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All In: How Colby Met COVID-19

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“

**Some places shine
in their hardest and
toughest moments.**

ALL

**It is in Colby's DNA
to come together
as an entire
community...**

...it inspires me.

”

—President David A. Greene
March 2020



By Gerry Boyle '78

IIN

SCIENCE AND SOLIDARITY WERE KEYS TO THE COLLEGE'S PANDEMIC SUCCESS

THE STORY

It was last August and first-years were arriving, unloading cars, lugging stuff into residence halls. President David A. Greene was on hand for the big day, meeting students, greeting parents, only to hear, “We expect to be back here within two weeks to a month to pick up our child.”

It didn’t happen.

Eight months later those students were still on campus, and Colby’s singularly successful effort to provide an in-person, on-campus learning experience amid the pandemic had been heralded in national media from the *New York Times* to the *PBS NewsHour*, CNBC to the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* to *Forbes*. Colby had more mentions in prominent publications and news outlets during this period than any college like it—and those mentions were overwhelmingly positive,

as Colby’s handling of the pandemic was held up as a model for others.

“Colleges are exploding with Covid and have lax testing,” said a headline in *USA Today* in a feature story about Colby. “One school is keeping cases down.”

So why no repeat of the March 2020 evacuation of campus that began the College’s entry into the world of Covid-19? Why no headline-grabbing implosion with partying students seeing their school years ended by a pandemic wave? How was it that as this story was being written, Colby held an in-person, on-campus commencement, with graduates receiving diplomas before friends and family on the Miller Library lawn, while other colleges and universities held yet another mass Zoom event?

This is how.

It's a story of disciplined focus on Colby's values and mission, belief in science, intensive research and planning, and meticulous execution. A community that was all-in—faculty and students, alumni and parents, dining services and facilities, and athletics. Eighteen-hour days and sleepless nights, and decisions implemented faster than even this virus could spread.

Said Provost Margaret McFadden, “We left it all on the field.”

It was a very different field when this all began, back when Zoom wasn't our window to the world and contact tracing was vaguely known as something in the domain of public health experts. Early in 2020 that world was upended in a matter of weeks as the Covid-19 virus spread across cities, countries, and continents like a swarm of invisible locusts. Deserted New York City looked post-apocalyptic. European countries were ravaged. News reports were filled with images of refrigerator trucks used to supplement morgues overflowing with Covid-19 victims.

Mayflower Hill seemed like a sanctuary until it didn't, and with the virus approaching in March 2020, students were evacuated from campus.

They were soon being taught remotely by professors who pivoted to the new reality in a matter of days, trading the close community of a classroom for a roster of faces across a computer screen. Sports seasons ended mid-stride, international students and others who could not return home were sequestered in residence halls, and the semester ended without a commencement on campus.

Meanwhile, the administration intentionally said, well, not much.

“That was probably the hardest part,” said President David A. Greene. “The lack of knowledge about the virus, how it was spreading, whether you could do things safely. Testing was not available, so I just kept saying, ‘What we're going to do is wait. We just have to hold off on making important decisions as long as we can because we need to see the road ahead.’”

This wasn't easy, not in mid-crisis, with other institutions quickly moving to do and say something. But while Colby was resisting any rush to decisions, within weeks it was becoming clear that no matter how well faculty provided online learning, how adroitly student-life and technology staff improvised, remote learning wasn't going to replace the personal experience that students expected, nor did it fulfill Colby's fundamental mission. And it soon became apparent that online college, while temporarily passable for some students, was filled with obstacles for others.

“Some students had good computers and quiet places to work and bandwidth,” McFadden said. “And others went back to places where they were in crowded homes without enough internet and with no access to a computer or needed to go to work to support their family. The inequities were very troubling to faculty, and to all of us.”

Including Greene, who made the first big pandemic decision. “If we can get back for the fall, we need to be back. Let's focus on that.”

This was in April 2020, a time when some schools like Colby were battening the hatches to weather the pandemic storm: going fully remote, devising hybrid models with limited numbers of students and faculty on campus, compressing courses and semesters to keep students from interacting as much as possible.

Greene said he had presumed that colleges would move in similar directions if they were considering the same information, and he was shocked to see how different the approaches turned out to be. And he knew a Covid-19 outbreak was a risk in Colby's relatively aggressive decision to try to bring all students back to Mayflower Hill.

"That's one way to think about it, that the only risk is Covid-19," Greene said. "That's a risk and a very important one. But there are several risks. Not giving our students a great education is a huge risk. The risk of inequitable treatment of our students. The risk of mental health issues, the strain and stress that many people would be put under if we were not back on campus."

But he believed then and believes now, he said, that there is a way to manage these risks in a way "that optimizes what is important: keeping people healthy, allowing people to have a great education, and, ultimately, allowing them to have a great experience."

And one more thing.

In the coming barrage of information, Greene emphasized, the College would have to remain true to its values. Do the right thing by the students, Colby employees, and the greater Waterville community. "The way we carry out our mission, the way we treat people is going to be the most important thing," he said. "These are going to have to be the values that sustain us through all of this."

So with the support of the Board of Trustees in April (more on that later), the direction was set.

The management of the myriad moving parts that make up that task actually had begun before students left campus in March as administrators first grappled with the scope of the pandemic crisis. It was uncharted territory for Colby, but the organizational model used in the past kicked in, counting on what Greene calls the College's hard-wired ability to "get things done."





First order of business was to appoint Chief Financial Officer and Vice President for Administration Douglas Terp '84 to manage the effort. Terp, knowing the monumental task and time commitment that was looming, accepted the role only after consulting with his wife. It was a good call. A year later, many on campus could count on one hand the number of days they'd had off since the effort began.

Eventually, the record of Covid-related information would fill an entire bookshelf of binders in Terp's office. But Terp started things off with a meeting in fourth-floor Eustis, where administrators overseeing health services, student life, risk management, and other areas of the College spent four hours trying to get a grip on this new reality. "We're walking through it," Terp recalled. "What is the CDC saying about what happens if someone is infected? What do you do?"

That early discussion led to hundreds more as Colby tried to figure out whether and how to bring students back in the fall. "We had a delivery date," Terp said. "We needed to be ready [with recommendations] in early June."

Terp had no direct public health experience, but he had served on local and regional health care organization boards. He hit his virtual Rolodex and started looking for the answer to the question: how do we bring students back while still ensuring the health and safety of the community? "I started making phone calls to health experts, the hospital systems. They started putting me in touch with labs. Who is out there? Who has tests? Can you get them?"

It was a potentially overwhelming directive: can Colby safely bring upward of 2,000 students, 200-plus faculty, and a full staff back to Mayflower Hill? If so, how? If not, why?

But with Greene as gatekeeper and Terp as manager, 10 subcommittees began meeting daily, some attending via Zoom, with an executive committee reporting back. And dozens of people began the process of turning into pandemic experts.

Vice President, General Counsel, and Secretary of the College Richard Uchida '79 and his staff generated a 10-page document exploring the legal questions involved—and readied to take over contact tracing. Terp's chief of staff and financial analyst Stephanie Sylvester had previously been a manager for George Washington University's Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, a background that was immediately put to use. "Even just knowing what a PCR machine is," Sylvester said, referring to one of the key testing processes. "There were microbiologists in our department, so having interacted with those people helped me immensely."

Facilities fanned out across the campus to measure every single teaching space. Dining Services began to consider how to feed students if dining halls weren't going to open. Cleaning protocols were considered and developed. And inquiries about the nature of Covid-19 went out across the country.

Information began making its way back to Mayflower Hill from a variety of sources: Colby trustees, operators of hospital chains, public health experts doing risk analysis for investment banks. It was a brave new world, and Colby was plunging in. What did testing actually look like? Where could those tests be processed? Where did one obtain swabs in massive quantities? In the meantime, the pandemic was a presence at home as well.

"Some of the people had children who were now at home and couldn't go to school," Terp said, "or had family members who were ill. We look back now and it was crazy. I can remember driving down to Augusta on a Sunday afternoon shortly after the governor's lockdown orders and we saw two cars. Just two cars on the interstate."

Amid this rapidly changing landscape, the Board of Trustees, which had been embedded in the process, wholeheartedly supported the Return to Campus Plan at its meeting at the end of June. It was a level of confidence in

the administration that other colleges didn't enjoy during that time, administrators said, and it was part of a chain of trust that allowed Colby to be nimble when the shifting pandemic demanded immediate course adjustments.

In August the College's plan was submitted to Dr. Nirav Shah, director of the Maine Centers for Disease Control. Uchida remembers it as "a hold-your-breath moment," but he needn't have worried.

"We had meetings with a number of colleges and universities in Maine and the meeting with [the Colby group] was by far the one where we came away with the highest degree of confidence that the plan would work," Shah said. "The plan that the team thought through, presented, and then executed led the nation ... and quickly became the gold standard."

Colby had small contained outbreaks while other colleges and universities had outbreaks that closed campuses and spilled over into communities. Shah said he initially had concerns that the same could happen at Colby, but the frequent testing, fast turnaround on results, and buy-in from the community eased those concerns.

No huge surprise for those involved.

"Colby as a community is collaborative," Uchida said. "This would not have worked without the financial support of the College, the students having the right culture, the faculty's willingness to teach."

That willingness to not only teach, but to tackle the pandemic's pedagogical challenges, was made clear at the outset. After the upheaval of the spring semester, faculty jumped right back in, said McFadden, pointing to the more than 50 volunteers who started in with academic planning for the upcoming return back in May.

"Who's going to teach in person? Who's going to teach remotely? Who's going to teach in some hybrid form?" she said. "Collecting that information and talking with people while they made their decisions was a very complicated process."

Ultimately, the faculty as a body decided to stick with the regular curriculum, adjusting some courses that were difficult to maintain with Covid-19 restrictions. Faculty agreed to lift a restriction that required a letter grade in courses in a student's major, allowing a satisfactory/unsatisfactory option in acknowledgment of the pandemic's continued strain. And they made accommodations in their teaching for students who had

to remain remote for health and personal reasons. Department chairs and program directors took on the burden of a stream of pandemic-related obligations.

“It was tremendous leadership from them,” McFadden said. “One of the things I love about this place is that there really is this extraordinary culture of teaching among faculty, and dedication and commitment to it while they’re also committed to being great scholars and creative professionals.

“What we asked of the faculty was amazing, and what they delivered was amazing.”

None of that would have mattered if outbreaks of Covid-19 on campus had outraced the protocols, testing, and quarantine designed to contain them. The national news was punctuated by cases of colleges and universities where just that happened. Greene told parents and arriving students back in August, “Do not let this be Colby.”



It hasn't been, and that, said Dean of the College Karlene Burrell-McRae '94, is partly due to an emphasis on a policy of full transparency with students and parents and a rejection of anything that smacks of top-down management of the pandemic crisis. “You approach it from the perspective that you’re not going to fall into the pattern of a rules-based reaction: ‘You will do this’ and ‘You will do that,’” Burrell-McRae said. “The emails on the subject from other institutions—they have a very different tone from ours.”

The tone is reflected in Burrell-McRae's language. “We wanted to start from a place of hope,” she said. She speaks of accountability, but it is “accountability with grace” and “the ability to forgive.”

That message has been clear in her Zoom calls with parents and guardians (every three weeks, three in a single day to cover all time zones, with upward of 500 parents and guardians checking in), where she opens the virtual floor to questions and has colleagues on hand to talk about curriculum or health issues, among others.

“I understood that families were nervous,” she said. “I understood that parents couldn't just sweep in [to a closed campus] and see their loved ones. And I understood that they have gifted us with their most precious joys.”

But parents could get answers to specific questions and get the general message: “We're a place that believes in supporting each other,” Burrell-McRae said. “We're a place that puts the health and safety of our community first.”

She also pointed to the increasing diversity of students' experiences,

which, she said, contributes to an appreciation of living and studying at Colby. “Collectively, they see the value of the education,” she said. “They see the value of the student interactions. They see the value of partnering with their faculty members. They see the value of being in Waterville.”

But even as they adapted to a pandemic, Colby students knew the success didn’t come easily, and that for many colleges it didn’t come at all. The result was “a newfound Colby pride because Colby has been plastered all over the news as one of the schools that brought back all the students and succeeded in staying open without a ginormous outbreak on campus,” said Sophie Lee ’21.

And that sense of pride, one of the positive outcomes of the pandemic, has been expressed in all corners of the College, from the alumni class notes in this magazine to the president.

“I’m enormously proud,” Greene said. “I’m so proud of our students and the way they’ve treated this. I’m so proud of the faculty, who are teaching in person in numbers that I don’t know is happening at any other college or university in the country. I’m so proud of our staff and the way they approach this with selflessness to make Colby a strong place. I’m so proud of our alums and our families, the way they’ve supported us.

“I’m so proud of our board for their willingness to take a calculated risk. You know, not all boards would have done that.”

The result was an effort that wasn’t a one-off. Shah, at the Maine CDC, pointed to expected innovations that could make testing cheaper and faster and make the Colby model more replicable for other large organizations going into the future. “Every time we do something in public health, we’re generating data,” he said. “When we do it well in controlled environments ... that’s science. You may think of that as part of the mission of a college or university, not just to do it for the sake of the students, but to also do it in a manner that adds to the scientific fund on knowledge.”

Greene also pointed to something beyond the sphere of Mayflower Hill that was a benefit of Colby’s pandemic year. “People needed to see someplace succeed at this time. I think we all did. I know I did. We needed to know that while we were in the midst of a war against a virus, we could continue on with the essential elements of our lives.

“Finding places that can really shine at the hardest, toughest moments is one of the things that gives us hope, that beacon that shows people it can be done. We were willing to step out when many others weren’t and say we were going to do everything we could to get our students back.”

Greene said the experience confirmed for him that Colby is a place he wants to stay for a long time. (He subsequently signed a nine-year contract with the College.) “It’s hard to imagine another community quite like this,” he said, “where people pull together and focus on doing the right thing the way we do at Colby. That doesn’t exist everywhere else.

“We found real clarity in the mission and the purpose and the things that matter. If I can hold on to that throughout my life, I’ll be really grateful for it.”







Associate Professor of Economics Samara Gunter took to a spare bedroom with a shop-light tripod and webcam to film her microeconomics lectures, leaving in-class time in expanded sections for discussion of real-world applications. Associate Professor of Chemistry Kevin Rice '96 and his department colleagues went all in on in-person teaching but halved the number of students in labs so distancing guidelines could be followed.

Associate Professor of Theater and Dance Annie Kloppenberg staged a play with the actors separated throughout by rolling eight-foot-high panes of Plexiglas on Strider Theater's stage. Associate Professor of Music Jon Hallstrom had students hum rather than sing under their face coverings and taught in a library space that afforded more distance.

Faculty and others innovated, experimented, and improvised to deliver the best possible academic experience

"There's no [piano] keyboard in there," Hallstrom said, "so I brought in my little keyboard from home. We had some good laughs over that."

Across campus and from bedrooms and basements, Colby faculty, administrators, and staff threw themselves into their work as they adapted, innovated, and developed new teaching methods and ways of relating to students in order to

ensure that 2020-21 would be, yes, the pandemic year, but also memorable for the learning that took place on Mayflower Hill.

In a prescient moment, when President David Greene informed faculty in March 2020 that students would be leaving campus, the news was received by many, not with panic, but with a can-do sort of confidence. "I went up to him afterward, and I said, 'We're ready for this,'" said Carol Hurney, director of Colby's Center for Teaching and Learning. "Faculty are going to shine."

And they did.

In the two weeks of planning that preceded the remote part of spring semester last year, Hurney and Jason Parkhill, interim chief information officer for Information Technology Services, dove in to set up websites and online office hours. They convened course design institutes that connected faculty at Colby, Bates, and Bowdoin to brainstorm ideas.

When students returned in the fall, faculty rode the momentum of the spring semester into the new year.

With the office of Provost Margaret McFadden working 24-7, the Center for Teaching and Learning, in place since 2017, supporting faculty more than ever before, Information Technology Services in high gear, and faculty themselves stretching to fit their teaching to the pandemic, Colby's mission to provide a rigorous liberal arts education with the reach of a research university was accomplished. For the spring 2021 semester, 75 percent of classes were fully in person.

Teaching to students whose faces were covered, no small thing for professors who are always watching for facial cues. Dividing intro lecture classes into smaller ones, loading up the teaching time. Facilitating for socially distanced students who found it more difficult to connect for study sessions. Adapting to technology that hadn't been in their classrooms before. Being aware of the myriad factors that this year sometimes have made the hard work of being a student at Colby even harder.

"We had to show compassion with students who were in tough situations, whether as simple as being stuck in quarantine for contact tracing or mental health issues," Rice said. "It was trying to navigate that in concert with our built-into-the-DNA desire to teach rigorous courses."

Doing both often required looking at teaching in new ways, at material from a different angle, at students with a fresh perspective.

Hurney saw professors succeed with technology they would have eschewed in a normal year.

Kloppenberg said she had some students have small-group discussions on Zoom, which they would record and send to her for review. "Sometimes they would say, 'I'm not really sure what she's asking here,' and they would work that out together," she said. "In terms of ways I'm asking questions and generating assignments, it was a way to be a fly on the wall. It also showed me that they really were able to push the conversation forward in productive ways ... even without my prompting."

For the course the Art of Athletics: Choreography for the Camera, Kloppenberg grouped three roommates together because they were already in close proximity outside of class. Fourteen-foot spaces were outlined with tape on the studio floor to keep dancers distanced. The Plexiglas wall constructed by set technicians worked so well for the spring production of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Topdog/Underdog* that Kloppenberg planned to hold onto it for future use.

“

We're ready for this; faculty are going to shine."

**—Carol Hurney, director,
Center for Teaching and Learning**





And even separated by face coverings, shields, and distance, a bond was developed.

“One thing that’s struck me about this year is that I’m closer to my students,” Hallstrom said. “I always try to be close to my students, but this year it’s significantly different. We’re all kind of in this together.”

As Hurney observed, courses succeeded because a sense of community was created. “Nothing replaces getting to know your students,” she said.

And that meant faculty being transparent in facing challenges, telling students when they were improvising and why. Gunter said she was honest with her economics students, saying, “I am experimenting ... and we’re going to see what happens.”

Mostly good things, it turned out. Gunter said the pandemic gave her reason to try different teaching methods that she’d been considering for some time. Working online some of the time moved students from doing a problem set every week to assignments three times a week. There were more writing-based assignments in the intro course. “I think that having to just rip your class apart and put it back together again provided an opportunity to try things that I’d been thinking about for a while,” she said.

And the outcome? Gunter said her students seemed to learn as much or more, though they didn’t always enjoy the virtual process. Rice said senior chemistry majors were being admitted to prestigious graduate programs, as expected.

Hallstrom said using electronic dance music as a learning vehicle engaged students in unexpected ways. Kloppenberg said everything was a bit more time-consuming, a bit more tiring. But the pandemic improv worked in the end.

“Making the best of a terrible situation,” she said with a smile. “In the arts, this is what we do. Constant reinvention.”

Ultimately, there were many silver linings, including faculty who said they felt like they bonded with students who had shared this historic challenge. But the bottom line, as the end of the semester loomed?

Said Kloppenberg, “I can’t wait to see real faces. In real life.”



With Transparency and the Right Message, Student Leaders Stepped Up

When they ran for Student Government Association president Ashlee Guevara '21 and vice president Sam Rosenstein '21 said they would work to ensure a quality student experience and raise school spirit.

They did, just not in the way they expected.

This was spring 2020, and the pandemic's spread had closed the campus, forcing the pair, then juniors, to campaign virtually from home. "We assumed this would probably be over by the summer," Rosenstein said. "Certainly by the fall, we'd be back to normal."

The new normal, maybe, and Guevara and Rosenstein, after winning the election, threw themselves and the 30 or so student government members into the mission of helping students stay with the plan that would keep them on campus. "We both have immense levels of pride in this community," Rosenstein said. "Anything that we could do to get the

entire student body through this experience, we were up for the challenge."

With their fellow SGA leaders, they met with the administration and spent the summer considering communications strategies. Key in on potential consequences or community values? What were the areas where students were most likely to push the boundaries? (Capacity limits for informal social gatherings.)

Ultimately, one message resonated: "Remind people that it truly is a privilege to be here," they said.

One Colby, a slogan proposed by the Student Athlete Advisory Committee, became an ever-present reminder hung on banners across campus. SGA continued to reinforce messaging, including reminding students that they might be young and relatively immune to Covid's worst effects, but the same could not be said for faculty and staff or members of the Waterville community with whom students might interact.

“

We both have immense levels of pride in this community.

Anything that we could do to get the entire student body through this experience, we were up for the challenge.”

**—Sam Rosenstein '21,
Vice president, SGA**



Guevara said students bought in, but just as important as the message was transparency on the part of the administration. She pointed to the Covid-19 website, where case numbers were updated daily, including the number of students testing positive and in quarantine.

“Being honest will get people on your team,” she said. “If we had downplayed the risks of coming back, if we had not been so robust with our testing schedule. ... What we really learned is that it has to be everybody in on this, everyone coming together, leading in with transparency.”

That, and a lot of work. With their student colleagues, they organized everything from laser tag to robo soccer, keeping people engaged on campus, which was, after all, where they pretty much had to stay. Both Rosenstein and

Guevara credited the SGA team members, who made huge contributions without hesitation all year.

With commencement approaching, their efforts appeared to not have been in vain. Guevara said the pandemic year was in some ways representative of her experience at Colby. “The opportunity to take calculated risks and know that I was going to be supported. ... I think that’s when your best ideas come, not when you’re coming from a place of fear, but when you’re coming from a place of knowledge and truth and vulnerability. Sometimes that’s when the biggest payouts happen.”



Logging onto Mayflower Hill from home doesn't come close to the experience of a Colby education, students say.

"Being remote last spring made me appreciate the in-person experience at Colby like never before," said Justin Masella '21, of Montreal, Canada. "To see people's faces, even though you have a mask, to be part of a community."

A varsity football player (whose last game was in 2019) and co-president of the Student Athlete Advisory Council, Masella said he and other student leaders have

encouraged their peers to focus on what they have in common rather than their differences. He was one of the architects of a messaging campaign called One Colby that reinforced the need for students to think of the community as a whole.

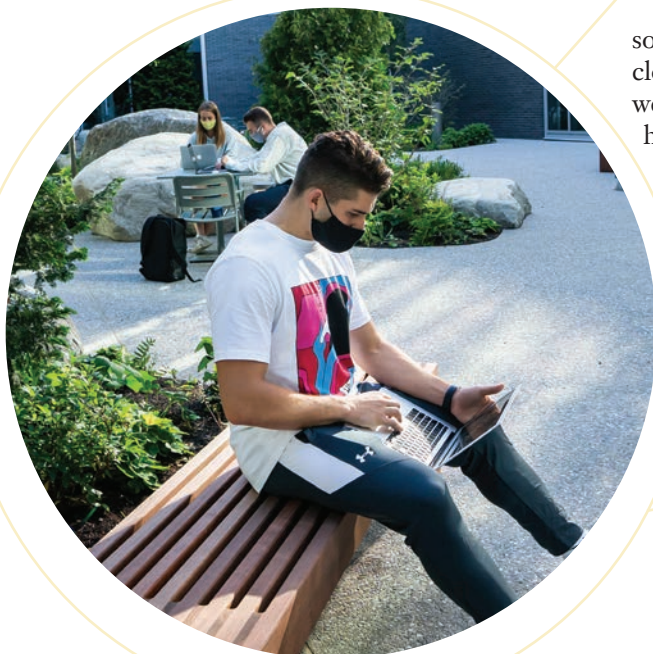
The alternative, Masella said, isn't pretty.



A NEED FOR COMMUNITY

"I have some friends who are remote [at other colleges]," he said. "I've had some friends who have been closed on, sent home after two weeks. I have some friends who have been successful in being in person, but they haven't had this experience. I think Colby is defining how to have the best college experience during this pandemic."

Masella acknowledges that there had been "bumps and bruises" (a reference to an increase in cases during Jan Plan that resulted in a week-long quarantine to start the second semester), that students were more prepared for the pandemic academically than socially. "For the most part, the discomforts that people felt about having to adapt, people eventually just bought in and trusted the leadership," Masella



Top, The strings section of the Colby Symphony Orchestra performs a pop-up concert on Miller Lawn. Left, Justin Masella '21, who encouraged fellow athletes to act as "One Colby." Facing page, top, Sophie Lee '21 found her biology and chemistry studies prepared her to understand the science behind Colby's Covid-19 strategy. Facing page, bottom, Sierra Verdin '23, a member of the Pugh Community Board, said the pandemic hit many first-generation, low-income students hard at home while they were on Mayflower Hill.

said. “Colby students aren’t ones to shy away from a challenge. They just ask themselves, ‘What do I need to do to come out of this successful?’”

Testing three times a week. Every week. Covid-19 cases and close contacts being quickly quarantined at a College-leased hotel. The campus closed to those outside of the testing bubble.

Socializing meant staying within the maximum of 10 people at an indoor gathering, he said. “But the connections I have with my friends or peers are stronger.”

For some students, the pandemic has reinforced the risk of the year going badly. Sierra Verdin ’23, a member of the Pugh Community Board, said some first-generation low-income students feel a disheartening “duality” as they deal with college and Covid-19 while also dealing with what may be stressful situations back home. “And we can’t do anything about any of it,” Verdin said.

In her case, wildfires near her home in California last summer coincided with a death in her family, adding to the stress of the pandemic. “It felt like everything was crumbling from the weight of what was happening back home, even though I was distant from it.”

And yet, students for whom in-person Colby was a refuge may have felt the added stress of knowing that the pandemic could drastically change their situation. “People in the Pugh Center realize the

gravity of what’s at stake just by being here,” Verdin said, “because if it gets taken away, then there’s not much else.”

It hasn’t been taken away, and some of the success of the Colby pandemic plan can also be attributed to students’ increasingly sophisticated understanding of the science behind Covid-19. Case in point: Sophie Lee ’21, a biology/biochemistry

major who did cancer research last year as a Paul J. Schupf/Memorial Sloan Kettering intern.

Lee knew what Colby was in for when the pandemic loomed.

“Pretty non-symptomatic, highly infectious but not super infectious—it’s not like measles, which is very infectious but shows signs very quickly.”

For Lee, that understanding of the virus confirmed that Colby’s intensive testing program was the right one. “Three times a week catches 97-plus percent of the cases, and changing antigen tests for students to Friday makes perfect sense. You can go into the weekend knowing, okay, I’m fine.”





**Across
Athletics,
Teams
Were
Patient—
and Ready**

Brooke Niemiec '23 fields a ground ball at second base in a nonconference game vs. Thomas College March 27. The Mules were among the teams participating in a 2021 NESCAC season, more than a year after the pandemic halted sports on Mayflower Hill.

Tommy McGee '21 and his teammates prepared like there was going to be a 2021 baseball season. In the weight room. In the batting cage. On the field. So when Coach Jesse Woods broke the long-awaited news in March that there would be 2021 NESCAC competition amid the pandemic, the group broke out in applause—and confident smiles.

“It’s not like we were caught off guard,” McGee said. “We were definitely ready.”

And then some, as the team beat St. Joseph’s and Thomas College in the run-up to a historic shutout win over 11th-ranked University of Southern Maine and the opening of NESCAC play. “That was awesome,” McGee said. “We’ve been waiting so long.”

Colby athletes took the long view this year, turning Covid-19 into a motivator, adhering to protocols, scrimmaging each other, sticking to the program in the weight room, keeping their goals top of mind.

“We were able to use that as a way to say, whatever we can do to make sure we’re being safe and keeping everyone else on campus safe,” said Adaobi Nebuwa ’24, a first-year forward for womens’ basketball. “It was just being teammates to the wider campus, just being the best people we can be.”

Nebuwa’s first Colby season was four games long, but women’s basketball notched a decisive win against NESCAC rival Bates. Women’s hockey logged two games, including an overtime win against the University of Southern Maine—

the first-ever victory in the O’Neil O’Donnell Forum on the Jack Kelly Rink in the recently opened Harold Alfond Athletics and Recreation Center (HAARC).

For seniors like Aimely Michaud-Nolan ’21, it was a chance to get on the ice in a real game for the first time in a year, but also an abrupt conclusion to hockey careers that began when they were in preschool.

“It was really emotional because it was sad to think that my hockey career had ended,” said Michaud-Nolan, who saw two remaining games canceled. “But I was also very thankful. ... I was thinking that if the worst thing that’s going to happen to me during a pandemic is my hockey season being canceled, I came out of it pretty okay.”

Her team practiced six days a week. The run-up to the possible spring NESCAC season (it would ultimately not happen) saw the campus humming with athletic activity every day. The mantra was not only be ready, but take this opportunity to be more ready than you’ve ever been—and maybe more ready than your opponents.

Swimmer John Connors ’22 said he worked out with weights at home in Pennsylvania over the summer, and when he returned to campus last fall he had to adapt to a training program that had a different feel. “We had to make it different because there were no meets, and it’s kind of hard mentally to train if there’s nothing to race against,” Connors said.

So the team focused more on lifting than in past seasons, he said, which will have carryover to next season.

They competed virtually, and when the men’s team was able to have a meet against the University of Maine, coaches carefully managed the intensity so the Mules would peak for their inaugural—and only—event in the Olympic-sized pool in the HAARC.

With a small number of fans in the stands, the Colby men’s team defeated the D-I UMaine Black Bears, with personal bests for the Mules throughout (Connors won the 200- and 100-freestyle events). “I guess they were practice times, but we destroyed those,” he said.

Connors said he plans to pick up the weights again this summer, and he hopes to be able to swim with his club team—pandemic permitting. The reward for “staying mellow” (as some athletes put it) this year was a year on Mayflower Hill with teammates and, for some, competing for the first and last times.

More successes will come next season, when teams will be able to bond without boundaries, train with games and meets ahead of them, and return to full competition.

“I’m very, very excited,” said Nebuwa. “What was so special about those games was that we really got to see a glimpse of how great this team is and how great this team can be. We’re getting new recruits in, which means younger people who are just hungry, which I really like.”

So even amid the pandemic, the future looks promising. “I’m looking forward to working with them,” she said, “and trying to make this a championship-winning team.”

THE PANDEMIC WAS A TIME TO PUSH FORWARD

Successfully navigating a pandemic was only part of the job.

President David A. Greene points to the ongoing crisis in higher education, with a shrinking pool of students putting the squeeze on colleges and universities. When the pandemic ends, those challenges will remain.

“We have to do more than simply be great at Covid,” he said in the spring of 2020. “We need to use this year to really be able to push ahead major initiatives, to be thinking about our future, and to have our head up all the time.”

Almost a year later, it’s clear that Colby did keep its head up, and the major initiatives kept moving forward. And then some.

In addition to coping with Covid-19, the College stuck to the plan: continue to move on initiatives that ensure Colby is widely recognized as a prestigious liberal arts college with the innovation and reach of a major

research university, and that the student experience is integrated and opportunity-rich.

In August the Colby-owned Lockwood Hotel opened on Main Street for the arrival of students, its role shifting temporarily to meet the need for housing during the pandemic year. Seven months later, the hotel’s flagship restaurant, Front & Main, opened to the public.

Last fall, after the College worked intensively to prepare for students’ arrival, work began to prepare the site for the Gordon Center for Creative and Performing Arts, a key venue in Colby’s broad plan to create an “arts ecosystem” with the Colby College Museum of Art, and, on Main Street downtown, the Paul J. Schupf Art Center (construction began in April) and the arts collaborative (opened in April). It’s all part of a multipronged effort to make the arts a more central component of the student experience and to make Waterville an arts destination.

In October the 350,000-square-foot Harold Alfond Athletics and Recreation Center opened on time, reaffirming Colby’s commitment to excellence in athletics and to the health and well-being of the entire community. Students, faculty, and staff—wearing face coverings where appropriate and physically distanced—immediately began using the center.

In January Colby announced the Davis Institute for Artificial Intelligence, the first such undertaking of its kind at a liberal arts college. The institute will provide new pathways for talented students and faculty to research, create, and apply AI and machine learning across disciplines, all part of the ongoing strengthening of the academic program to address the world’s challenges.

In addition, in May 2020, the College launched an “Inequality Lab” to provide a multidisciplinary approach to scholarship, teaching, learning, and community engagement, a move that

will ultimately create many courses on inequality and research that will illuminate causes and solutions around this societal challenge. In March of this year, a new concentration was added in literature and environment to the English major to focus on the intersection of social justice and environmental change.

And, in spite of the pandemic, which had some colleges and universities straining to fill their ranks, applications for the Class of 2025 totaled nearly 16,000, a 13-percent increase from last year's record. The enrolling class is the strongest ever in terms of academic qualifications and diversity, driven by programs like the Colby Commitment, the Fair Shot Fund, and the Pulver Science Scholars Program.

In a year when the College rallied to give students in-person learning and experiences, Colby's financial supporters also answered the call.

From March 1, 2020, to March 31, 2021, more than 9,000 donors made gifts to the College totaling \$86

million—including more than 8,700 donors to the Colby Fund. Momentum driven by the collective Colby community continued across all areas, from the arts to the sciences to humanistic inquiry. Donors propelled forward Dare Northward campaign initiatives, including endowments ranging from financial aid to public policy, the Gordon Center for Creative and Performing Arts, the Harold Alfond Athletics and Recreation Center, the Davis Institute for Artificial Intelligence, and much more.

In 2019-20, a year marked by the onset of Covid-19, the Dare Northward campaign still surpassed \$550 million, with 21,000 donors and counting, positioning Colby within reach of its \$750-million goal and ever closer to securing Colby's unique place among top liberal arts colleges in the nation.

"This was not a moment to pause and sit back," Greene said. "This was a moment to really see the landscape in front of us and make the most of it. And that's when we're at our best. That is what we do."



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**—President David A. Greene
March 2020**



Pay It Northward: A Bold Bet

By Kayla Voigt '14

Offers rescinded. Internships canceled. Positions closed.

The Class of 2020 needed help.

As the Covid-19 pandemic ground the economy to a halt, student after student came to DavisConnects with the same question: What am I going to do now?

“When we sent students home for the spring semester March 12, 2020, there was this stunning moment where we realized: This is real,” said then-Vice President and Dean of Student Advancement Andy McGadney. “There are two modes of how to respond to a crisis. You can retreat, or you can double down. So we doubled down. We asked ourselves, ‘How can we help our seniors?’”

The stakes couldn’t have been higher. Some 66 percent of wage growth happens in the first 10 years of a career. Graduating during a recession reverberates throughout a person’s life, resulting in overall lower earning potential.

On April 15, the team quickly sent out a survey to graduating seniors to find out more. Of the 500 members of the class, 200 said they were all set. That left 300.

President David Greene made a bold bet: opportunities for every graduate. “We have 300 seniors who need to acquire a meaningful job, fellowship, or substantive experience that will launch them into the kind of purposeful work that has long been the hallmark of Colby alumni,” he wrote in a May 6 email to the Colby community. “And here is the good news: We have 30,000 alumni, parents, guardians, and friends who stand together as the Colby community. Can the 30,000 of us pay it forward for these 300 students? I know we can.”

Pay It Northward was born.

As the pandemic spread, more than a thousand in the Colby community stepped up, supplying DavisConnects with more than 700 job listings, volunteer opportunities, and words of encouragement and

advice. “We had to quickly figure out how to operationalize all this,” said Director of Employer Engagement and Entrepreneurship Lisa Noble. “We got a flood of responses in a short period of time, and we knew we had to jump on it.”

They did, and it worked: Radhika Vu Thanh Vy ’20 and Kevin Muñoz ’20 joined tech security firm IDmission. Hayley Gibson ’20 landed her dream pre-med gap year job at Falmouth Women’s Health. Lexi Hanus ’20 launched her career in e-commerce for marketing agency Compass. Hundreds of students started their careers as the result of Pay It Northward.

“Our team worked tirelessly on this, putting in countless hours over only a few weeks,” said McGadney. “We put so much pressure on ourselves, but we wanted the students to know we were there to help. It was so incredible to see it all come together.”

With 95 percent of the Class of 2020 now employed in jobs and internships, participating in fellowships, or pursuing graduate school, the DavisConnects team has turned its attention to the Class of 2021—Pay It Northward 2.0.

Ultimately, what made Pay It Northward so successful was the students themselves. “The fact of the matter is, I can put any Colby student in front of an employer, and I know they’re ready. They’re smart, humble, articulate, and they learn incredibly quickly. It makes my job easy,” said Noble.

“I feel hopeful for 2021. Businesses are bouncing back. The employers we’re talking to are incredibly optimistic about their ability to take on entry-level talent, and they want to hire Colby students.”



“Hiring top talent involves looking for three things: a willingness to learn, the ability to communicate well, and confidence to ask questions. And Colby teaches its students all of those things.”

**—Ashim Banerjee P’21,
CEO, IDmission**

