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Student Life

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Green Thinking

Environmentalists learn to surmount obstacles

By Kevin Cool

John Kurucz '99 pushed his backward baseball cap higher on his forehead and let out a heavy sigh. A member of the Colby Environmental Coalition, Kurucz was reacting to a question about the difficulty of changing environmental practices on campus. "Yes," he said with obvious understatement, "it can be frustrating." That's just what Elizabeth DeSombre wants to hear.

DeSombre, assistant professor of environmental studies and government and a mentor for students interested in improving environmental practices, encourages a rigorous project orientation with a big splash of cold-water reality. Students in her senior seminar on environmental policy come to understand just how hard environmental policy change is. Now, that understanding is informing the broader student activist community on Colby's campus. "I'm more impressed with the lessons students draw from their experiences that don't work than with those that do," she said. "You see a light bulb come on."

Dealing with setbacks is a necessary step toward implementing meaningful change, says DeSombre. "Too often students have this view, that is fostered by the college environment, that if you turn in your proposal a little bit late it's not a problem. But when you're working within a political system or a bureaucratic structure you don't have that option," she said. "Or, students are surprised when they present their ideas and nobody listens. The realization that people don't all share their views and that they're going to have

to work hard to make it happen is an important intermediate step on the way to getting something accomplished."

The lesson is taking hold. Frustrated by the cycle of expanding and contracting support for recycling, composting and other initiatives, senior leaders of Colby's environmentalists say they are hoping to shift their strategy away from projects that require multiple-year timetables to a more cohesive program that builds awareness and changes behavior.

Environmental activism at Colby over the years has engendered passionate participation among a committed few who have battled apathy and overextended student workloads to build a strong movement. Despite widespread interest in conservation, says Johanna Reardon '00, students at Colby have trouble translating that interest into meaningful action. "A majority of students share an environmental ethic—that often is one reason they choose to come to Colby," Reardon said. "Unfortunately, that enthusiasm doesn't have an appropriate channel." Students profess environmental interest but continue to practice wasteful behavior. "It's so frustrating to talk to somebody who really is excited about environmental issues who then drives their car every day from Mary Low parking lot to the field house for a workout," Reardon said. "We need to try to build awareness about how people can make changes in the little things they do to have an effect."

Kurucz agreed, pointing out that a grassroots campaign to



change individual, everyday practices—say, using china instead of paper—could produce a culture that values stewardship. Such a campaign, if effective, might be more productive than an annual attempt to develop, for example, a composting program for waste from the dining halls, said coalition leader Heather Davidson '99. "It's always a struggle to keep students motivated and involved. When you are working on a large project the momentum that is generated one year tends to be lost the next year and somebody else starts it again from the beginning. It makes sense to concentrate on smaller projects that promote awareness."

Toward that end, says Davidson, the Environmental Coalition this year sponsored speakers, including representatives from both sides of the controversy over forestry practices in Maine's North Woods. "I think that's a role we

should play—informing people about these issues," she said.

Lack of time often is cited as an impediment to student involvement. But now in DeSombre's seminar students can combine part of their academic load with their commitment to improve local conservation practices.

While DeSombre is on leave this year, visiting professor Sam Barkin has led the course and is impressed by the commitment and ability of Colby's environmental activists. Students in last fall's seminar, working in three-to-four-person teams, had as their targets specific environmental goals—composting waste at Colby, a recycling program for Waterville small businesses and a campaign to reduce energy consumption in Colby residence halls. All three were successful in different ways, says Barkin, and at least one of them delivered measurable benefits. ♦

A survey of students initiated last fall by one of Barkin's teams revealed that more than half were often uncomfortably warm in their rooms and that the typical response to an overheated room was to open a window. That resulted in cooler air hitting thermostats and triggering the heating system. "What students in the dorms hadn't realized was that when they opened their windows they made several other rooms around them hotter," Barkin said. To combat this lack of awareness, students in the course worked with College officials to redesign the pamphlet describing how residence hall heating systems operate, a pamphlet that often was discarded because it "looked like a typical, boring administrative leaflet that nobody would read," said Barkin. Students also succeeded in having thermostats lowered in residence halls, a simple but effective means of saving energy and heating costs, Barkin says.

The recycling and composting projects were more ambitious and

more difficult to achieve. The recycling plan called for collection points to be established at local malls and for a network of recycling bins to be made available to small businesses. The composting plan was deterred by the sheer volume of work involved, including daily collection, transportation and depositing of organic refuse. Because of the larger scope of both projects and because composting required administrative approval and recycling needed city government approval, Barkin says, expectations for these efforts probably were not realistic given the seminar's time frame. Nevertheless, the projects provided important lessons for students interested in environmental policy. "They can read from the books about what is required to make policy changes, but until they have actually confronted some of the obstacles, some of the frustrations, they can't appreciate how difficult it is," Barkin said. "The experience forces them to figure out ways around the obstacles." ♦

Mopping Up in Grossman

A room fire February 25 on the top floor of Grossman set off sprinklers that soaked all three floors of the residence hall and left 37 students without a place to sleep. The College responded with extra shifts for clean-up crews and security officers as well as overtime work for a downtown laundry and dry-cleaning business. Some students found a place to sleep with friends on campus; more than half were put up at Colby's expense at a local motel. After PPD crews worked through the night alongside a special contractor brought in to take care of the smoke damage, students were thrilled to find all but one room ready for occupancy the following day.

Play Things

A toy drive organized in December by Cotter Union post office supervisor Allen LaPan collected more than 500 items for local children.

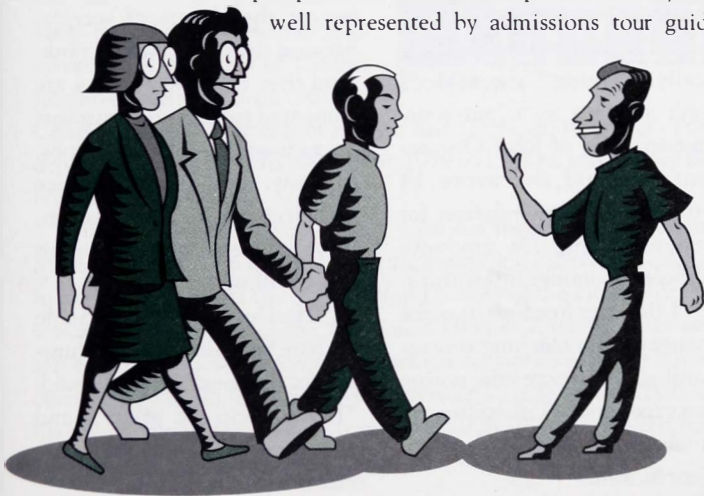
LaPan was impressed by students' generosity, but not surprised by it. "I had a student come in during finals week and hand me a sixty dollar check and say, 'I don't have any toys, but please use this to buy some,' LaPan said. "This was not a student who can easily afford sixty dollars."

The toys were distributed during the holidays to needy families in central Maine.

Pam Tinto Pillay, assistant director of residential life, challenged hall staff to adopt area kids and families for the holidays, and every residence hall responded. "They did an *amazing* job," she said. Working with the Maine Children's Home and the Salvation Army, students provided holiday gifts and food for 18 individual children plus eight entire families. ♦

Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk

On January 3, the Education Life section of *The New York Times* carried a feature article about a *Times* editor taking his daughter on a tour of five New England liberal arts colleges, Colby first among them. In an article that could have been inspired by Colby Professor Jim Boylan's novel *Getting In*—also a story of college-hopping by a prospective student and a parent—Colby was well represented by admissions tour guide



Dave Famiglietti '00 of Windsor Locks, Conn.

Famiglietti impressed the *Times* writer, Charles Strum, with his sense of humor and his ability to walk backwards in sandals while providing meandering descriptions of the College. A German major, Famiglietti told Strum that he volunteered to lead admissions tours because those he remembered during his college search were "dry and boring." He recalled a tour guide who told "dumb little facts about the school: 'This building was built in 1874 by three green men from Mars, who at first didn't like their life here on Earth, but then grew to like it, so they moved to Minnesota.'"

Famiglietti figures only about 10 percent of what he tells families sticks with them and says, "I would guess that seven percent of that is something they asked the tour guide about."

Strum wrote: "Students in the wilds of small-town Maine can still have fun, [Famiglietti] says, but they don't want to get thrown out of school. So they make their own fun. He cites the Mr. Colby contest last winter. 'My favorite part,' Dave says, 'was the swimwear and evening-wear competition.'"

The Strums also visited Bates, Bowdoin, Middlebury and Hamilton. No word yet on where Strum's daughter, Kate, will attend. ♦