

**Final Report
of the
Colby College
Trustee Commission.
on
Multicultural & Special Interest Housing**

Introduction:

In March of 1994, at the invitation of the Campus Community Committee, a number of students calling themselves Students of Color United for Change made an articulate and forceful presentation to the Committee during which they raised a number of concerns and outlined suggestions for creating a more comfortable, sensitive and tolerant campus environment, especially for students who feel the burden of their minority status. One of their recommendation was that the College create a multicultural house/center.

Several of the issues raised by these students were addressed by the College in the spring but, because the addition of any special housing would significantly alter the pattern of residential life established by the 1983-84 Trustee Commission an Campus Life, the trustees voted in April to refer the proposal for a multicultural house or center to a special trustee commission. The new Trustee Commission on Multicultural & Special Interest Housing was charged with examining Colby's residential system "to see how well it supports the increasing diversity of our community and to propose changes, if any are appropriate."

Members of the Commission, whose names are listed at the end of this report, included four students, selected by the Student Association; four faculty, selected by the President in consultation with the division chairs; four administrators; the chair of the Alumni Council, and ten trustees. The group first met in May, 1994, and formed three fact-finding committees to gather information and further define the topics to be considered in the study.

A Comparable College Evaluation Committee was charged with collecting information from other colleges which have multicultural facilities. Twenty-two colleges, suggested by commissioners and others, were surveyed via telephone over the summer and from this list the following colleges were chosen for visits by Commission teams which took place in September and October: Connecticut College, Trinity, Wesleyan, Franklin & Marshall, Bryn Mawr, Amherst, Williams, Oberlin, Allegheny, Bowdoin, Bates and Middlebury. Trip reports were written, distributed and discussed at length at the Commission meeting in Waterville on October 13, 1994.

A Colby Community Evaluation Committee was asked to gather campus opinion. More than 300 upper-class students responded to a summer survey and on October 13 the Commission heard testimony from students, faculty and administrators through the day and well into the evening. Some 30 people spoke at a Spotlight open forum, including representatives of a new

group called Students United for Change which offered a proposal for a house where students from all cultures would live and be pledged to providing multicultural education and programming for the entire campus. This proposal gave a focus for much of the day's discussion and highlighted the need to broaden the scope of the Commission's study to include educational programming as a cornerstone for improved racial, ethnic and cultural understanding. Others who testified were student: leaders in SOBHU (Student Organization for Black and Hispanic Unity), SOAR (Society Organized Against Racism), the Asian Student Association, the International Club, Hillel and the Newman Club. Commissioners also toured campus group meeting rooms and met with members of the College Affairs Committee, the Student Association Executive Committee, Commons presidents, hall presidents, faculty residents and head residents. Altogether, nearly 80 students expressed their views.

A National Cultural Evaluation Committee was asked to survey literature that would provide Commission members with a broad perspective on national cultural and racial issues, particularly at other colleges and universities. Members of this committee -- as well as others -- identified several books and dozens of articles from professional publications and the popular press that provided important background information on issues and trends that might impact or provide guidelines for Colby's own diversity objectives.

At the November 5, 1994, meeting, following the investigating and reporting stages of our work, the Commission began its deliberations with a review of the College's diversity goals and progress to date. [A trustee planning exercise in 1990 set a goal for the class entering in 1995 to have at least 20% representation from the nation's three most populous ethnic groups - African-American, Hispanic and Asian American. Although the class that entered in the fall of 1994 - one year short of the goal time frame - had the largest minority group representation in the Colby history (10%), the College is still well short of the goal. At the same time, this same most recent entering class slightly exceeded the planning goal of enrolling 7% international students.] The Commission re-affirmed the diversity goals and, at the same time, refined its own objectives within the general charge as follows:

To find constructive ways to make the residential life program comfortable and welcoming for all students, to educate the campus to understand and appreciate cultural and ethnic differences, and to support Colby's long range goal of attracting, retaining and nurturing a more diverse student body.

From the outset, the Commission embraced the vision of a campus where diverse individuals and groups could freely and comfortably interact and mutually support one another. In addition, the Commission emphasized the statement from the *Colby College Catalogue*, as follows:

Colby stands for diversity, without which we become parochial; for respect of various lifestyles and beliefs, without which we become mean-spirited; and for the protection of every individual against discrimination.

Once again, the Commission divided itself into sub-committees. One group was asked to prepare a proposal on the housing options; another to develop possible plans for a center; and a third was asked to assemble the other ideas for improving the campus environment that had arisen through Commission discussion, visits to other campuses, and from testimony from students and faculty.

Alternative Proposals:

Housing

The proposal for the residential option was considered by the Commission at our meeting in Boston on December 15, 1994. It contained a thorough summary of the advantages of creating a multicultural house and suggested possible configurations and locations for such a facility. It also addressed many of the objections to a multicultural house that had been expressed through the inquiry phase of the Commission's work.

After many hours of discussion and debate on the question of whether Colby should create some form of multicultural residential housing, the Commission was unable to arrive at a consensus. The members -- even within the various constituent groups -- were sharply divided and it was finally agreed that the idea of establishing separate housing of any kind should be put aside.

Some worried that a "multicultural" house would give its residents special privileges - including material and human resources - not available elsewhere on campus and that, regardless of the requirements set for admission to such a house, students could still be included or excluded on political bases. Others were concerned that having a special house would consolidate those most committed to multicultural appreciation and education, thus possibly dividing the campus and worsening rather than improving the general campus atmosphere. There was also concern that some students who would prefer to live elsewhere might be pressured to live in a multicultural house.

Several members, worried that creating any separate housing might lead to special cliques elsewhere and concerned that it would be difficult to withdraw this option even if it was unsuccessful, urged the preservation of the nearly egalitarian residential life system based upon the principal of open access for all students to all campus housing, in place at Colby since the abolition of fraternities in 1984.

Those in favor of establishing a house argued that Colby already has special interest housing by having created "quiet" and "substance free" dormitories. Proponents envisioned an opportunity for Colby to make a bold, unique move toward its goals of diversity; empower the students committed to multiculturalism to improve cultural awareness on campus; assist students of color who feel less comfortable on campus; and enhance the educational programs dealing with race relations and cultural differences. They also argued that the proposed housing option was open to all and was thus consistent with current policy.

At the end of the discussion it became apparent that while the proposal to create a multicultural house was inviting to some, others feared that any such change in the pattern of

residential life might compromise the College's broadly held desire to sustain and further strengthen an interactive and fully integrated campus community. Although the proposal for establishing a house earned a small majority when it was put to a vote, nearly all members were concerned that the lack of a strong consensus could be divisive and weaken rather than strengthen our goal to enhance diversity and appreciation for cultural differences.

Inasmuch as the original January, 1995, deadline for completing the Commission's work had been set to accommodate possible changes in the spring student room selection process that would arise by the establishment of a multicultural house, the absence of a recommendation on housing enabled the Commission to extend its over-all timetable into the early spring.

A Center

At its March 4, 1995, meeting in Boston the Commission turned its attention to the alternative proposal to create a multicultural center in order to provide a more specific proposal for consideration by the Commission. A center has been envisioned to be a space that would provide meeting rooms for student organizations devoted to gender issues as well as racial, cultural religious and ethnic diversity in one location where social and educational programming can be provided for all students to enjoy. Student organizations are at the center of the diversity efforts and such a facility would provide a tangible commitment of the college to this goal.

Two possible locations were examined. One would utilize the Mary Low annex and basement by converting the annex (four rooms/six beds) and refitting part of the basement boiler room, the Nautilus room, and the locker room area. Under this plan, center functions could be held in the existing Coffee House, in the lounges of Mary Low and Coburn halls, and the Foss Dining Halls. The preliminary cost estimate of this project is \$300,000 with an annual \$36,000 cost of lost revenue.

A second plan suggested an addition of approximately 4,000 square feet to the Student Center, again utilizing adjacent space for special functions. The very rough cost estimate of this project is \$650,000. Each of these plans is based upon the creation of 14 to 16 offices for student organizations with telephones and computers (approx. 180 sq. ft. each), kitchen facilities, lounge and multi-purpose space and access to copying and TV/VCRs. The Commission also agreed that a center would need staff support, a link to academic programs and a governing board.

From the outset, Commissioners were concerned that, in the absence of a strong program and student and staff support, a new center might divide the campus rather than unify it or, perhaps, run the risk of creating a "white elephant" of unused space. Concerns were also expressed about matters of cost, the fear that the College might duplicate space already available in other ways, the availability of staff at a time when there is an administrative freeze, and the dilemma that would arise if any of the student organizations deemed essential to the mission of a new center preferred not to participate.

In exploring the concept of a center, Commissioners agreed that while the space itself will be important as a means of facilitating programs, the College will also need to continue and enhance programs of cross-cultural education across the campus. The ideal center was described

as a "hub" of activity, providing impetus and support for programs that would emanate from it and take place throughout the campus. Aside from being a center for club activities, it would also be a comfortable place for students to go to share common interests and concerns and to replenish energies for diversity work.

Commissioners were drawn to the Student Center as a site because of its central location with high student traffic and because of the immediate proximity of professional staff offices for administrative support. In addition to its current multiple uses, the Student Center should also become a hub for activities aimed at achieving the important goals of diversity.

Conclusion: Recommendations:

The Commission members present at the March 4, 1995, meeting agreed, without dissent, to recommend to the Board of Trustees

"that the College enhance the use of the Student Center by the addition of appropriate new space that will create a hub and a common ground for activities aimed at promoting interaction and understanding in an increasingly diverse campus community."

Further, the Commission found that because the term "multiculturalism" can be misleading and often connotes too narrow a definition, this new space should be identified as "The Common Ground," expanding upon the concept of The Marson Common Ground Room that has been part of the Student Center for several years. The concept of common ground will promote greater understanding of not only cultural issues but also the multitude of factors such as race, religion, nationality, heritage, gender etc., that make each and every student unique.

General Findings

Campus testimony, visits to other campuses, meeting discussion and readings identified a number of ways in which to make the campus more comfortable and more welcoming for all students. It was apparent throughout our evaluation that most colleges and universities are wrestling with the issues of race relations and diversity, just as is society at large. The Commission compared our pursuit of a more understanding community as a journey toward a more ideal goal. It will take many steps to reach this objective. Some proposals, such as separate housing, could have offsetting negative features. For example, a proposal that would have changed the present room selection process to enable groups of six or more students to live together found almost no support from student leadership or the professional staff on the campus and, therefore, was only briefly considered by the Commission. However, there was agreement on the following general findings, about which the Commission urges campus discussion and action:

1. The Commission embraces the College-wide goals for improved racial, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity. While principal responsibility for admitting students rests with the admissions department and, for retention, with the dean of students office, all segments of the campus have important roles to play in these two vital endeavors.

Consideration should be given to asking each relevant department to detail ways that its activities impact upon the diversity objectives of the College and set goals for how their efforts can be improved and broadened.

2. The College already provides a rich array of programs to educate students about multicultural and cross-cultural issues.

Consideration should be given to placing additional emphasis on appreciating diversity during the fall orientation program for all new students, to be followed throughout the year by related programs in each residence hall. Faculty advisers should be encouraged to make new students fully aware of the goals set forth in the Colby Plan and, specifically, the importance of appreciating and supporting diversity. The College should continue to find multiple ways to do cross-cultural training to include all students.

3. The Commission investigation found that the need many students feel for being safe and protected in the residence halls is not unique to any group or groups. At the same time, not all students, of any culture or background, have need or desire for special "safe haven" living. Indeed, many students of color and international students prefer to live in the mixed environment of residence halls. Some who prefer to live in a more protected living environment find comfort in quiet and substance free halls. Testimony at Colby and visits to other campuses where special housing is provided revealed that some students prefer or even need housing that is protected from the distractions and infringements that are all too often found in many college residence halls. Some students also seek a social medium through which loneliness and boredom can be buffered. The need for quiet and reflection is at the core of the College's educational mission and the right to be free from the health risks of smoke and alcohol is guaranteed under College policy and federal law.

The Commission supports the College's efforts to expand the quiet and substance free residence halls and urges that these facilities be among those considered to be most desirable by students while preserving facilities best suited to large parties for that purpose. The Commission is also in agreement with the College's decision to experiment with a change in the room draw system so that students will declare interest in quiet or substance free housing in advance of receiving lottery numbers. Further, the Commission underscores the College's position that the Dean of Students has the latitude, on a case-by-case basis, to make special housing assignments, outside of the regular room draw process, to accommodate special needs.

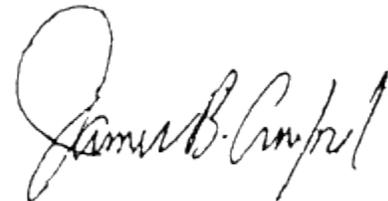
4. In a campus community of an evolving and constantly changing population, there is a continuing need for more campus cultural awareness, understanding and appreciation of diversity of all kinds. The position of cultural chair, established at Colby with the new student governing structure in 1984, offers much potential for leadership in this important area. A more centralized cultural chair structure would result in the broader sharing of good ideas, a mechanism of evaluation of cultural events, and better coordination of college-wide cultural events.

The Commission applauds the current efforts to re-define the role of the residential cultural chairs, working closely with the Student Association Cultural Chair and focusing more directly on leadership in the area of multicultural understanding and education. We urge that each residence hall elect or appoint a cultural chair and that they receive special orientation training.

5. We have found that many students often find the residence halls inhospitable and intimidating because of the behavior of students who have had too much to drink. In order to make residence halls more conducive to study and sleep and to insure a safer haven for all students, the Commission would urge the Student Affairs Committee of the Board to immediately undertake a review of the College's drug/alcohol policies and related programs and report its recommendations to the Board. While not limiting the scope of the Committee's investigation or recommendations, we urge the Committee to consider, among other things, more effective means of holding students responsible for misconduct and damage related to drug and alcohol use and the creation of an education program which students who abuse alcohol or other drugs may be required to attend.
6. Students and residential life professionals at several other colleges point to the success of special mentor programs whereby students profit from a close association with peers and with alumni. Limitations of numbers and proximity of available alumni would make it impractical to establish a one-on-one mentor program at Colby. The Commission finds merit in the idea of developing a program of student-to-student mentoring and for bringing alumni to the campus on a regular basis for meetings with students, advising and sharing experiences, and guiding the College in its efforts to attract and retain students.

The Commission is grateful to all who participated in this re-examination of campus life, especially those students who raised the several important issues last spring. Their concerns have guided and inspired our work throughout. We are also grateful to the broader group of students and others who shared their views with the Commission in testimony and in writing, and to the entire campus community which, with thoughtful and productive debate and discussion, joined in this important process of trying to make Colby a better place. We thank, as well, the professional staff, faculty and students on other campuses who so graciously and generously gave their time and shared their experiences and ideas with us. We are pleased that, in the final analysis, we have recommended a unique Colby proposal that will draw upon the many strengths of the programs and organizations that are already in place at our very successful institution.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James B. Crawford". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J".

James B. Crawford '64
Commission Chair
For the Commission

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3/22/95

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