussing the practice of admissions "tips" for some recruited athletes (Colby and NESCAC are carefully considering the practice). Lunch with students in Dana, including a senior who sent harshly critical e-mails to Adams the previous spring about the canceling of Doghead, an off-campus party. (Adams had had nothing to do with it.) "I wrote back to him and said, 'You know, I know we don't really know each other but



From lower left, Adams poses for a photo with graduating class speaker Evan McGee '03; converses with Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson prior to Robinson's address on campus in November; hurries to his next meeting in Manhattan in October; relaxes with guests at the president's house during the annual holiday gathering in December.

this is really over the top,” Adams said.

The pair now talk occasionally and civilly. Adams ends by inviting the student to stop by and chat.

Other students do just that. A student makes an appointment and sits very formally across from Adams's wing chair. She thinks Colby should do more to compensate alumni who come to campus to speak. Adams listens cordially and directs her to take her concerns to Career Services. No micromanaging here. Another student, an *Echo* columnist, comes in and talks about his summer internship abroad, his travels. The student is thrilled to find Adams has read his column and caught a reference to a Woody Allen film. “*Annie Hall*, right?” Adams says.

It is a triathlon of a job, one that requires the president to be facile, knowledgeable, thoughtful, political—usually in the same minute. The successful president has vast

reserves of social stamina, the ability to converse with equal and considerable interest about world events, literature, the financial markets, and the Colby drag show. “You have to be able to engage in a lot of different things, so you have to be interested in a lot of different things,” Adams said.

But to what end?

On the car ride to Lewiston (he drove his gray Toyota Avalon; I rode), Adams took the question, mulled it for a moment, and said he believes strongly in what institutions like

Colby accomplish. More precisely, he said, “I think there's a kind of elemental social aspect to it. You know, most of these kids will go out and be in places of important—reasonably important and sometimes very important—responsibility. I'm sure I can find better words for this, but it is an undertaking that involves what a French sociologist might call the education of elites. They're not always from elite backgrounds, but they're going to be elites in the kind of social, theoretical sense of mattering in institutional life, organization life.”

They will have influence?

“They will have influence.”

He mused philosophically about the role colleges like Colby have in providing equal education opportunities, the continued reliance on wealth to make those opportunities available, the “progressive force” that Adams sees at work at Colby, his occasional worry that the nurturing Colby experience is too comfortable and can lead to complacency.

“But you know, you never think about one thing at a time. Most of the time I'm thinking about the other things, the good things the experience does both for individuals and for collective life. As long as I feel that balance, I'm content. . . . I mean, these places are full of contradictions. That's all there is to it—they are. They're not just simple and formulaic.”

It was big-picture stuff, but it should be noted that a college president—like the rest of us—needs the occasional serendipitous boost. Example? In New York, I left Adams checking his watch in the ornate lobby of The University Club in mid-town Manhattan. Adams, a member of the historic club along with dozens of other college and university presidents, had invited an alumnus to lunch.

Adams's luncheon guest had expressed interest in exploring the possibility of making a substantial gift to the College. However, before proceeding the alumnus wanted to meet Adams—they'd neither met nor spoken—to discuss the situation, including another donation plan that, years before, hadn't worked out. For the alum the earlier discussions had left hard feelings.

So he arrived at the club, shook hands with Adams, and the pair chatted over lunch in the club's grand dining room for more than an hour. “How did it go?” I asked Adams, as he emerged onto 54th Street. “He was great,” he said with a grin. “It turned out we lived in the same village in France, though not at the same time. For twenty minutes of the conversation, we spoke French.”