

GoodWork at Colby College
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Last week Colby's campus sprang back to life as 480 new freshmen arrived on Mayflower Hill. This is the time of year that college communities throughout the nation anticipate anxiously. How will these new students make their impact on our community?

We know a great deal about Colby's entering students. They hail from 33 different states, and from 31 different countries. More than half are from outside of New England. About one in six come from African-, Latino/a-, Asian-, and Native-American backgrounds. They are smart, remarkably accomplished, and ready to tackle the world.

But what do they think? How do they see the world? And what will be their role in it?

Most colleges assign a freshman book, to provide some common ground on which new students begin their undergraduate careers. Most incoming students do not read those books.

At Colby, we have undertaken a new orientation program, the goal of which is to start our incoming students on a process of reflecting about how they define "good work" and what that means for them at an important transition in their lives.

The concept of "good work" has been developed by Howard Gardner, professor of cognition and education in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, and his colleagues at the GoodWork Project. Gardner and Rush Kidder, the president of the Institute for Global Ethics in Camden, and their colleagues worked with the Dean of Student Office and the Goldfarb Center to develop an orientation program through which

our incoming students would begin to reflect on what “good work” means to them. We will see the program’s results over time.

We know already that we learned a good deal about how they evaluate the work that others have done—and that tells us a lot about this incoming class.

The students were asked to come to Colby having thought about and identified two public figures whom they had never met—one whose work they admired, one whose work they did not admire. They were asked to do the same with individuals whom they did know and to write an essay in which they deduced the values that led to these conclusions.

I have not seen all of the choices, but the patterns were clear. Whose work was respected? Those who are doing good deeds for others, healers not dividers, problem-solvers. A number of students mentioned Mother Teresa and Bill Gates (and talked about the work of the Gates Foundation) and Jimmy Carter. The only active politician I heard mentioned was Barack Obama, and the value associated with his name was “bringing people together.” These were the role models.

And whose work was not respected? Michael Vick and Barry Bonds were named more than I would have thought; I had hoped the students would view the problem with a broader lens. But George W. Bush was mentioned more than anyone else; Dick Cheney and Alberto Gonzalez (to be fair, he was in the headlines) followed close behind.

The incoming students also heard from one panel of young Colby alums who are involved in a variety of work experiences and from a panel of Colby faculty, discussing their work and what they expect of their students. Both panels were led by Peter Hart, Colby class of 1964 and one of the nation’s leading public opinion experts.

Hart asked the students if there was an institution in which they had lost faith. An overwhelming majority chimed in “the federal government.”

One of the returning alumnae was Jill Morejon Gutierrez, class of 2000, who works at the U.S. Department of Labor, as a Presidential Management Fellow, a program that accelerates bright young federal employees into management positions. Hart asked her how she would define “good work,” as she pursues her career. Her reply was telling: “These young people have lost faith in our government. But I see it as a way to help people have better lives. If my work can make even a few of them change their view of the government, I will have succeeded.”

According to the Gardner model, “good work” in whatever one does combines excellence in performance, engagement in and commitment to what you are doing, and a conscious effort to perform up to high ethical standards. Our incoming students seem to understand that intuitively—and to choose models or anti-models accordingly.

Our hope is that our students learn from models like Jill Gutierrez and accept our challenge to perform that “good work” for four years at Colby and in their post-college careers.

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