

Colby



Colby Magazine

Volume 93
Issue 4 *Winter 2005*

Article 7

January 2005

Join the Crowd: Alumni find that graduate school isn't Mayflower Hill, but a supportive Colby prepares them well

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Recommended Citation

Bures, Frank (2005) "Join the Crowd: Alumni find that graduate school isn't Mayflower Hill, but a supportive Colby prepares them well," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 93 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol93/iss4/7>

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Join the



Aaron Megquier '01 in Madison at the University of Wisconsin

e Crowd

Alumni find that graduate school isn't Mayflower Hill, but a supportive Colby prepares them well

It was the summer of 2002, and Aaron Megquier '01 was pedaling his bike across America, along highways, on back roads, through city streets. About halfway through his solitary trek, Megquier headed out of Chicago and turned north on a hundred-mile detour to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he thought he might go to study for his master's.

Coming out of Colby as an honors biology major, the Hampden, Maine, native knew there were professors at the university who were doing cutting-edge work in the field. He was less prepared for UW-Madison itself: 40,000 students, 20,000 faculty and staff, a sprawling campus set in the middle of a city of 250,000.

"I remember standing on a corner," Megquier said, "and thinking I could never handle it here. It felt like New York City, with a hundred, two hundred people waiting to cross the street."

Megquier took a deep breath and thought: This is definitely not Colby.

By Frank Bures Photos by Fred Field

That didn't keep him from applying to UW-Madison more than a year later or from thriving there. With a coveted National Science Foundation fellowship covering his graduate school costs, Megquier soon was working with his department head in conservation biology and sustainable development. The project: a new system of indicators that will be used to measure the results of large-scale conservation efforts. "The program here is just in a league of its own," Megquier said.

And despite his initial culture shock, he was well prepared to step into UW.

Megquier is just one of the thousands of Colby graduates who move from an intimate, supportive college to big, sometimes impersonal universities where graduate students can be left to sink or swim. And Colby students often find that the same undergraduate experience that proves a stark contrast to graduate school culture has prepared them well academically for places that, in many ways, couldn't be more different from Mayflower Hill. "You're not going to get much attention [in graduate school]," Professor Fernando Gouvêa warns his mathematics students at Colby, "and you're going to have to fight to get noticed."

The warning isn't lost on students like Stephanie Nichols '01, who is getting her Ph.D. in mathematics and a master's in statistics at the University of Texas at Austin, another of the nation's biggest campuses. Nichols said she did have to fight to be seen as more than a cog in the graduate-degree machine. "In my first semester, my advisor didn't help me very much," Nichols said. "She just sort of said, 'Oh, whatever. Do what you want to do.' Whereas at Colby, I felt like I really knew my advisors and they had my interests at heart.

"Here," she said, "it's hard to find someone who really cares about your education. I've been lucky to find that, but it has taken some looking."

And it's students from places like Colby who know what they're missing in the bigger and sometimes colder pond of graduate school. Lisa DeKeukelaere '03 is enrolled in a graduate program in applied mathematics at Brown. DeKeukelaere found that graduate school faculty had very different notions of student-faculty relationships than did professors at teaching-centric Colby.

"At Colby," she said, "I went over to my professors' houses for dinner. I could walk into their offices whenever I wanted. They knew my name, and it was wonderful. At Brown, it's just a bigger university. . . . You have to learn to work on your own."

Colby faculty members, including Oak Professor of Biological Sciences F. Russell Cole, point out that many parts of the Colby curriculum are project-based, giving undergraduate students an opportunity



Aaron Megquier '01 at work in a computer lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Megquier successfully made the transition from small liberal arts college to large university.

to do both team and independent research. Last year nearly 500 students made presentations at the annual Colby Undergraduate Research Symposium, an experience that can be invaluable in graduate study.

Added to that is access to equipment usually available only in graduate schools (a DNA sequencer and electron microscopes, among others) and requirements that emphasize writing and public speaking. "They really get grilled on that," said David Firmage, the

Clara C. Piper Professor of Environmental Studies and Megquier's advisor at Colby. "Whether they go to graduate school or to work, that's going to be very important."

Assistant Professor Philip Nyhus (biology) worked closely with Megquier in conjunction with Nyhus's ongoing work on tiger habitat and on other conservation topics. That opportunity, which would have been harder to come

by at a bigger undergraduate institution, likely was crucial to Megquier's success in landing an NSF fellowship and to his admittance to UW-Madison, Nyhus said. "There aren't many students who get that opportunity."

In fact, Megquier had already met a third of his master's requirements with courses taken at Colby. Contrary to the experience of some alumni, he found the graduate school faculty to be friendly and approachable. "My advisor is fantastic," he said.

That comes as no surprise to Nyhus, who suggested that his student protégé investigate UW-Wisconsin—where Nyhus earned his own doctorate. In a sense, the program already had been vetted for Megquier by a professor who knew him and his work. That led to a good student-advisor relationship for Megquier, and Colby students say that's crucial to a successful graduate school experience. In fact, faculty members recommend that students planning to go on to

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Mariah Hamel '02

graduate school consider the ethos of a school or program. Does the program admit liberally and then weed students out? Or is the winnowing done in the admissions process? Colby faculty also recommend that students visit schools and meet potential advisors.

Good advice. Just ask Dan Thomas '02, who also went to UW-Madison but had a very different experience from Megquier's. Thomas arrived in Madison fresh from four years at Colby, where he'd studied music and classical civilization. Thomas was ready to take his love for music to the next level.

But before long, he began to see that things might not turn out as he'd planned. That's when he found his classmates to be unlike anyone he had known at collegial Colby.

"When I first got there, I was really, really overwhelmed," Thomas recalled. "People were throwing names and ideas around I hadn't heard of, as if they were common knowledge. I had a degree in music, and I hadn't heard of half the things these people were saying."

In those first days, Thomas started to question whether he was academically prepared. He soon concluded that some students were playing a sort of esoteric one-upmanship.

"I figured this out," Thomas said, "because people started doing it when I had been there for two or three semesters, and I had taken the classes they took. In grad school the classes get very specialized. . . . And when they started pulling out these obscure things we mentioned

in the last seminar class as common knowledge, it became really apparent what they were doing."

And, Thomas said, he was assigned an advisor he didn't work well with and whom he found to be unsupportive. That can be the kiss of graduate school death. "An advisor could make or break your experience," said Mariah Hamel '02, who is studying math at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

Hamel said her transition to graduate school was eased by the fact that she built a wonderful rapport with her advisor. That says something, not only about her advisor but about Colby students, said Edward H. Yeterian, vice president for academic affairs and dean of faculty at Colby and a member of the Psychology Department for a quarter century.

Yeterian, who's moved literally hundreds of students into graduate and professional schools, said he's found that those students excel because of a combination of academic preparation and interpersonal skills. "One special asset that our students take with them is the ability to form close working relationships with faculty," he

said. "This is something that is inherent in the kind of education that we provide at Colby, but it is sometimes overlooked in terms of its importance. The fact that our students are knowledgeable and are able to relate to faculty on a professional level is a key factor in their consistent records of success right from the start of their graduate education."

There are always other challenges, however. For one, Hamel says her broad liberal arts background—and the comparatively narrow math experience it necessitates—was a mixed blessing when she first got to grad school.

"In terms of being in math," she said, "a Colby education was in some ways slightly limiting, because there weren't that many math classes offered, compared to a large university. But the classes I did take [at Colby] were excellent. I have only good things to say about the math department at Colby. And I don't think the fact that I had seen less [at the undergraduate level] really hurts me in the end."

In fact, Hamel's exposure to other subjects is what sets her apart from other students in her program. "If I try to talk to a lot of the other students about things other than math," she said, "they don't really have much to say, and that isn't so interesting."

"At Colby I was surrounded by all different kinds of thinking. I took a lot of French classes and read novels and I took a class in international relations. I exercised different parts of my brain."

But if graduate school isn't like Colby, the converse is also true: Colby isn't like a large graduate school and doesn't intend to be. As Gouvêa, in the Mathematics Department, points out, many of the Colby students who go on to excel in the top graduate programs in the country became passionate about their subject or field as undergraduates in Colby's supportive learning environment.

And it also should be remembered that every experience is not going to be entirely successful, Gouvêa said: "Life is tricky. People get to do lots of different things and run lots of risks."

Sometimes the rewards are unexpected.

Thomas, whose experience had its ups and downs at UW-Madison, worked his way through the program, got his degree, then moved to a city outside Tokyo to teach, not music, but English. "Most of what I got out of [graduate school]," he said, "didn't have much to do with my field but were essential life lessons. I matured a lot and can deal with these situations with much greater ease."

"I'm stronger for going through it."

Framing an Education

Elizabeth Hoorneman '01, who double majored in art and English, quickly found a job at a Boston museum. Once there, though, she found that the biggest obstacle to advancement wasn't lack of knowledge but the fact that she hadn't earned an advanced degree. Yet.

"Out in the working world, nobody seemed to care that I probably knew more about the art than many of the people working at the museum," Hoorneman said. "I was in the basement doing the dirty work, and there really was no opportunity for advancement."

She went into a graduate program at Pennsylvania State University, joining the estimated 75 percent of Colby alumni who go on to earn an advanced degree. Of that group only 15 to 20 percent of graduates go straight from Mayflower Hill to graduate school, which is part of a national pattern in higher education. That trend has young people venturing into the world of work before heading back to the classroom.

"[Graduate school] has changed since most current students' parents were going," said Cindy Parker, Colby's director of career services, who has an M.B.A. degree. "Many students will hear from their parents, 'Go right away or you'll never go,'" Parker said. "But in our experience that's not true."

The average age of students entering graduate school tends to be mid- to late 20s, she said. Yes, some students stay in school without a gap, but many spend a few years in the workplace.

"[Years ago] if you didn't go to graduate school right away, [admissions] would imagine that you were out dithering around and that you weren't really serious," Parker said. "That's just not the case anymore. In almost every field, they really value some work experience."