Statement on the Library Planning Group Report

We dissent from the report of the Library Planning Group, centered on our call to increase very substantially the book collection in total and on site. Faculty members have sought this for years in petitions, forums, surveys, rallies, letters, and interviews with local and national journals. We urge the administration to commit unreservedly to meet this need.

We want to acknowledge, at the outset, the hard work of the Planning Group during the past year, evident in the craft of its report and its many thoughtful recommendations. We particularly welcome the report’s compelling statement of the centrality of the library to our shared intellectual enterprise; the equally compelling articulation of the need to expand programs in information literacy to help students navigate and evaluate an ever-changing world of sources; and the recognition that the kaleidoscopic uses of the library are all valuable, mutually reinforcing, and deserving of the administration’s full support.

We lament, though, the decision at the start of the Planning Group’s work to exclude consideration of a new or greatly expanded library building in order to augment the on-site collection of books and journals. While we laud the impressive advances in digitizing resources, we believe these should supplement, not substitute for keeping many more physical texts in the main library building. Browsing clusters of texts is no mere casual enterprise but is essential to students’ research by broadening their vision and prompting new lines of inquiry. As a supportive institution centrally concerned with research, the library plays a role for the humanities analogous to the labs of the natural sciences.

While hardly anybody disregards the need for a storage facility, which has enabled the library to preserve many sources it would otherwise have discarded, our celebration is tempered by its limitations in the absence of far-reaching action to enlarge the on-site collection.

Despite the best of intentions, the removal of 170,000 volumes from Miller Library—some 40 per cent of the physical collection—has created a separate and second-class holding area for our intellectual resources. It has artificially detached new from old, well-trod from pristine, commonplace from rare books, periodicals, and other sources. This has devalued what we all intend the library to be: a repository for the most diverse texts, whose rich connections remain for students, faculty members, and others to discover, cultivate, and refine.

Nor should frequency of use predetermine judgments about the potential value of sources to onsite exploration. Students in different disciplines may see the world with fresh eyes precisely by consulting sources others have overlooked. As the writer Haruki Murakami observed, “If you only read the books that everyone else is reading, you can only think what everyone else is thinking.”
Although the library agreed to keep some discipline-specific collections on site, many faculty members have found the removal of so much of the collection damaging to their teaching and research. Students, among them writers of honors theses, have also found it more difficult to do research. While some scholars in some academic disciplines do not use physical copies of books and journals any more, the possibility of browsing book stacks on campus for spontaneous examination remains a great asset to others. For a significant group of faculty and students, this is a precondition for excellence in research and, more broadly, intellectual development.

An open letter to the Colby Echo, signed by more than forty teaching faculty, which appeared in April 2014, conveyed the stakes for students’ intellectual growth:

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.

We are pleased that the Planning Group report quotes Colby’s expanded Library Committee report of May 2015, whose findings seem to us a compelling spur to action:

A focus on information literacy requires increases in staffing, space, and acquisition budgets. In all of these areas, Colby’s libraries are in a much poorer state than the libraries at peer institutions. It is worth noting that we are up to 100,000 sq. ft. smaller… significantly understaffed… have significantly smaller print collections… and are under-budgeted.¹

We dissent from the premise of the Planning Group report that these stark deficits are mitigated by the statistical refinement of dividing resources by the number of users, such as the “physical title count/student” and “total collection/student.” No one we know has ever chosen to visit an archive based on its ratio of sources per capita. We believe it self-evident that a wisely-chosen collection with greater resources is more valuable than one with fewer resources. Similarly, we dissent from the report’s premise that accounting for limits in space and endowment will show our library in a more positive light. To its credit, the report ably distills our position, and we cannot improve on its cogent formulation:

Some members maintain that the data reveal meaningful gaps between Colby’s current position and its desired place as a preeminent liberal arts library. In this accounting, differences between size and institutional wealth should not impact our comparative assessment of library resources. Instead, Colby should aspire to be a leader in absolute terms (not just in “weighted” terms). The gaps

between our current position and our desired position, then, are most keenly felt with respect to physical volume counts, overall staffing, and library square footage…. the best libraries stand on their own merits, providing the richest possible set of materials and staff support….

We dissent, finally, from the report’s inference that the flux in technology, book publishing, and library operations precludes bold action because it is “very difficult to predict the precise set of objectives that will prove compelling 5-10 years in the future.” Although we would not predict the percentages of faculty members and their students who will use books and other physical sources in five or ten years, we are confident that some will, and we believe that, like other members of the Colby community, they deserve the school’s unreserved support for their creative work.2

In calling on the administration to give priority to the library, we invoke the “Faculty Voices, Faculty Visions” document that emerged from the May 22, 2014, faculty retreat, in which 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 the Library an elite library for research and teaching in the 21st century.”3

Colby has persistently summoned the resources to accomplish ambitious tasks, as in its expansion and renovation of the school’s athletic facilities. We should do no less for the library. As President Greene rightly told faculty members in September 2014, we must not compromise in our pursuit of excellence or merely copy what other schools are doing. Instead “we must move beyond a culture of constraint to imagine what is possible and find the resources to do it.” In that spirit, we urge the administration to expand decisively the library’s book collection in total and on site, and, more broadly, to make Colby’s library “the premier research, teaching, and learning library in Northern New England.”4

2 We concur with assessment by the expanded Library Committee in May 2015 that “print books and other physical resources in our collections…. continue to have enduring value as readily accessible materials of deep importance for the research, teaching, and learning for many in our community. Our intellectual community is enriched by the presence of these materials. Investment in the Library’s acquisitions budget should reflect the value it brings to the broader academic mission of this liberal arts college.”

3 Italics added.