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From the President

David Greene
david.greene@colby.edu

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Living with courage and grace. It was a simple phrase but a concept that hit me as a powerful force. It was spoken by Hanna Holborn Gray in a conversation with her I was privileged to facilitate at a recent meeting of the Colby College Board of Trustees held in Boston. The board met this summer to consider a plan for ensuring Colby's eminence in the decades ahead. It was an extraordinary set of meetings with deep and engaging discussions about Colby's history and future, about the changing landscape of higher education, and about Colby's potential to shape the liberal arts in an evolving global context.

The board's deliberations benefited from the engrossing discussion with Hanna Gray, the distinguished historian who served as president of the University of Chicago from 1978 to 1993 and provost and acting president of Yale University prior to that. Many know her as the first woman to lead a major American research university, and in truth the list of firsts for Dr. Gray is long. But that is never how she wanted to be described—she justifiably wants to be judged and known for her talents and accomplishments, which are numerous and lasting. Nevertheless, it is worth noting how Dr. Gray smashed the proverbial glass ceiling. Following her successful tenure as president, it became nearly (though not yet entirely) commonplace for women to lead top universities and colleges.

This is not to say that discrimination has been eliminated or that systemic biases are not still prevalent in many of our institutions. It often takes someone truly remarkable to break through these invisible barriers and to show us the powerful results of seeking and nourishing talent in all its varied and wonderful forms. Dr. Gray rose to the top because of the qualities of her mind, her discerning judgment, and her ability to lead people and institutions with a wonderful combination of force and compassion. Yet what really stands out for me is the strength of her informed, principled convictions.

In Boston we were discussing freedom of expression on campus and the challenges to this ideal, many of which are well-intentioned and draw on the inequitable treatment and experiences of those who have been excluded or rendered invisible on our campuses. Not simply a historical artifact, these inequities persist and rightly raise questions about whether in protecting free speech in its most offensive forms we are pushing those who traditionally had little or no ownership of the academy even further to the margins. In the name of free speech and expression, might we be adversely affecting the educational experience of those who have fought hardest to gain access to our institutions?

Dr. Gray took on this issue with passion and nuance. She described the risks to our colleges, to the discovery of new knowledge, and to society if the academy puts restrictions on what ideas can be considered, voices heard, or evidence followed. She also acknowledged the pain and discomfort that these freedoms can evoke, and why the utopian ideal of freedom existing without costs can no more exist in colleges than in larger society. Living with courage and grace, she said, is how we should approach our work on campus and how we should prepare our students to live in the world. We should have the courage to stand on principle and act with conviction, but we should also proceed with grace and empathy.

It struck me as a simple, beautiful, and at times hard to attain standard. I hope we can live up to it at Colby.

David A. Greene