Jonathan Thomas, left, a member of the Students of Color United for Change at Colby College, and Kebba Tolbert, president of the organization, say the college is not committed to serving diverse cultures.

African-American students: Colby is not our advocate

By DARLA GILBERT PICKETT
Sentinel Staff

WATERVILLE — African-American students say Colby College is giving mere lip service to its claim that it is committed to serving diverse cultures.

They say a program by Spike Lee, Black History Month, lectures on diversity, and a handful of forums just don't cut it.

"It's a really watered-down response," says senior Kebba Tolbert of Bronx, N.Y. He says the college must begin to look at the diverse needs of its student population. He estimates there are 30 Black, 31 Hispanic, and 60 Asian-American students on a campus of about 1,700.

"If the college felt diversity was important it would be embedded in the curriculum," says Jonathan Thomas, an African-American senior from Nashua, N.H.

The response by college administrators needs to affect the heart of the college, its education, curriculum, student organizations, and socialization, according to Karlene Burrell, a senior from Queens, N.Y.

Burrell and several others say the curriculum needs to reflect their respective backgrounds, heritages and cultures. She and others would like to see such offerings as:

- A Latin-American studies program with a focus not only on history, economics, and culture of those countries, but one that illustrates the experience of Latin-American people in the history of the United States.
- Government classes that expand on the role the government plays in issues of diversity.
- Economic classes that incorporate how race and class comes into play in economic issues.
- An Asian-American Studies program that recognizes Asian Americans as Americans, not foreigners.

Academics aside, some students are pushing for a multicultural housing that would allow students of color to live in a dormitory together.

Despite some opinions that might be viewed as separatist, Burrell said that would not necessarily

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be the case. Anyone could register, but the dorm would give students a chance for cultural exchange not understood, or accepted, by everyone.

"It wouldn't exclude anyone from living there, but would give people a chance to explore differences, a safe haven," Tolbert said.

"Students here have had, stereotyped views of people, of cultures," Burrell said.

Tong Lee, a sophomore from Boston, said she will miss the support of the seniors leaving this year, the support they offered. "Last year, I didn't see as much unity."

Victoria M. Hershey, associate dean of students for intercultural affairs, says it is inappropriate to label blacks, Hispanics and Asian-Americans as 'other.'

"I think there is a need to not address people who are not white as 'other.' There is a need to define American history as an all-inclusive subject... To have an adult person arrive at Colby, 18 years old, without any sense of who is American — or other than people who are white in color and define themselves basically as European heritage — is really not being educated for the world we live in today."

Hershey said she would like to see an education that offers "a blend and sharing of many cultures, many ideas, many philosophies... Otherwise, students may come to Colby with the perception that the only real claim to being American is to be white, and those who are not are seen as 'fringe people.'"

Everyone loses with that perception, she said, "the chance to share ideas, to share how you grew up and lived, to learn what hurts each other."

"Burrell and Cicely Finley, a senior from Chicago, said when they chose Colby, they expected a white-dominated college population. What they didn't expect was a social life that made them feel ostracized from college life.

"They give us little crumbs a little at a time and say, 'See, we gave you this,'" Burrell says.

Tolbert said more money needs to be pumped into student organizations.

"They expect us to take a large role in educating, serving as a support group," but the money isn't there to work with, Tolbert said.

Tullo Nieman, director of student activities, says he thinks the students have made some strong progress, and have some legitimate concerns.

"It's been frustrating at times for them," Nieman said. "I look forward to the time when we can view all the clubs as part of the (college) community instead of 'That's a speaker for the Asian-Americans.' When they say, instead, 'That's a group the Colby kids brought in.'"