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## A Strategic Plan: Two-year effort reaffirms Colby's priorities and sets future course

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# A Strategic Plan

***Two-year effort reaffirms Colby's priorities and sets future course***

*By Stephen Collins '74*

**I**ndividuals need to do it, and so do institutions. It is critically important, every once in a while, to pause and take stock. What are we doing? Is it the right thing? Does it still make sense, or has something fundamental changed? What are others doing? Is there a better way?

As Colby approached the 21st century, other transitions loomed for the institution as well, not least among them the first new president in more than 20 years. It was a perfect opportunity, trustees recognized, to assess what the College is all about and to think about its future.

This was the impetus for The Strategic Plan for Colby, a framework for the next 10 years, which was approved by the Board of Trustees this spring after more than two years of work. President William D. Adams enlisted a cross-section of administrators, faculty, students and support staff ([www.colby.edu/planning/group](http://www.colby.edu/planning/group)) to study what Colby is doing and how it might be done better, with particular emphasis on academic, residential and social life. The future of the physical campus, a major part of the overall planning initiative, was considered at the same time, though final details of a long-range campus plan are still being refined this summer.

"I think the bottom line was, let's stop, pick up our heads, look around at the environment, look at what we do, and think about where we're going so that we get to where we're going in a deliberate and self-aware way," Adams said. "That's a good thing to do from time to time, and I was pleased that it was happening, because it also afforded me an unusual way of getting acquainted with Colby and immersing myself in it in a very careful and comprehensive way."

To catch the spirit of the planning initiative, revisit 1999 for a moment. The economy is a juggernaut. The dot-com bubble is still expanding and shows no sign of bursting. Distance learning is going to make residential colleges obsolete, some cyber-soothsayers predict. For-profit universities are gaining momentum, and increasing pressures toward professional preparation with a more vocational approach have reinvigorated the old debate about whether liberal arts education is relevant. As Adams pointed out at his inauguration, only about 2 percent of the 14 million students in U.S. colleges

Said Adams: “I think the essential elements are, one, the reaffirmation of what we’re doing and of the character of the institution as a residential, undergraduate liberal arts institution. Now in one way that seems obvious and maybe anticlimactic, but there are lots of things in the environment that are raising questions about that. So one of the major points of this plan, as it’s turned out, is to reaffirm who we are.

“The second part was to figure out how to do what we do even better in an atmosphere and context in which people are questioning both the role of higher education generally but also the role of the

## Academic

With academics first and foremost, the plan has two major emphases:

- pursuing innovations that will keep Colby’s overall approach to and philosophy of liberal learning fresh and powerfully engaging, and
- building on existing and recognized organic strengths in ways that will make Colby’s academic profile more distinctive.

Adams listed concerns for the planning group as it considered potential innovations related to the academic program:

- preserving Colby’s culture of teaching;
- making sure we’re doing the things we say we’re doing; that is, conveying and teaching the essential intellectual capacities and competencies that we value;
- continuing our commitment to international education;
- injecting a more significant dimension of project-based learning and service learning in the curriculum; and
- doing things to strengthen some of the core programs through which liberal learning occurs.

When it comes to building on existing strengths, there is potential for controversy. “Anytime you pull programs and departments out of the landscape . . . you risk offending the people that you don’t mention,” Adams said. “It’s tricky. But the truth is you can’t be distinctive in everything you do. You can be very good, and we don’t want to do anything that we’re not very good at. So this is not condemning the rest to mediocrity; I think you continue to have very high standards in all those places where you’re investing time and energy.

“But as a profile matter and as a matter of public perception, I think we have some opportunities to be even more distinctively



and universities are enrolled in residential liberal arts colleges like Colby.

“The environment, much more now than it was ten or fifteen years ago, is telling us ‘don’t take it for granted,’” Adams said.

In the brave new information age and with the pace and the scope of change accelerating, is Colby an anachronism? If not, where and how can it be improved? Those questions defined the big picture of the planning process.

liberal arts college more specifically.”

That—“how can we do what we do even better”—is the point of the 33-page document and all of the various appendices that make up The Strategic Plan for Colby. The plan applies that question in three major spheres—academics, student life/campus culture, and buildings and grounds on campus. Broadening and deepening diversity at Colby is a fourth major component of the plan.



good in particular places, because of what's gone on here in the past and because of where we are—Maine.”

So, after extensive investigation and deliberation, the plan includes a half-dozen initiatives to enrich the academic profile:

- using Colby's strong core programs in the social sciences to create a programmatic center for public and international affairs;
- reinforcing and enhancing creative writing;
- reinforcing the depth and quality of the Environmental Studies Program and environmental science concentrations and implementing a sustainable campus greening initiative;
- introducing an interdisciplinary concentration in neuroscience that builds on strengths in biology and psychology;
- expanding and strengthening the visual arts, including Colby's remarkable art museum; and
- pursuing strategic partnerships with other institutions in Maine.

### **Student Life and Culture**

While the overall planning process found a very strong institution with much worth celebrating and preserving, there were, inevitably, areas where planners found room for improvement. “The strong feeling,” said Adams, “is that between the academic experience and the social experience there's too much disconnection.” The top two goals in the student life section are to “enhance the intellectual climate and atmosphere on campus” and “integrate more effectively student academic, residential, and social experiences.”

Plainly put, planners were candid that student social life at Colby could be better, and more than a dozen initiatives are listed for improving the student experience and addressing social and cultural programming.

Among them: increasing the use of common space around campus along with renovations and expansion of Cotter Union to make it a true hub of student activities.

Though a separate part of the plan deals with increasing, sustaining and supporting diversity, the section on student life and campus culture acknowledges the need to improve the campus climate for students of color, international students and other under-represented groups as Colby becomes a more diverse institution.

Adams characterized the issues around social life as an instance where the environment has changed. “Part of it has to do with the diversity of students we're attracting,

because a lot of students express disinterest in forms of social life that may have been more characteristic of Colby a generation ago,” he said. “So there's some dissatisfaction there. But even among more traditional students there's evident dissatisfaction with the nature and quality of the social interaction on campus. We've got to think cleverly about that.”

Initiatives are aimed at enhancing the intellectual climate outside of classrooms; better integrating students' academic, residential and social experiences; providing a richer array of social and cultural programs; advancing diversity; reducing the role of alcohol as an

## *Highlighted Initiatives in the Plan*

### **ACADEMICS**

**10 New Faculty Positions** Some will support strategic academic initiatives.

**Innovative Teaching** Reinitiate course development fund and other programs.

**Career Services** Additional staff and programmatic changes.

**Internships and Service Learning** Expanded opportunities for both.

### **FACILITIES**

**New Buildings** Four are slated over the next 10-15 years:

- a social sciences and interdisciplinary studies center,
- alumni center and development office,
- music instruction and performance space,
- science building.

**Cotter Union Expansion and Renovation** To create more effective, central gathering space.

**Black-Box Theater** Added to or incorporated in Runnals Building.

**Classrooms** Improve and tailor size of spaces for academic needs.

**Dining and Residence Halls** Complete comprehensive renovation project begun in 1996.

**Athletic Facilities** A new artificial turf field and renovations to athletic center.

### **STUDENT LIFE and COMMUNITY**

**Cotter Union** Address programming to make new gathering space into a social hub.

**Spotlight Event Series** Bring back Spotlight series and review other programming.

**Mary Low Coffeehouse** Expand and renovate space and enhance offerings.

**Emerging Leaders Program** Identify first-year students for leadership roles.

**Transportation** Better College-sponsored transport for social and recreational options.

**Diversity** Launch ambitious plan to promote diversity, including partnership with the Posse program beginning in 2002.

**For the Complete Plan** [www.colby.edu/planning/strategicplan](http://www.colby.edu/planning/strategicplan)

## The Campus Plan

Colby completed its move from downtown Waterville to the “new” campus 50 years ago this year, and it has been more than 70 years since campus architect Jens Fredrick Larson was hired to order the buildings and grounds on Mayflower Hill. Since the groundbreaking for the first building, Lorimer Chapel, in 1937, the campus has been filled to the point where Larson’s vision has been fully realized for some time.

Perhaps the most distinguished college and university architect of his era, Larson conceived the Colby campus as a place for up to 1,000 students, and, understandably, he didn’t foresee ways in which the ubiquitous automobile shaped American life in the second half of the 20th century.

As Colby moved into its recent strategic planning effort, it was a school of not 1,000 but 1,800 students, its parking lots were at or beyond capacity, and it needed up to 90 more faculty and administrative office spaces than were available. The gross square footage of indoor space at Colby was about two thirds of what Bowdoin or Middlebury maintain.

“I walked into a campus that’s bursting at the seams,” President William Adams said. One of Colby’s strategic advantages over the years has been its efficiency, he noted, and that is particularly true of the efficiency with which it uses facilities. “We’ve been modest with respect to the growth of the physical plant and we’ve outstripped its capacity. We’ve got to address that,” he said.

Before arriving in Waterville, Adams helped select an architectural firm, Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott, and as part of the strategic planning process a Campus Planning Group composed of faculty, administrators and students was formed to study both what new facilities need to be built and where they should go.

Arnie Yasinski, vice president for administration, led the campus planning initiative, which concluded that Colby needs about 150,000 more square feet, most of it academic space. The group proposed four new buildings and a scheme for siting them that should keep Colby on national “prettiest campus” lists. The proposed buildings:

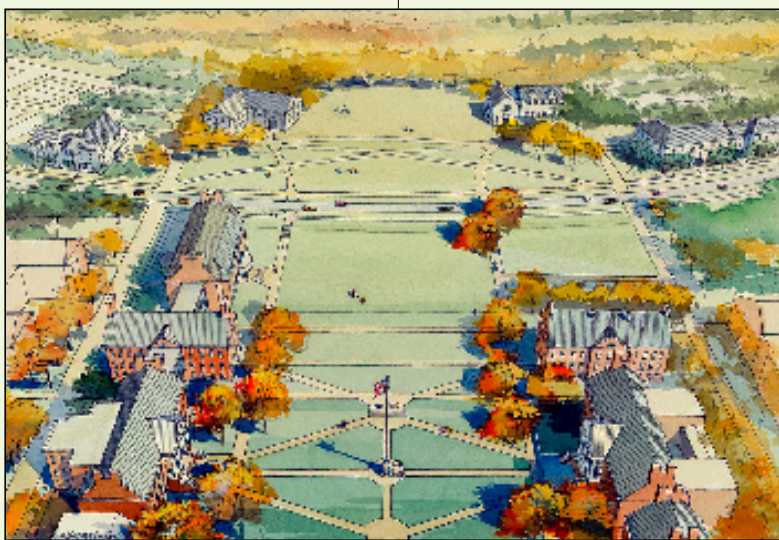
- a building for the social sciences and interdisciplinary programs;
- a small science building to accommodate psychology, mathematics and computer science departments;
- a music performance and instruction building;
- an alumni center with development offices.

“Once we identified those needs the issue became where should new buildings go?” Yasinski said. The group was eager to maintain the beauty and order of the campus in a planned

fashion but without extending the formal quadrangle too far, physically or conceptually. Planners needed a flexible framework for siting buildings that anticipated a wide range of future needs without foreclosing options for optimal organization. “We needed to honor the Larson plan without imitating it,” Yasinski said.

The campus planning section of the Strategic Plan is the last to be finalized, and though conceptual directions have been identified, the plan won’t go to trustees for approval until October. Several things are clear, however: extension of the academic and administrative core of campus—including some of the four new buildings—will require moving across Mayflower Hill Drive; development will need to break out of the formal quadrangle of the Larson plan; and no one wants the view from Miller Library and the academic quad blocked by new construction.

Details aren’t fully resolved, but the committee imagines an area tentatively called “The Colby Green” on the east side of Mayflower Hill Drive with new buildings (and the existing Lunder House)



Campus planners' vision of The Colby Green east of Mayflower Hill Drive.

sited somewhat more informally than those on Larson’s quadrangles. While construction will certainly continue the tradition of Colby bricks, the less formal arrangement on the Green may permit discreet uses of other building materials, Yasinski said.

An architectural firm, AnnBeha Architects, Inc. of Boston, was hired this spring to design and plan the new alumni center building, which will be sited on the northeast corner of The Colby Green.

One effect of the decision to expand across Mayflower Hill Drive is the need to ensure the safety of pedestrians crossing what has become a busy roadway. “We need to look at what we can do to reduce the traffic and slow it down,” Yasinski said.

To reduce traffic, Colby is working with the state and city on a new bypass road that would close the steep hill leading to the Thayer campus of MaineGeneral Medical Center and route that traffic behind the athletic complex and the soccer fields.

Officials also are studying traffic calming—measures to reduce the speed of the traffic that will continue to use Mayflower Hill Drive and Campus Drive (the roadway between the field house and the football field).

The campus planning effort also will redesign parking and identify potential future building sites beyond the four structures included in the Strategic Plan for Colby. The result is a blueprint for Colby’s growth over the next 10 to 15 years plus a flexible framework for expansion that should guide campus development for the next three or four decades, Yasinski said.

organizing force in social life; improving the quality of opportunities for developing leadership skills; and promoting a safe and secure campus.

### **Other Areas**

While academics, social life, diversity and plans for the physical campus (see sidebar) are the heart of the Strategic Plan, additional sections make the plan comprehensive. Detailed and specific strategies are included for “Strengthening the Admissions Profile,” “Strategic Investment, Financial Strength, and Equilibrium,” “Deepening Alumni Engagement and Support,” “Communicating Colby’s Strengths and Aspirations,” “Waterville and the Central Maine Region,” and “Timetable, Measures, and Assessment.”

The plan is grounded in reality, which is to say money. “Regarding finances, I feel like I walked into a healthy place,” Adams said, “but a place that remains under-endowed with respect to its aspirations and its competition.”

The plan includes sophisticated projections of the financial resources of the College over time, with costs of all the strategic initiatives—new faculty positions, employee benefits, financial aid and new construction—modeled in exhaustive detail through 2013.

“We used a conservative estimate on the growth of tuition and the comprehensive fee and we wrestled with other key financial issues so that we have confidence in the financial stability and equilibrium of the College over time,” Adams said. “As a part of that financial picture

there is another quite ambitious fund-raising campaign imagined that will address both the new facilities envisioned in the plan and our strategic need to continue growing the endowment.”

### **Conclusion**

The Strategic Plan for Colby ends upbeat, cataloguing reasons the College community can be proud: improved measures of the capable and diverse student body that Colby attracts each year, the rich and compelling academic program, the impressive campus, striking improvements in the College’s financial strength thanks in part to the generosity of alumni and friends.

“Perhaps now more than at any other time in its history,” the plan concludes. “Colby has the resources, the organizational health and confidence, and the public stature to enhance substantially the quality of its educational program and to aspire to be even more prominent among the leading liberal arts colleges in the United States.”

“What is this really about in the end?” Adams asked rhetorically, considering the document in his office last month. “It is about the basic excellence of the place on the one hand, and on the other hand it is about competitive aspiration and stature. I don’t want the second to overwhelm the first, but it’s important for Colby to be aspirational with respect to the way it’s regarded within our constellation of institutions. Ultimately, by being excellent, we address the aspirational side.”

Careful scrutiny reaffirmed the importance of Colby’s niche in higher education, and initiatives in the Strategic Plan focus on how to enhance the overall experience of students who come to the College. “Liberal arts colleges find themselves occupying a narrower and narrower terrain in the broad spectrum of higher education,” Adams said. “It’s still a very important part of the terrain because we recruit a lot of very impressive students who subsequently do important things.”

