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Meet Bro Adams: Colby and Its Next President "Ready to Go Even Further"

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William D. "Bro" Adams was on academic probation when he left Colorado College to join the Army in 1966. He spent a year in Vietnam and returned "a completely different person," ready to soak up every drop of what a college education can provide to an intellectually curious person thirsty for knowledge and understanding. "There were a lot of things I wanted to sort out," he said, exhibiting a propensity for understatement.

Back at Colorado College he combined a philosophy major with courses in political theory "to investigate 'what is the meaning of things,' as well as how to think about things," he said. He graduated magna cum laude in 1972 and went on to earn a doctorate in political philosophy.

When it was suggested that this course seems like excellent preparation for a college presidency, he chuckled and asked, "What? The combat?"

Adams relented and agreed that philosophy—"how to think analytically and critically about complicated organizational issues"—has served him well as he has sorted out the challenges of life, both personal and professional.

The Next Level

Adams will bring that analytical bent to Maine when he becomes the 19th president of Colby next July at what he perceives as a critical point in the College's history. While it's challenging to follow a president as strong, popular and successful as Bill Cotter, Adams said, what really attracted him was the sense he gleaned from faculty, students and staff that Colby sees itself poised to ascend even further. "In the midst of a very strong moment, they are wanting to take another step," he said.

After he was elected, he told the Board of Trustees that Colby is "a rising star that has been noticed" among the nation's liberal arts colleges and that it "stands at a moment of great opportunity and challenge and on the threshold of a new level of excellence."

The evidence is clear that Colby has gained stature and prestige under Cotter's leadership and particularly during the successful capital campaign just concluding, Adams said. Following intensive interviews, long conversations, personal research and a day on campus when he talked to more than 100 members of the community, Adams said he got a strong sense that "now we're ready to go even further."

"What's further? That's the question," he said, talking about Colby while sitting in the parlor of Bucknell University's Victorian president's house in November. Adams says he's not ready to commit before he's more saturated in Colby's history and personality.

"One risk is that it becomes only a comparative matter," he warned, recommending against defining Colby only in relation to other colleges—Bowdoin and Middlebury among the usual suspects. "Doing that, you risk losing sight of the very thing that's distinguishing about Colby."

Ultimately, the proof is in the graduates. "All of this is about our capacity to empower young people," Adams told the Board of Trustees in October. "It is through that that we make the world a better place."

A voracious reader, Adams planned to delve into Ernest Marriner's History of Colby College, College literature and books by Colby faculty members to get a sense of the traditions and the culture of the institution before he arrives next summer. When it comes to the details, "I have a lot to learn about the place," Adams said, telling the trustees he was ready to "begin a process of listening."

Adams, a youthful 52, is a study in contrasts. He is thoughtful, serious and deliberate in conversation, but intellectual energy crackles in his eyes and his animated hands. He laughs often and
heartily. Of medium height, he stays in shape running, cycling and playing golf.

His eagerness to get settled in at Colby, clearly shared with his wife, Catherine Bruce, is palpable. “We’re very drawn to Colby and to Maine,” Bruce said. She recalled how, during the enthusiasm and not raise their hope too high. When they visited Waterville in October and met with numerous faculty, staff and students, though, they were sold on the idea.

“Our reaction was one of immediate and powerful connection to the campus,” Adams said. “We immediately felt at home and at ease.” But they had to spend another anxious week and a half in limbo, knowing there were three finalists.

“I kept saying, ‘Where’s the glitch?’” Bruce said, describing how she searched for some flaw so she could say “it wouldn’t have been perfect” if they didn’t get the call.

The call came, though, and details were worked out the week before trustees voted unanimously to elect Adams. “I take that as a good sign,” Adams quipped, when he and Bruce were met with a standing ovation when they finally entered the trustees’ meeting.

New England Roots

For Adams and Bruce the move north will be a return to New England and the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC). They were married seven years ago, when Adams was vice president and secretary of Wesleyan University in Connecticut. For Adams, coming to Maine also will be a return to an ancestral homeland, since he traces his family to 17th-century seafarers from Searsport. His grandfather was born in Portland and his father in Augusta. When Adams was a student at The Holderness School in New Hampshire he would visit his grandparents in Bolters Mills, near Sebago Lake, and he remembers watching his grandfather drink hot clam broth every morning instead of coffee.

With a father in the automotive supply business, Adams grew up outside Detroit. He was dubbed “Bro” as a youngster by his father, who had left college for World War II with a buddy named Bro who died in the conflict.

Adams came east to prep school at age 14. He played football and lacrosse, and he skied competitively at Holderness, including one year under William Clough ’61, now headmaster at Gould Academy in Bethel, Maine, and in the early 1960s a faculty member at Holderness. Later Adams considered Colby when he was looking at colleges.

Higher Education

He selected another good liberal arts college in ski country—Colorado College—and arrived there in the mid ’60s, the same year that his father died. “I was pretty lost, both emotionally and intellectually,” he said.

As a freshman, Adams participated in soccer, skiing and lacrosse. “I didn’t flunk out,” he said, “but it was perilously close.” At the end of his freshman year he enlisted in the Army, “not really understanding the implications.” He went from teenage college student to commissioned Army officer in a year and spent 12 months in Vietnam. “I grew up fast,” he said. He was a military advisor to regional infantry troops in Chau Doc province, near the area where the Mekong River enters Vietnam from Cambodia. As a first lieutenant, his role was to advise local forces on combat operations and to coordinate American air and artillery support during those operations. He has published articles in popular media on the meaning and symbolism of Vietnam in addition to scholarly articles in academic journals on the history and philosophy of politics and meaning. (See page 24.)

The day he returned from Vietnam to U.S. soil he agreed to help move a friend of a friend into the University of California, Berkeley. It turned out to be the day that James Rector was killed at People’s Park, and Adams was tear-gassed by the National Guard when he and his friends got tangled up in a huge campus demonstration.

Adams had left Colorado College as a bewildered kid. In 1969 he returned from the crucible in Southeast Asia as an intellectually and politically curious man, aware of the opportunity that a college education presented him and eager to make the most of it. “I was full of curiosity about things I didn’t know the answers to,” he said.

He desperately wanted to probe fundamental moral positions and attitudes, and college provided the time and guidance to do so. He studied with J. Glen Gray, an authority on Heidegger. Gray’s book The Warriors, a reflection on his own service in WWII, was a popular text in the 1970s. Adams lists other professors—Harvey Rabin, Jane Cauvel and John Riker in philosophy and Tim Fuller in political science—as influential undergraduate mentors.

After graduation Adams enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of California at Santa Cruz and studied with political theorist J. Peter Euben (his advisor) and philosophers Maurice Natanson and Albert Hofstadter. He won a Fulbright Fellowship to spend a year doing research in Paris at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes and Ecole Normale Supérieure. His dissertation was titled "Digging in the Same Place: An Essay on the Political and Social Philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty." Even in his doctoral program Adams leaned toward interdisciplinary study, and he names classicist Norman O. Brown, biographer and literary critic Hayden White and political theorists John Schaar and Sheldon Wolin among influential teacher scholars.

After earning his Ph.D. Adams spent two years teaching political science, one at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and one at the University of Santa Clara in California. In 1985 he arrived at Stanford University as an instructor in the Great Works in Western Culture program, and
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a year later he became the program's coordinator. He describes the course, later renamed Culture, Ideas and Values, as an academic core curriculum for undergraduates.

In 1988 Adams was hired as executive assistant to the president at Wesleyan University and five years later was named vice president and secretary of the university.

The Bucknell Years

When he was hired as president of Bucknell University in 1995, Adams moved to an institution that has a lot in common with the NESCAC schools, including his once (Wesleyan) and future (Colby) employers. Like NESCAC schools, Bucknell is counted among the top tier of national liberal arts colleges. It has twice as many students as Colby—3,350 undergraduates and 200 graduate students in master's degree programs—and almost all of them live on campus.

The challenges he inherited upon his arrival in Lewisburg, Pa., are similar to those he'll face in Waterville. Bucknell wanted to keep itself affordable for future students, strengthen its educational experience, increase diversity and enhance its strength and reputation. He followed a popular president but was purposeful in establishing his own presence. "He will be himself," said Catherine Sweeney, Bucknell's personnel director. She said Adams made the transition a team effort, and she concluded, as did other sources at the university, that Colby has done well by itself.

In the five years that Adams led Bucknell, the university's endowment more than doubled as the beneficiary of unprecedented fund-raising success and investment results. The university's faculty was expanded to lower the faculty-to-student ratio, and over the last two years Bucknell received record numbers of applicants and admitted the strongest and most diverse classes in the school's history. Two years ago Adams completed a strategic financial plan for Bucknell, which led to a continuous planning and assessment process for the university.

In June 1999, Adams announced his intention to leave Bucknell to pursue new professional opportunities and challenges. At that point he expressed a desire to re-engage his
Since Plato banished the poets from the city of the just, social philosophers and scientists have worried and argued over the place and force of ideas in social life. Such musings and battles have yet to produce settled conclusions, and they probably never will. Indeed, the very word “idea” is enough to start the argument going again. Yet in spite of all the quarrels, the conviction that collective life is in some fundamental way about those things its members (elites and masses, peasants and kings) collectively think, imagine, or believe is something we cannot shake. No matter how far social science has traveled in the direction of naturalism, the notion that “man is an animal,” in Clifford Geertz’s elegant formulation, “suspended in webs of significance he has himself spun” . . . has traveled along with it. And to the despair, perhaps, of the naturalists, the complex and inexact business of unstringing such webs continues to attract its practitioners, and to produce a more-or-less steady din of discourse and disagreement over the best way to talk about the significance of significance. . . .

Still Shooting After All These Years
from Mother Jones, January 1988

... When Platoon was first released, a number of people asked me, “Was the war really like that?” I never found an answer, in part because, no matter how graphic and realistic, a movie is after all a movie, and war is only like itself. But I also failed to find an answer because what “really” happened is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about what happened that the pure experience is no longer there. This is odd, even painful, in some ways. But it is also testimony to the way our memories work. The Vietnam War is no longer a definite event so much as it is a collective and mobile script in which we continue to scrawl, erase, rewrite our conflicting and changing views of ourselves.

For the moment, at least, the view is complex and slightly paradoxical. The Vietnam War of our movies is the event that robbed us of our old, and always false, self-conception as a nation of gentle missionaries. But that unnerving message, and all the bewitching and particular excesses locked within it, is hardly ever delivered straight up. It comes to us, perhaps not so surprisingly after all, in more familiar cultural garb: through antiheroes and romance, spiritual journeys and rebirths.

Things could be worse. If one of the unconscious desires of the films of Vietnam is to domesticate the war, to deliver up its horror in palatable and digestible form, we can now be sure that the matter will not go down easily. There is just too much worry in these stories for that, too many indigestible lumps. Whatever its future transformations, the legacy of the Vietnam War—at least the war inscribed in our movies—will probably always be alarming, and our compensations always nervous, partial, incomplete.

Is The Residential College Dead?
from Bucknell World, March 1998

... What is modeled, conveyed and internalized in that interaction [residential liberal arts education] is not simply “information” or its mastery, but complex human capacities—capacities of reasoning, criticizing, valuing, judging. And that is why the original conception and practice of the college—the gathered presence and interaction of teachers and students in a common physical setting—is still so powerfully embodied in the private residential colleges and universities in the United States. We have found no better place or means through which to teach and learn the intellectual and moral capacities that are so vital to our individual and collective lives.

In short, the new prophecy of distance learning underestimates both the value and the power of the residential college experience, as well as its resilience and adaptability. . . .

The Revolution in Financial Aid
from Bucknell World, January 1999

... One of the most extreme and powerful expressions of the emerging financial aid system is the rapid expansion of “merit aid.” This is any form of financial assistance awarded strictly on the basis of personal attributes or qualifications regardless of financial need. In the last decade, merit aid programs have made significant gains in the admissions practices of all but a few highly selective private colleges and universities. . . . Although institutional and governmental resources committed to financial aid are likely to grow, those resources are limited. The new competitive uses of aid could diminish over time the dollars available to support more traditional goals. As a nation, then, we face the real possibility that in 10 or 20 years we will be spending more on financial aid and serving fewer and less needy students. If that were to happen, the financial aid revolution will have reversed decades of progress of equal opportunity at America’s best private colleges and universities. . . .
Top 10 reasons Bro Adams and Cathy Bruce will feel at home when they arrive

- Bucknell’s neo-classical brick-and-white buildings were arranged around a central library in a plan by campus architect Frederick Larson, who designed Colby’s new campus.
- Bucknell has an Olin science building and Roberts, Dana and Taylor halls.
- Originally a Baptist institution, Bucknell, like Colby, was renamed for a benefactor who bailed it out during the post-Civil War depression.
- Bucknell started to admit women between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century (Colby in 1871; Bucknell in 1883).
- Neither Lewisburg, Pa., nor Waterville, Maine, has scheduled air service.
- To get to either campus from the interstate highway, motorists pass Wal-Mart, Pizza Hut, McDonald’s and Burger King.
- Close student-faculty relationships, emphasis on undergraduate research and interdisciplinary programs are institutional strengths at both schools.
- Non-alcoholic social events can be page-one news in The Bucknellian or The Echo.
- A statue of an anachronistic large mammal (a bison) stands in front of the Bucknell field house.
- Bucknell, like Colby, recently admitted the strongest and most diverse classes in its history.

To Be a President

Adams said he enjoyed dealing directly with students at Bucknell, and he considers that to be part of the first charge of the college president: “providing day-to-day leadership in institutional life.” That’s where the president is the chief executive officer of the college—collaborating with faculty about the curriculum, making decisions on facilities, organizing the planning and strategic thinking required to keep a good school on top and guiding the interrelated constituencies of the institution to make sure they work together efficiently.

The president’s role as team leader is also a priority. While avoiding micro-management, a president needs to spend “the right amount of time” working with senior staff and hiring the best people to fill key vacancies.

The other key element of the president’s job is relating to the off-campus community—getting to know the school’s alumni, helping with fund raising and getting involved in important community relations. While the fund-raising part has gotten bigger in recent decades, and while Adams proved very good at it at Bucknell (he spent 61 days traveling during the last academic year), he maintains that it’s a team effort. “If you don’t have a good organization and a good institution, the president is not going to raise any money,” he said.

The Search

Even before Bill Cotter announced last winter that he would retire at the end of this academic year, there was anxiety on Mayflower Hill over Colby’s future, and as the reality of Cotter’s impending departure set in, uncertainty grew.

A search committee was formed, and by February it had 19
Catching Up with Cathy Bruce

If Bro Adams's understatement, dry wit and measured, penetrating conversational style is the yin of the future presidential household at Colby, then the energy, spontaneity and rollicking good humor of Cathy Bruce is the yang.

A recent afternoon in the president's house at Bucknell University tells the tale. Two-year-old Carmen was up from her nap and climbing a ladder-back chair to sample chocolate truffles that were put out of her reach; 10-year-old Sean had a friend over after school to watch Pokémon on television; a photographer was setting up lights in the hallway; a visitor from Maine was getting the tour and asking a lot of questions.

In the midst of the commotion Adams was unflappable, completing a thought begun 10 minutes earlier, checking to make sure his answer was satisfactory. Bruce seemed to be everywhere—laying out a wholesome snack-fest (carrot sticks, apples and crackers) for the boys; admiring Carmen's dexterity while gently limiting the little girl's truffle intake; standing off-camera to tease her husband as formal portraits were taken; occasionally lighting in a chair to answer questions; then snapping on her in-line skates to push Carmen's three-wheeled stroller to the park for a visit with neighborhood moms and kids.

Bruce's personal history helps to explain her seemingly boundless energy. She grew up in Corning, N.Y., in a family of skiers. After attending Burke Mountain Academy in northern Vermont, she joined the U.S. Ski Team and raced in alpine events for five years. After that she spent nine years on the women's professional ski racing tour, winning championships three of those years. One brother, Doug Bruce, was an NCAA skiing champion at the University of Vermont. The other, Geoff, skied for the U.S. Ski Team at the Innsbruck Olympics.

Cathy Bruce's memories of Maine consist largely of freezing in a speed suit at the top of Sugarloaf's Narrow Gauge, and (yet) she's thrilled at the prospect of her future in Maine, winters in particular.

Bruce sees Waterville, like Lewisburg, Pa., as a small, safe town that will provide the children with opportunities for independence and proximity to new friends. She has done some volunteering in Lewisburg schools and helped publish a cookbook for the local Red Cross chapter, and she's eager to find opportunities to participate in the community around Colby as well.

She will bring proven experience to all of her roles. She and Adams had been married two and a half years when they arrived at Bucknell. "Among trying to be a mom, a wife and a president's wife, I was a little overwhelmed," she admitted. "There's a lot of entertaining, but you get used to it and learn there's a pattern to it."

"I came here [to Bucknell] saying, 'I'm a mom; that's where my heart is.'" All the evidence (not to mention sterling references from the university's CEO) indicates that her success in that endeavor is unqualified. But the full résumé is much longer, and the warmth and energy of the Adams and Bruce household are testament to her success in juggling her varied roles in the academic community.
members representing all of the important constituent groups in the Colby community. The committee hired A.T. Kearney of Alexandria, Va., a specialized search consulting firm, to assist, and the committee pledged an inclusive and relatively open process.

When it came to specific prospects, though, secrecy necessarily reigned. Months passed. Curiosity and anxiety grew. In August, Jim Crawford ’64, chair of the Board of Trustees, reported that the search was “proceeding very well.” Two more months passed. Option papers for the new president were drafted as part of a strategic planning process, but there was no indication who would end up reading them. Crawford reported that the College was still on schedule for naming the new president at the January 2000 board meeting.

Then in October the pace quickened. Faculty, staff and some student leaders were invited to meet the three finalists, each brought to campus for a day-long series of interviews and meetings. Much of the anxiety lifted as participants in those sessions reported back to colleagues and shared their observations with the selection committee. “An impressive majority—I’d say it was almost a chorus—said they thought all three candidates were terrific,” said Earl Smith, dean of the College and secretary of the search committee. But the big question remained: who would lead Colby starting in 2000?

Once the on-campus interviews were concluded the process assumed new momentum, and it was a surprise when Crawford announced that a special meeting would be held on October 31 in Boston. There, with Cotter and former president Robert E.L. Strider II present, the board unanimously elected Adams to become Colby’s 19th president, starting July 1.

Colby’s process was unusual, possibly unique, in its openness. Trustees, alumni, faculty, administrators and students were represented on the search committee. The committee reviewed about 100 dossiers. All members of the faculty, administration and support staff who expressed interest were included in question-and-answer sessions with the three finalists.

Associate Professor of Physics Shelby Nelson, a member of the search committee, reported to trustees that comments from those sessions were extremely helpful. Participants’ impressions of Adams described “a genuine intellectual leader,” a man who is “quick, energetic, impressive and inspiring” and someone who seemed “a lot like Bill Cotter.”

Crawford said that the process succeeded in demonstrating how Colby does business and how components of the institution work together. “We were trying to sell Colby, and that mission was accomplished,” he said. Crawford described exhaustive research that included visits to the current institutions of five semi-finalists and conversations with 12 to 15 references for each of them.

In the end Colby signed “the best candidate from a very strong pool,” Crawford said. “Adams will arrive with proven experience from running a respected university, where he established a record of strong leadership in areas that reflect Colby’s current priorities.”

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**Pedro, the Presidential Pig, and His Pals**

In the Adams and Bruce household, Louie and Sadie, a pair of cockapoo dogs, serve as the welcoming committee, whose crusade is to convince anyone who will listen that they aren’t getting their full share of attention. Cats stroll the periphery, all feline aloofness. In the sun room Adams and Bruce each pluck a big tawny ferret from the ferret cage. And in the kitchen, underneath the birdcage, sleeps Pedro, half Vietnamese pot-bellied pig and half white boar. “The white boar is, of course, a distant relative of the white mule,” Bruce said.

Adams bends to scratch the pig’s back, and Pedro awakes from his slumbers with a snort to careen around the kitchen with a pillow balanced on his head.

Within two weeks from the time Adams was named Colby’s next president, the Mayflower Hill rumor-mill managed to exaggerate the family’s pet count to include more than 100 birds. In truth, the total number of animals depends on “how many frogs are living,” Bruce said. “I think it’s 27 total, counting the newt.” Only seven of them are birds—tropical finches, all in a single cage.

“When kids come to visit, I want it to be like a pet store, only where the pets aren’t for sale,” Bruce said. “It’s a good conversation starter.” “Yeah,” Adams volunteered. “When the pig walks into a reception...”