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## Nature and Nurture: Planner and architect Mina Amundsen sees connections as she oversees Colby's growth

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# STAFF



Since her childhood in India, Minakshi “Mina” M. Amundsen, assistant vice president for facilities and campus planning, has always been curious about the interconnectedness of the natural world, the built environment, and the humans who navigate both. That fascination with connections has informed her work at Colby in myriad ways.

Since arriving on the Hill in 2015, Amundsen has overseen approximately 110 administrators and staff in Facilities Services, which is responsible for capital planning and construction, such as the planned 350,000-square-foot athletic complex; operation of the biomass-fueled central steam plant; custodial work and maintenance of the grounds; building trades and mechanical and electrical services; and sustainability efforts. There are literally a lot of moving parts that require a manager who sees the big picture, understands how things work at ground level, and is responsive to the people who keep the campus running day and night.

Which brings Amundsen’s story back to her native India.

She traveled across the country on family vacations, including stops to see *son et lumière* for which her engineer father provided lighting. “I was exposed not just to physical geography, but to social geography and economic geography, languages, food, and culture. You can learn so much just by passing through.” These childhood pursuits and travels drew her to art, biology, languages, drama, model making, and social studies, which included history, civics, and

## NATURE AND NURTURE

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By Sue Repko

geography. In her work at Colby, she brings a keen awareness of the complexities inherent in the way an institution grows, how its history and values ultimately shape what gets built, the impact on the land, and how the school relates to the larger community.

Nowhere is the comprehensive nature of Amundsen's work more evident than in her role overseeing the diverse project team undertaking the planning and construction of the new athletic complex, the largest project in the College's history. As the point of contact for the facilities project team, design team, and senior administrative team, Amundsen was closely involved in the architect selection and all phases of design as well as environmental approvals. She is keenly interested in meeting the facility's ambitious sustainability goals. "I see the successful delivery of the new athletic complex project as ultimately my responsibility," Amundsen said.

Her journey to the field of campus planning was circuitous. As a teen, she rejected expectations that she might become a doctor, then a microbiologist, then an engineer. Architecture was a compromise, especially when she realized it could combine her love of art and history. Amundsen would eventually practice as an architect in India for eight years, but found herself drawn more to the chaos and integration of big cities than working on one small building after another. Her boss kept urging her to become a city planner, and when



She and her husband, conservationist and consultant Ole "Trey" Amundsen III '90, though, had always wanted to live in Maine, and today live just down the hill from Colby. "I can promote sustainability here on this hill of such natural beauty," she said, "and I have the chance to integrate planning, design, and operations on a smaller scale."

On those childhood trips, Amundsen also saw how her father was always stopping in a village to visit customers. All these years later, Amundsen is touring all of the mechanical spaces on campus to see how they function. She's taking time to talk



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**—Mina Amundsen, assistant vice president for facilities and campus planning**

she was awarded a scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for a master's in architecture studies, the transition began. After a year in the program, she added city planning, receiving a dual master's degree in 1998.

Following graduate school, she joined Harvard University's office of planning and real estate as a senior planner with both planning and design skills. Three years later, she moved to Cornell, where she directed the university's facilities planning. "For me it was not just numbers, but a map. We were looking at processes, buildings, and the glue that holds them all together."

to members of the Facilities Services Department, learning who they are, what they do, and how they want to grow.

Today this might be considered an example of "slow management," in which every employee is valued for their role in an organization, trusted as a professional, and given more autonomy for creativity and problem solving. At Colby, Amundsen's approach is translating most noticeably into sustainability initiatives. "We're trying to pull everyone into sustainability. The project folks are updating to sustainable standards. We're doing green cleaning and piloting organic lawns. Everyone has been very receptive, and they're learning cutting edge ideas and technologies."

In the long run, the hope is that this will result in a shared ownership of sustainability. "Everyone here has a role, and they are equally important," said Amundsen.