



April 2014

Bro Reflects: Adams reveals his private thoughts on his presidency

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2014) "Bro Reflects: Adams reveals his private thoughts on his presidency," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 102 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol102/iss4/6>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Bro Reflects

Adams reveals his private thoughts on his presidency

Interview by Gerry Boyle '78 | Photography by Fred Field

Retiring President William D. Adams on the “relentlessness” of the job, learning to be extroverted, and the need to stay focused on the College’s core mission

So, after fourteen years at Colby, here we are. Do you ever wonder how you ended up in this moment?

I guess when I reflect on my life I do come back to that, the mystery of how I got here. But you know, having done this [the job of college president] now for twenty years, it is my life. And I think what I worry a little bit about is that this has become so normal to me that it will be a very dramatic change not to have all of that commotion.

Like if you move from Manhattan to the country.

Exactly.

You’ve said, “There’s nothing that can prepare you for doing this job other than being in it.” For what were you not prepared?

I think it’s being in it and in the center of it in the way that you are on a day-to-day basis. Until you have the responsibility and you are exercising the responsibility, it’s very hard to understand what that’s like. The weight of it, the implications of the things you do or think, and how much consequence there is to things you do.

You always have your phone?

Yeah. Well, not really. I felt a little disengaged [in France] this summer because of sabbatical, and people were trying to leave me alone. There was a kind of

freedom to that that was really interesting and, to me, unfamiliar. When I was on my bike on some savage climb, I felt pretty disengaged in a good way, in the appropriate way. But apart from that, I think back on the fourteen years—you’re always on duty, and at any time the call can come, the knock on the door can come, or somebody can walk into your office with some terrifically exciting or depressing news. There’s a sense of constancy or relentlessness of it. ... There are many things I will miss, but not that.

Speaking of cycling, we have the photos. You know there’s a metaphor going on there.

I think that’s appropriate.

Riding off into the sunset?

That, but also the nature of the sport. It’s hard. It requires regular engagement and discipline. It’s an endurance thing.

As does the job?

Yes, because the other thing you have to have is patience. It is a long-distance race. It’s not a sprint.

What has given you a sense of accomplishment?

I’ve been thinking a lot about that. And it’s important to say, in addition to the pressure and the difficulty and the kind of innately challenging nature of these roles, it’s also important to say that there’s a lot of pleasure in it. Faculty, administrators, support staff, people that I spend a lot of time with—the physical plant people, the dining services people—that’s the source of the greatest pleasure, I think. That sense of teamwork and making things happen. Because all of this is about teamwork. The president gets privileged in the way that people perceive his or her importance,



Colby President Bro Adams is reflected in Untitled, 2010, by Anish Kapoor, which was recently on loan from the collection of Jennifer and Bob Diamond '73.

and there is something important about it, but it's teamwork basically. The pleasures of it are immense. It's exciting. It matters. It has social consequence and political consequence.

And those specifics?

I'm probably proudest of the things that are not visible in the ways that buildings are visible or that the endowment is visible. I think it's interesting changes or additions or shifts in the program, the broad sweep of what we're doing. The Goldfarb Center was one of the first things I was preoccupied with here, and it's one of the most satisfying of all. And there are other things like that that are so interesting programmatically. The latest expression is this humanities center, which I think is a great thing and I was a champion of. The museum of art and all of these expressions the College now has in the visual arts were very important to me. The programmatic developments in environmental studies and environmental science. The new marine conservation track. The evolution and strengthening of neuroscience and strategically hiring faculty that were arrayed

“There's a mission focus on the one hand and an externality focus, and I think it's increasingly easy to become preoccupied with the externalities.”

around the programs interested in neuroscience: psychology, biology, chemistry. And I'm also very proud of some of the programmatic things in the community that we've done. The Maine Film Center. Quarry Road. I really enjoyed and felt good about Colby's, and my, engagement in the community.

And fourteen years' worth of graduates?

Yeah, I have a very keen sense of that. This kind of segues into this sense of accomplishment, though it's not my accomplishment; it's the institution's accomplishment. I have a really keen sense of the extremely interesting things that people do over decades after they leave here. To me, it's pretty clear that their experiences here inform what they do and their ability to do what they do as well as they do it. I think that's another great dimension of this job that you see the impact in countless ways. It's our achievement, our collective achievement, and it's real, and it's concrete, and it's visible.

Do you have moments when you're tired or discouraged and a student gets you back on track?

All the time. I think the risk of jobs like these is that you get kind of buried in administrivia, sort of navel-gazing. It's all important work and it has to get done, and it can even be fun, but you can also get buried in it. And when you come back into contact with what students are doing and you find them in their excited, best moments, that's enormously encouraging and inspiring.

It seems Colby's impact has broadened considerably.

That's also very much on my mind. When I got here, we were running at about ten percent of the student body in terms of underrepresented domestic groups. The international contingent was five or six percent. Partly because of things that [former President] Bill Cotter had started on the international side, we very quickly grew to about fifteen percent international students, mainly through the Davis United World College program. But now quite a bit beyond that. And slowly but surely—it was very difficult and is still very difficult—we gradually made progress on the domestic front.

So the student community is very different from when you arrived.

I think that's right. And again, this is a team sport, so it took a lot of people and it took some pushing and shouting along the way.

Which is continuing.


And it will. Because as these places become more complex they become more dynamic, and they become less complacent with their being. And that's fine. You can't have a very complicated community and have a very simple sort of collective consciousness. Some of the more challenging moments I've experienced here and in my career have been around that emergent diversity. It's tough. It's worth it.

When you were profiled in Colby in 2000 you talked about the College as being “on the threshold of a new level of excellence.” Still true?

I hope so. I hope it's still rising. When I talk to people from your time, and even after, people look at the institution today and they compare it to the institution they experienced, and they're quite struck by the difference in this sort of trajectory, where is it along some kind of road to wherever—perfection. And they see a much better version than what they experienced. Not that it negates what came before. I think even over fifteen years you can see it. It's expressed in the qualities of the students; it's expressed in the look of the campus; it's expressed in the interesting changes in the program; it's expressed in the achievements and the qualities of these kids as they graduate and how impressive they are. But I think it's got a long way to go before it will be at some plateau of perfect excellence.

A lofty goal.

Yeah, right. And my sense of [incoming president] David [Greene] is that he's got lots of aspiration. But I think a lot of people have aspiration here. I hope Colby is different in the future, and I hope it's got a lot of difference left to achieve, and I hope we would agree at the end of whatever period we choose that it's gotten better, particularly in the way that it delivers the mission. I think that's the key. You've got to keep going back to that. Because I think one of the great, powerful perceptions that I have—and it's not something that leaves me happy necessarily—is that because the world is so now interconnected and closed in upon itself, and because the comparative dimension of what we do is so highly visible and highly estimated and highly calibrated, it's getting increasingly easy for leaders in the institution, for everybody in the institution, to become preoccupied with the comparative



“It is a long-distance race.
It's not a sprint.”

—Bro Adams on parallels between
cycling and being president of Colby

and the external as opposed to how are we doing at the thing that's the most important, which is in the trenches educating our students. And how do we know that we're succeeding, how do we know that the things we're doing now are better than the things we did before? How can we make it better and better and better, and what does it mean to be better and better and better? What are the measures and what are the outcomes that we want to see? So there's a mission focus on the one hand and an externality focus, and I think it's increasingly easy to become preoccupied with the externalities. What's your ranking in *U.S. News & World Report*? How big is your endowment?

I guess it's a way of simplifying it to the point you can put a number on it.

A number that puts you in relationship to somebody else. I concede the importance of that, but I think it's terribly easy to get disconnected from what you're doing.

Back to you. What do you think your stronger suits were or are?

Well, this is probably for other people to say—but I was and am a good fundraiser. I was a pretty good administrator, I think. I could handle a lot of work, I could keep a lot of balls in the air. And I was pretty good working with the people who I had to work

like a bolt of lightning, cosmically unfair and senseless. I've never experienced anything nearly that bad before or since, and I don't think I ever will. But that was an episode that brought home the truth about the sense of obligation you have, the protective impulse you have. And the fact that sometimes you can't protect people. They experience loss and tragedy in ways that are terrible.

And you never quite get over it?

No. But fortunately, there aren't many things like that. But there are those moments of crisis. You're working with two-thousand eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds. That's an unusual context, and unusual things happen.

Such as?

Sometimes the place comes unglued sort of collectively in ways that have to do with its closeness and intimacy. It's an inwardness. But people get wound up collectively about things and out of joint and out of proportion. That's a totally different kind of low because it doesn't involve, typically, people in jeopardy or students losing parts of their lives or their lives. But it's another kind of low where you get worried about the very nature of what you're doing. You almost feel like you're disconnecting people. You're creating a sort of irreality. So I've had those moments of doubt.

Why did you choose to study philosophy after you served in Vietnam?

I think it was the sudden appearance in my life of big questions that I didn't have answers to. And I kind of lived a philosophical conundrum in watching this thing unfold and having the incredible experience you have in those situations, the range of human order and disorder and function and dysfunction and trial and tribulation and disaster. For me it all became fuel for questions.

Did you figure it out?

That wonderful thing that Cezanne said—"I'm making progress." At sixty-two or whatever he was. So there's no figuring it out. There's only a deeper insertion, which I think is going back to the humanities. I think the truth about literature and philosophy and those things is they make you bigger. They give you more capacity to wrestle with these things. They don't lead to conclusions. You get deeper, but I don't think these things resolve. They become more interesting, more compelling, a little more self-aware. But they don't end. People go on killing each other in war. We certainly haven't figured that one out.

On a brighter note, have you and David Greene gotten together?

So far only in a preliminary and not very deep way.

But when you do?

I can tell you what I'd like to say to him. Obviously one level of things I want to say to him involves my sense of what remains unfinished, in terms of the work of the institution—certain things that he ought to at least know are underway and in process. That are promising or maybe not promising. What the worries are, what the concerns are that immediately are likely to present themselves. Where the black holes are.

Any of them you can share?

Probably not. But it's a fair question. Where the opportunities

“Some of the more challenging moments I've experienced here and in my career have been around that emergent diversity. It's tough. It's worth it.”

with to succeed. I was a pretty good communicator in certain dimensions. I learned to speak, I won't say how well but well enough to communicate, both in front of big groups of people and one on one. I learned how to write better and to communicate in those ways. I think I was pretty good at dreaming up interesting things for the College to do. And I was pretty good at working with the volunteers I had to work with. Trustees, overseers. Now you probably want to know what I wasn't so good at.

As long as you've brought it up.

The extroverted self that is necessary in this work is hard for me. That must show in ways that I'm not even aware of. But the first time you have to go out and work a room full of strangers is hard. I got acceptably good at that. I got good enough. But you still find things that are very, very hard. It is hard, but I have a discipline now where I can summon the energy.

You certainly learn that you're ultimately responsible for all of these people. And that includes some very difficult situations.

The lowest points for me were points where that truth came home in a horrible way. When students are at risk and the institution can't protect them or they can't protect themselves. And where really bad stuff happens. You probably know what I'm thinking of. The Dawn Rossignol death was to me horrible in a way that I have trouble articulating. That was dark. And very hard. It was



“ When you come back into contact with what students are doing and you find them in their excited, best moments, that’s enormously encouraging and inspiring.”

are, too. It’s up to him to decide what’s an opportunity and what’s not. But I can at least share with him things that I think are likely to be viewed by him as positive potential for further evolution, things in the academic program. There are certainly a lot of things I want to tell him about personalities. There’s a lot to know, and there aren’t very many people who know as much as I do, being in this place and position, sort of the center of the institution.

Are you pleased to have been part of this chapter of Colby’s history?

Absolutely. Pleased. Honored. But I also know it will be surpassed. At least I hope it will be surpassed, because I know a lot about the relative weaknesses of the place now. And I know that those relative elements of weakness, or unfulfilled promise really, need to be addressed and the institution has to keep going and growing and perfecting itself. So I’m very eager for my successor to make this place considerably better in ways that I probably couldn’t have done. I think we all meet our moment of limitation when we don’t have really enough to contribute to justify continuing. And I kind of feel like I hit that point. It wasn’t a bad feeling. It wasn’t a negative feeling. It was kind of a certainty about having given what I have to give. Now it’s somebody else’s gifts and capabilities that will give to Colby what it needs now that I couldn’t give it. I’m rather happy that somebody different, and I hope better, will come along and take it to the next logical place.



President William D. Adams has lunch in Roberts with Tommaso Montagni ’17, right, and Nari Roka ’17.

Someone suited to whatever those next challenges will be?

Yeah. And I thought a lot about those challenges as we were preparing for this transition and as we were preparing the board, and I think I know what some of the challenges are. And so it’s not only somebody else’s turn, it’s somebody else’s unique combination of capabilities that will be right for the place. And I have every reason to believe that in David Greene they found the right guy. So I’m very at ease with that. I can imagine some people not being at ease with moving on or having trouble with that. I’m not having trouble.

It’s time?

It’s time.



Much more from Bro Adams online, including life after Vietnam, defining Colby, the impact of United World College, and the College’s “epic” history. colby.edu/mag