

The Future of the Colby Library

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Miller Library was the largest and most expensive building designed for the new campus on Mayflower Hill. It was intended as the physical and symbolic center of the College, an enduring statement of Colby's academic values and purpose.

--**David A. Greene**, President, Colby College¹

Pivotal to my development as a student was direct access to the resources of Miller Library. I spent hundreds of hours there, particularly during my senior year, when I pursued an honors thesis on Maine's politics during the early nineteenth-century. My experience with that thesis persuaded me to pursue graduate study in history and to concentrate my work on the early American republic. The collection at Miller Library proved essential to the first three articles that I published including one that derived from my honors thesis.

--**Alan Taylor '77**, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Chair,
Corcoran Department of History, University of Virginia,
and two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize for History²

The library is the center of any campus. It is therefore the center of the student admissions process and a center for fundraising when our graduates look back at their days spent doing research and writing.

--**Faculty Open Letter** to the *Colby Echo*, April 2014³

The Library has had its own history. It has always shared the adversity of the College but not always has it been invited to sit at the table of its prosperity.

--**Edwin Carey Whittemore**, *Colby College 1820-1925*⁴

The recent renovations to Miller Library (2012-2014)—which were designed to create study space and office space, restore the Library's "grand reading room," and fashion a more impressive "entry sequence"—did not address in meaningful ways the central role of the Library in the intellectual life of the College, or the academic program. Going forward, it is my view that we simply must address this larger issue of the absolute centrality of the Library to Colby's intellectual/academic life and aspirations. To do so is essential if we want to meet the standards for teaching, learning, and scholarship we have set for ourselves and our students, and if we want to credibly market Colby as a top-flight academic institution with an unwavering commitment to the humanistic disciplines and the liberal arts more generally. Although Colby's Library offers much *more total seating for patrons* than most of our "aspirational peers" (1,036 seats versus

¹ *Colby Magazine*, Fall 2014.

² Alan Taylor, Open Letter to President David A. Greene, July 15, 2014.

³ *Colby Echo*, April 10, 2014.

⁴ Edwin Carey Whittemore, *Colby College, 1820-1925: An Account of its Beginnings, Progress, and Service* (Waterville, ME: Trustees of Colby College, 1927), 60.

900 for Bowdoin, 703 for Davidson, 646 for Amherst, 475 for Carleton, etc.), we are disadvantaged in several key and interrelated ways:

1) **STORAGE OF PHYSICAL COLLECTIONS: Colby has a *much higher percentage of the books and other physical collections (books, bound periodicals, maps, microforms, etc.) in storage*** than our competitors do. Just in terms of print books, Colby has 209,667 print books in storage, out of a total of 517,845 (41%). **In contrast:**

Williams has 35,000 print books in storage, out of a total of 833,000 (4%)
Wellesley has 71,462 print books in storage, out of a total of 662,330 (11%)
Bowdoin has 78,000 print books in storage, out of a total of 605,167 (13%)
Haverford has 500 print books in storage, out of a total of 469,826 (0.1%)

2) **STAFF: Colby's Library is currently *sorely understaffed***: Colby has 11 full time librarians and a total of 24 library FTEs. **In contrast:**

Williams has 15 librarians and a total of 42 FTEs
Amherst has 16 librarians and a total of 33 FTEs
Swarthmore has 13 librarians and a total of 37 FTEs
Wellesley has 20 librarians and a total of 27 FTEs
Bowdoin has 15 librarians and a total of 31 FTEs

3) **SPACE: Colby's Library occupies *much less space*** than the libraries of most of our peers: about 83,000 square feet, including the library space in Miller, Bixler, and Olin, but not including the off-site storage facility, which provides another 10,000 square feet. Significantly, the 83,000 square feet of space located on Mayflower Hill houses not just the on-site physical collections and office space for the library faculty and staff but also, in Miller, office space for the Center for Arts and Humanities—identified in numerous Communications venues and elsewhere as one of Colby's "areas of distinction"—as well as the Writing Center, the Writing Program, Academic ITS, and the proposed Center for Teaching and Learning. **In contrast:**

Williams's library occupies 175,000 square feet
Amherst's library occupies 162,000 square feet
Bowdoin's library occupies 135,000 square feet
Middlebury's library occupies 189,000 square feet

4) Unlike many of our peers (Williams, Amherst, Swarthmore, Wellesley, Bowdoin, Middlebury, Carleton, Haverford), **Colby's Library lacks a systematic program in *information literacy education*** that is well and consistently integrated with the academic program.

In the "Faculty Voices, Faculty Visions" document that emerged from the May 22, 2014, faculty retreat, the Colby Library headed the list of "resources and support for a changing curriculum" that faculty collectively identified as being in need of attention. The document articulates the following goal: "**Financial investment in the Library needs to match the quality of the academic program we seek to provide to our students and the teaching and**

research expectations we have of our faculty. This means significant investment in the collection and in staff, as well as in the structural/architectural changes that will be required to make ours an elite library for research and teaching in the 21st century.”

Soon after arriving at Colby in July 2014 President Greene wrote,

One of Colby’s greatest assets is its scholarly faculty who are deeply committed to research and discovery as well as teaching. Although research methods are constantly changing, the library remains the most important scholarly and teaching resource in many disciplines. These include disciplines where Colby has been and must continue to be excellent. Our libraries are key to ensuring that is the case.

Colby’s libraries give us a comparative advantage over many institutions that did not have the foresight and resources to amass great collections and to literally as well as symbolically place the library at the center of the college. The light that illuminates our library each morning is a reminder of our enduring values and the need to focus on the excellence of our libraries and the richness of our intellectual life.⁵

I would respectfully suggest that if we want Colby’s Library to meet our own and President Greene’s aspirations for the College, particularly in terms of a reinvigorated commitment to the humanistic disciplines, we must respond to the current deficiencies immediately and invest abundantly in our Library *on all fronts*. We should take the opportunity this propitious moment offers to ensure that Colby’s Library becomes the premier research, teaching, and learning library in Northern New England, raising it to a level of regional prominence equivalent with the Colby Art Museum.

Recommendations:

I. SPACE

First and foremost, I would argue for the **addition of roughly 80,000 additional square feet of climate-controlled space at the heart of the main campus.**⁶

Doubling the amount of square footage on the main campus dedicated to the Colby Library would make it possible to:

⁵ *Colby Magazine*, Fall 2014

⁶ Although I am recommending a substantial increase in the amount of physical space allocated to the Library, *I am not recommending the development of a fourth library branch on campus*. Indeed, my several conversations have made clear that the creation of a fourth branch would be undesirable in many ways, not least because of its inefficiency. In my opinion, the redesign of Colby’s library system that the allocation of this additional space would make possible should be the focus of a focused task force that includes dedicated members of all relevant constituent groups on campus and one or more architects.

- Bring a substantial proportion of the physical collections (at least 100,000 volumes) back to the main campus from storage, increasing their accessibility and visibility for teaching, learning, and scholarship. Currently, as noted above, roughly 40% of Colby’s books (not to mention 100% of our bound journals, maps, and microforms) are in off-site storage.

A substantial number of faculty in the humanistic disciplines in particular (but hardly exclusively) have demonstrated repeatedly that having such a large proportion of our physical collections in storage is a serious impediment to teaching, learning, scholarship, and personal development. I quote here from an open letter to the *Colby Echo*, signed by more than forty teaching faculty, which appeared in April 2014:

Electronic data are valuable, but they are no alternative to the book. The issue is not a question of electronic resources vs. physical books. Many of the most sophisticated users of electronic resources, in fact, are the same scholars who recognize the irreplaceable role of print and other physical materials. The vast digitization of texts is one of the greatest and most thrilling things that could happen for many scholars, but electronic resources are only valuable and powerful if those using them have ongoing experiences with the physical books and archives they partially represent. The greatest libraries of this new century will maximize immersion experiences with both. . . . Books on shelves serve the purpose of enabling browsing and discovery. . . . The assumption that students, as “Millennials,” appreciate the clearing away of dusty books to emphasize screen-based learning is a mistaken one. Many students—in conversation, in the *Echo*, on Facebook, and elsewhere—have described with deep sadness the ways in which the sudden absence of an inspiring world of books—books that in their very presence shifted students’ states of mind and directions of thought—have negatively affected their learning experience here. . . . Books are not dinosaurs; they reflect the core values of liberal arts institutions.⁷

- Provide office space to house new staff essential to bringing the Colby Library’s services for teaching, learning, and scholarship up to the standard exhibited by our “aspirational peers” (please see II below).
- Expand the currently limited office, student, and programming space available for the Library as a whole, as well as for the high profile Center for the Arts and Humanities—currently tucked away almost out of sight in a corner on the second floor of Miller—the Writing Center, the Writing Program, Academic ITS, and, potentially, the Center for Teaching and Learning.
- Implement a long-term plan for collections development deep into the future.

II. NEW STAFF

Through no fault of the dedicated professionals who currently work in the Colby Library, the lack of sufficient staff has sharply and persistently compromised the Colby Library’s efforts to fulfill its fundamental purpose and goals—e.g., to “teach and guide students to discover,

⁷ *Colby Echo*, April 10, 2014.

evaluate, and ethically use information; collaborate with faculty to meet their individual teaching and research needs; identify, acquire, preserve, and provide access to scholarly works and resources that support teaching and faculty and student research; manage, preserve, and promote use of the College's rare and unique materials, among other primary sources.”⁸

If we want our students to be competitive on the job market after graduation, we *must* commit as an institution to providing them with the best possible library in every way. This means providing abundant and readily accessible resources (physical, archival, and electronic) for learning and scholarship as well as ample staff to develop and manage these resources and to train students—in collaboration with classroom faculty—deeply and broadly in the area of information literacy, both within their disciplines and beyond. Colby Library staff must be expanded to include:

- More SRS librarians, the individuals who work most directly with faculty, students, and other patrons to provide training in information literacy and assistance in identifying, locating, and making good use of relevant physical and electronic sources for research.

Note: Tied to the notion of increasing the number of SRS librarians is a commitment to establishing a formal information literacy program, built into the academic curriculum and staffed by SRS librarians in collaboration with the classroom faculty.

- A Web programmer, dedicated specifically to the library, to create web applications that interface with the library systems to improve discovery of, and access to the collections. Currently the Library depends to a great extent on over-extended Communications staff. As a result, we are not able to keep up with our peers in creating web applications to facilitate patron use, discovery, and navigation.
- An electronic resources librarian (ERL), who holds an MLS or MLIS and coordinates, at all levels, the electronic resources of the libraries. This includes their acquisition, implementation, initial training (for librarian colleagues), and management of ongoing support issues (vendor and Colby IT) related to electronic resources (datasets, e-journals, aggregator packages, databases, and e-books). In addition to managing their coordination, the ERL develops and implements ongoing assessment and evaluation of resources, recommends reallocation of funds as needed, and informs subject librarians of forthcoming products prior to their availability.
- Two professional processing archivists for Archives and Special Collections, one for the collection generally and one for the Colbiana collection specifically. These librarians would be responsible for organizing and creating intellectual access to the manuscript collections, and would greatly enhance the Library's ability to expand its archival and rare book collections and make them usable to researchers.
- A digital archivist, who is professionally trained to manage the Library's rapidly expanding digital materials.

⁸ Colby College Libraries Mission Statement, as articulated on the Libraries' website.

- A collections developer/strategist. The person responsible for “planning and building a useful and balanced collection of library materials over a period of years, based on an ongoing assessment of the information needs of the library’s clientele, analysis of usage statistics, and demographic projections, normally constrained by budgetary limitations. Collection development includes the formulation of selection criteria, planning for resource sharing, and replacement of lost and damaged items, as well as routing selection and deselection decisions.” (ODLIS)
- Additional non-student staff to: 1) keep the Library open longer hours (including the intense 24/7 hours that the Library is open during exam periods); 2) diminish the safety/security problems of having students on their own during night and weekend hours; 3) expand the number of hours the Archives and Special Collections Department is open for faculty, students, visiting researchers, and events; 4) improve the retrieval schedule from the storage facility.
- Development of one or more target of opportunity positions and/or a Mellon Fellow for the library, designed specifically to increase diversity on among the library faculty/staff
- Outreach and Events Coordinator to enhance the Library’s profile as the intellectual hub of the campus by planning, arranging, and doing the logistical work for an increased number of Library-based events (book readings, poetry readings, lectures, workshops, etc.). This person could also provide service in the form of marketing the Library’s rich collections, promoting and making visible Library holdings relevant to each specific event.

III. INCREASED FUNDING

To bring the Colby Library up to the standards of our aspirational peers, we also need to increase funding substantially for

- Expansion of the Library’s physical collections
- Expansion of the Library’s electronic resources

Note: Currently, whenever new tenure-track faculty in new fields of study arrive on campus, no additional funds are allocated to the Library’s budget to support the development of the physical and electronic resources these new faculty require for their teaching and scholarship, which are often extremely expensive. Rather, the Colby Library must dig into its regular annual budget for this purpose. This arrangement makes it difficult for the College to provide to intellectual support required by the new faculty member, the students who seek to learn from that faculty member, and the new field of study that College has chosen to incorporate into the curriculum. This arrangement also results in frequent and yet unpredictable demands on the Library’s regular budget and budget planning, putting the academic needs of a new faculty member into direct conflict with the regular budgetary demands of the College’s central institution for intellectual support. A much better arrangement would be for a reasonable amount of funding to be allocated from sources other than the Library’s annual budget at the time a new faculty hire in a new field is made, to ensure that the faculty member has the intellectual support he/she needs for teaching and scholarship.

- Acquisitions in Archives and Special Collections
- Enhanced professional training for the library faculty and staff

IV. GOING BEYOND

The improvements recommended above would go a long way toward bringing Colby's Library into line with the excellent libraries our "aspirational peers" enjoy. (Note: For a look at the new Sawyer Library at Williams College, and the thoroughly collaborative process by which the design for the Sawyer Library was developed, please see <http://sawyerlibrary.williams.edu/>.)

There are many of us at Colby, however, who would like to do more than simply "measure up," who see value in transforming our Library in ways that will give it the same degree of regional stature—as a first rate institution for liberal teaching, learning, and scholarship—that the excellent Colby Art Museum has. If we want to raise Colby's Library to this level I believe that we must commit to:

- Development of a fifth-year internship program for students who may be interested in library science, to work in a variety of short-term positions that would also allow for some experimentation in library practices at Colby
- Creation of a Friends of the Library group (historically the Colby Library Associates) to provide supplemental funding and other support to the Library
- Revival of the *Colby Library Quarterly*, which was published from 1943-1975 and widely considered one of the finest academic library-based journals around in its day
- Creation of a multi-purpose programming space for events within the Library
- Revamping the Davis Classroom, probably in a modular format, to make it more useful for information literacy training and other purposes
- Development of a data visualization lab (probably in Olin)
- Development of some technology-enabled group study space which could also serve as student presentation-practice space
- Establishment of stipends for researchers who come from away to do scholarship in Colby's Archives and Special Collections

Respectfully submitted,

Elizabeth D. Leonard
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