

Students United for Change
Colby College
re: Multiculturalism at Colby
October 13, 1994

To the Students, Faculty, Administration, Staff, and Trustees of Colby College,

We, the Students United for Change, truly believe that Colby has the potential to create and maintain a multicultural and diverse community. However, we feel that our current residential life is not reflective of this image. In light of this circumstance, we recognize the need for change. If Colby wants to create a world reflective community, it must take action. In response to this need, the Students United for Change present the following, proposal.

Historically, Colby has valued understanding of and concern for others, diversity of thought and culture, open access to campus groups and organizations, and personal and academic honesty. In order to embrace and support these values, members of the College community bear a special responsibility, in all their words and actions, to honor and protect the rights and feelings of others.

The Commons Plan, adopted in 1984 following a lengthy study by the Trustee Commission on Campus Life, was designed in order to reinforce and amplify these values.

To these ends, the Colby academic and residential program is designed to free each student to find and fulfill her or his unique potential. It is hoped that students will become critical and imaginative thinkers who are: welcoming of diversity and compassionate toward others....

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. In the classroom and outside, there is freedom to study, to think, to speak, and to learn in an environment that insists upon the free and open exchange of ideas and views.

-Colby College Catalogue 1994-1995; pages 5,7.

We, the Students United for Change, believe that the members of the Trustee Commission, who assembled in 1984, enacted the Commons Plan in the hopes of realizing a vision. The original proposal for the creation of a multicultural house/center, drafted by Students of Color United for Change in April 1994, was inspired by what we believe is this same ideal- to create an environment in which people will have the comfort and confidence to express and share their differences with others. In doing so, they will create an all inclusive, non-discriminatory atmosphere in which a liberal education may be pursued to its fullest potential.

Every student should have the opportunity to participate in the Commons Plan vision. However, existing residence halls lack the community environment envisioned by this plan. The multicultural house/center will create a network of cross-cultural, interpersonal dialogue which will initiate the realization of this ideal. Brought together by a common desire for liberal education beyond the classroom, the students of the multicultural house will tear down existing barriers to multicultural thought both within and outside of the center. The hope for success of the Commons Plan vision requires the active participation of the students. Give us, the students, the opportunity to concentrate our energies to actualize our shared vision of excellence.

Multiculturalism is more than the physical presence of different peoples. It is the awareness and active embrace of the many cultures throughout the world. It is the commitment to understand and respect how all cultures contribute to life. Therefore, it is not enough for us to say that each Colby student has a unique cultural heritage, and have that satisfy our demand for diversity. We need an avenue through which we can cultivate a desire to learn about different cultures outside of the classroom. The multicultural house/center will provide a focal point for

informal, non-academic learning which is a necessary part of liberal education.

We have heard the ugly cry of "separatism". If the multicultural house is to be termed separatist, then every other residential building must be so described. Every Colby student, provided he or she has lived on campus for at least one semester, will have equal opportunity to apply for residency to the multicultural house. The application process, being blind, will not favor any single ethnic group over another. The only commonality which the students of the multicultural house will share is an expressed interest in diversity of thought and learning. Just as the students who live in currently established residence halls participate in daily campus life, so too will the students who live in this new residence hall participate. Current residence halls are separate in location, but this separation does not keep these students from interacting. It can be legitimately drawn that the only separatist condition of the multicultural house will be that it is an independently built structure.

The option to apply for residence in the MHC (multicultural house/center) will be open to all Colby students regardless of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc. However, we feel it is important that first-year students (including transfer and visiting students) be eligible for residence only after they have completed one full semester at Colby. We believe that to fully understand the unique commitment and responsibility that will be required of residents of the MHC, a student must be able to witness its operation on this campus and decide whether or not it is truly right for her or him.

The application itself will consist of an explanatory statement, two questions, and a place to indicate gender and class. (See attached sample). This process will be entirely color-blind. Nowhere will there be a place to indicate the race or ethnicity of the applicant. This living space would be bound by quotas in regards to gender and class composition as all other residence halls are, (with the aforementioned stipulations on first-year residency), but there will be absolutely no quotas proscribing racial or ethnic composition. These applications will be reviewed each spring by a committee of MHC residents who will not be on campus the following semester, either graduating seniors or students planning to travel abroad. Priority will be given to those students who demonstrate in their applications a need, as well as the appropriate character, to complete the vision of the MHC. In the event that the number of accepted applicants exceeds the number of spaces available, a random lottery will be used to determine residency. In the winter of each year the same process will be used to fill any vacancies for the spring due to travel abroad or any other reason. We believe that this will ensure a fair and objective consideration process for all applicants.

We envision a house with approximately 70 spaces, arranged in singles, doubles, quads, etc. as in any other dorm. There would be Hall Staff, Faculty Resident(s), a Hall President and other officers, just as in all other dorms. However, each and every resident of the house would have specific obligations above and beyond the regular hall contract. On the first floor of this house there would be a center, consisting of a large open space for events, a resource library, office space, a kitchen and small eating area. The activity of the center would be generated from the residents of the house, each of whom would be responsible for programming events during the semester. These events include movies, lectures, workshops, parties, food tasting, etc. and would be open for the enjoyment of the entire Colby community. The MHC will belong to all the Commons in kind, for the use and enjoyment of every Colby student. This gathering place will be open to everyone, to give presentations, read poetry and books, to sing, cook, play music, and to participate in dialogue. Additionally, we would like to offer office space within the center to all interested campus groups that advocate social understanding and acceptance of human

differences. It is our belief that this physical proximity will allow for greater communication and cooperation among these groups.

Our vision, of a center with living space, is an indivisible ideal. It has been suggested that Colby begin with trial housing in one of the already existing dorms. The flaw in this is that none of the existing structures provide the necessary facilities for the center. Multicultural housing without the center defeats one of the main purposes behind this proposal, which is campus outreach. A trial housing situation, then, is clearly not relevant to this specific proposal.

Along similar lines, it has been suggested that Colby implement a multicultural center without housing. This too is irrelevant to the proposal at hand. Without the students providing life and activity, in their very presence as well as through their responsibility for programming, the center would be dead space. We can see this in the current state of the Marson Common Ground Room. We must combat the formal and impersonal by instilling personality, character, and vitality into this residential center.

The MHC will be home to students from all backgrounds and orientations- ethnic, economic, sexual, political, national, religious, etc. There will be one idea uniting all these students, one idea bringing many different people together- understanding. The MHC will serve as a focal point for the campus, inviting, involving, including, and integrating the entire Colby community in cross-cultural dialogue and celebration. Knowledge and understanding on an active and personal level will extend across the campus. The vision of the Commons Plan will be realized.

While investigating the efforts of other colleges to respond to issues of diversity is informative, we can not work within another university's framework to address Colby's unique needs. At Connecticut College there is a Unity House, as Bates a multicultural center. There is no reason, however, for Colby to follow in the footsteps of any other institution. This proposal is unlike the approach of any other college, and would set Colby apart from, and at the forefront of, all other like institutions.

SAMPLE APPLICATION FOR RESIDENCY IN THE MULTICULTURAL HOUSE/CENTER

Name: _____

Class Year: _____ Gender: M F

Note to the Applicant:

The MHC expects its residents to be an active part of an understanding, accepting, and compassionate living community. You will be expected to respect and welcome all members of the MHC. As a resident, you will be required to participate in house and center activities. During the semester you will also be required to be regularly involved in the programming of events. Attendance at all hall meetings is imperative. If for any reason you are unable to meet these requirements, you will be asked to relinquish your space to someone who will be involved. Living in the MHC is a privilege and a responsibility not to be taken lightly.

On separate sheets of paper, please answer the following two questions.

1. Why do you want to live in the MHC? Please explain, not simply list, your reasons.
2. What would you hope to achieve as a resident of the MHC?

The circumstances which have preceded this event have been clouded by miscommunication, and the regrettable occasion of harsh confrontation. We must remember that despite the different views which we meet upon today, we are united in our common concern for human decency. We must determine what is the most decent and just course of action in considering the urgency of our concerns. It has been expressed that there lies a potential for harm in the creation of a multicultural house/center. It is our belief that these objectors fail to recognize the overwhelming potential for success. The human imagination, which inspired the vision of both the Commons Plan and the multicultural house/center proposal, is a most special quality. It is a quality which on rare occasions can be the impetus of great endeavors. Do we not owe it to ourselves to make this vision a reality? We can't afford not to try.

"A mind once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions."

-Albert Einstein

Thank you for listening,
Students United for Change

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