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Gifts & Grants

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Participation is the Key

Raising the number who contribute helps Colby stay competitive

By Kevin Cool

President Bill Cotter is diplomatic when he says it, but his message is unvarnished. Alumni, we need your help.

The Alumni Fund is a crucial piece of the College's attempt to provide a Colby education to deserving students regardless of their ability to pay. "We have a tradition of one generation providing that opportunity for the next," Cotter said. "Alumni have benefited from that tradition; now it's their responsibility to continue it."

For a host of reasons, Colby has emphasized Alumni Fund participation during the present capital campaign. Contributions to the fund provide an infusion of money "right into Colby's bloodstream," Vice President for Development and Alumni Relations Randy Helm said. "Those dollars go directly into our budget to pay for everyday costs. If we didn't have that money, some things simply would not get done."

Financial aid is one important byproduct of yearly alumni gifts, but there are many others.

The \$2.66 million raised by the fund in fiscal year 1998 provided approximately \$1,500 for each student at Colby, says David Beers '85, director of annual giving. That is equivalent to the interest on \$61 million of endowment given Colby's current spending formula, he says. "That's a significant source of income for the College."

In recent years, alumni giving has become a widely used barometer of "customer satisfaction." *U.S. News & World Re-*

port, which compiles annual rankings of schools, uses the percentage of alumni who donate to a college as one category with which to compare institutions. Despite anecdotal evidence that suggests Colby alumni are among the most loyal and supportive of any in NESCAC, the figures for alumni giving place Colby near the bottom of this group of schools. The lower giving rate compared to its competitors weakens Colby's position in external assessments like the one in *U.S. News*. "When our percentage of alumni who give is lower than other schools, that hurts us," Beers said. "Alumni participation rate is a category where we have some degree of control. We can't compete with Amherst or Williams in endowment but we can in participation."

Colby's participation rates hovered in the high 30s for many years and only recently crept consistently upward in the 40s—last year it was 48 percent. The goal is 50 percent—contributions each year from half of Colby alumni—before the current campaign ends.

Helm admits he's at a loss to explain Colby's historically poor alumni giving rate. "I know that Colby alumni love this school every bit as much as the Amherst alumni and the Williams alumni love their schools," he said. "It baffles me why our giving rates are so much lower than theirs. I don't get it."

Helm points out that Colby's alumni giving rate would be the envy of most small, liberal arts colleges—"nationally, our percentage is well above the aver-



The student phonathon, which began in January, is one way the College looks to increase Alumni Fund participation.

age," he said—but Colby is not competing against most colleges, it is competing against the best ones.

Rather than focusing only on the total amount raised by the fund, Beers says, alumni fund officers nationally also are concentrating on the number of people who contribute something, anything. Every gift helps, he says—a message Colby hopes to convey with a series of advertisements using the theme "Chalk is Cheap." The ads, one of which appears in this magazine, highlight ways in which small gifts help pay for students' educations. Beers hopes this promotional effort, in concert with Alumni Fund solicitations, will persuade alumni that their support is important regardless of its perceived impact. "We want alumni to give even if they think their gifts are too small to help," Beers said. "No gift is too small

to help the College, and each one does make a difference." In the last fiscal year more than half of all gifts made to the Alumni Fund were under \$100, and added together, they totaled more than \$170,000, Beers says. The point of the current promotion, he says, is that a higher participation rate helps Colby's image and strengthens its national reputation.

Helm said that part of the challenge for his office is educating alumni about how the Alumni Fund works. Apparently some potential donors have discarded materials sent to them, believing that they already had given to the fund, he says. "If there is only one message I could get to the alumni body it would be this: if you receive a letter from us, you haven't given this fiscal year. We don't send letters to people who already have given," Helm said. ♦