

## **Discussion Forum (Electronic Bulletin Board) Policy at Colby College**

1. Computer-based discussion forums are established to promote the exchange of information, questions, ideas, analyses, criticisms, and viewpoints within the diverse array of academic and social contexts at Colby.
2. The Code of Ethics for Information Technology at Colby College and other College policies apply to the discussion forums.
3. A forum may be requested for use by a regularly scheduled course, an academic or administrative department, a College committee, an official student club or other official student organization, or other officially recognized group within the College. Requests for a discussion forum for use by other campus groups will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis in the context of College policies. Decisions regarding requests will be reviewed as needed by a group consisting of the Vice President for Student Affairs, the Academic Vice President, and the Administrative Vice President.
4. Access to a forum (membership) may be broadly inclusive or restricted, for example, to individuals enrolled in the course or members of an organization. Access to a forum must comply with other College policies.
5. Only those people authorized to post to a forum will be able to read the contents of a forum. A full list of those authorized to read and post to the forum will be available to each member of the forum. Permission for an individual who is not a member of a forum to read its content requires special permission from the Office of the President and notice of this special permission must be posted in the forum, if necessary by a system administrator.
6. System administrators are prohibited from inspecting the contents of any forum in which they are not members, except in the routine performance of their duties in maintaining the operation of the system. System administrators must preserve full confidentiality of any information about the contents of a forum obtained in the performance of their duties.
7. The contributor of each posting to a forum is identified by name. There are no anonymous postings to any discussion forum.
8. Members of a forum must abide by the confidentiality policy stated for that forum. If, for example, the policy is that postings in the forum are confidential to members of the forum, it would be a violation of the code of ethics to give a copy of any of the forum contents to someone else. One's own posting in such a forum can be distributed elsewhere as long as the contents do not compromise the confidentiality of the forum membership and postings made by others.
9. Each forum will be closed one month after the end of the semester for which it has been opened. With special justification, a forum may be approved to remain open for an academic year, being closed one month after finals in the spring. JanPlan and summer forums are available on request. At least two weeks prior to its scheduled closure, a request for renewal of a forum with or without deletion of contents may be submitted by the moderator or sponsoring department. When a forum is closed, all content is deleted with no archiving of postings. Moderators are responsible for any archiving of the forum prior to deletion, bearing in mind the need to maintain the confidentiality of content that is established for the forum.
10. While it is anticipated that vigorous debate of ideas and opinions may occur within a forum, it is expected that civility in discourse will be maintained.
  - Criticizing ideas and opinions is a normal process of debate and each person should expect to have ideas challenged. However, personal attacks such as denigration of another person's character or value have no place in such discussions. Profanity is to be avoided.
  - Participants are urged to avoid responding quickly and emotionally to another person's posting. Quickly lashing out against a statement with which one strongly disagrees often results in a personal attack and divergence from the primary topic at hand. A period of contemplation followed by reasoned criticism of the viewpoint is far more effective in convincing others.
11. Each forum is created for discussion of a particular range of topics. Issues outside this range are to be avoided unless relevant to the discussion.

12. The forum moderator has a special responsibility in the case of a serious breach of the code of ethics, civility in conduct, or forum rules. A message and, if appropriate, responses to it may be removed by the moderator if the originating message is deemed inappropriate. The moderator should report violations of the code of ethics, the discussion forum policy, or other College policies to the appropriate Vice President to determine whether disciplinary action should be initiated. Special care should be taken by the moderator in cases where the views, criticisms, or information are contrary to those of the moderator, are unpopular, or are in some way incorrect; in such cases it is usually better to debate the matter within the forum.
13. Each forum will have a person designated to moderate the discussion. This person will be responsible for
  - stating the range of topics that the forum will cover and being active in keeping the discussion on topic,
  - stating the forum policy regarding confidentiality of the postings to the forum,
  - defining the forum membership
  - setting the tone of discussion,
  - reminding individuals as necessary of the code of ethics and importance of civility in discourse, as well as dealing with significant violations,
  - responding to complaints about people's participation in the forum, and,
  - conducting other administrative tasks as needed.
14. A forum may be closed by the vice presidents' review group if the moderator does not effectively carry out the designated duties or acts in a way that undermines the free exchange of ideas and views in a civil manner.
15. The deletion of a posting in a forum can create problems, especially if responses have already been posted. In general, only the moderator should be able to delete postings to a forum and the moderator may have to choose responses for deletion as well.
16. Complaints about postings to a forum should be directed to the moderator of the forum. The moderator may seek advice, if needed, from the sponsoring organization, from the Director of Information Technology Services, the chair of the IT Committee, or from the appropriate Vice President.
17. This policy document will be reviewed annually by the Information Technology Committee, soliciting comment from the campus community, and posted on the Information Technology Services policy web page.

### President Adams' Statement on Civility

Good colleges always are and must be places where important ideas and issues are vigorously and sometimes hotly contested. We should expect to disagree about things that matter, but we should also ground our disagreements in a reciprocal commitment to civility.

The civility I have in mind is not a shallow form of manners, but a more fundamental form of respect for others with whom we share political and intellectual space—in this case the space of a college and its educational mission. Respect is vital because it is only through respect that we can hope to communicate genuinely with others, especially others with whom we disagree about important things. The more important the issue, the more necessary is our respect.

Civility does not require us to like everyone, and even less to react passively or indifferently to ideas we question or oppose. But it does require that we treat others as full and legitimate members of our public conversations, worthy of attention and consideration, even as we understand the possibility of deep differences in values and views.

Excerpt from a letter to the Colby community in May 2002, by  
William D. Adams, President

**Approved by the Information Technology Committee on May 5, 2009**