2006 Presidents’ Club Dinner

Remarks by
Colgate University President
Rebecca S. Chopp
On Friday, May 5, 2006, nearly 700 members of Colgate’s Presidents’ Club gathered at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City for an evening filled with Colgate spirit. The following is the text of remarks delivered that evening by Colgate University President Rebecca S. Chopp.

Thank you Jeff and thanks to all of the members of the Presidents’ Club. You represent Colgate’s most engaged alumni, parents and friends. Through your involvement, support and love for Colgate, you truly are carrying forward the torch of leadership.
One of the great strengths of a liberal arts education is the emphasis on critical thinking.

Liberal arts graduates, Colgate graduates in particular, have the ability to take a concept, disassemble, reassemble it, and, most important of all, communicate what it is all about.

So, in the spirit of the liberal arts, I would like to issue to you a challenge. Better yet, an experiment – an interesting, difficult, fun, challenging experiment: think of one word for Colgate. A word that says what we are about in the world, what our alumni do and are, what our community is like in all its splendid forms, what academics, athletics, and arts are in their essence. One word.

Lots of words bubble up -- passion, spirit, drive, smart. I invite you to send your word to me, but allow me focus in on one particular word this evening. One word – many meanings, many visions, many ways we represent Colgate in the world.

One word: irrepressible.

Irrepressible in our history: 13 men, 13 dollars and 13 prayers. Our triskadekaphilia — only Colgate alums could take pride in loving 13; only Colgate can declare every Friday the 13th World wide Colgate day. Students and faculty working side-by-side, building East Hall from stone quarried on campus.
Irrepressible: Our great 1932 football team – undefeated, untied, unscored upon, and un-invited. The giant killer of the Chenango Valley.

Irrepressible: The first study off campus in 1935 in Washington, D.C. — foreshadowing the importance of global education, taking studies beyond the borders of campus.

Irrepressible: Oswald Avery, who discovered DNA.

Irrepressible: Adam Clayton Powell, the first African American to hold a position of power in the U.S. Congress.

Irrepressible: Francesca Zambello, Opera Producer Extraordinaire.

**Irrepressible: Colgate in the world**

Twenty-three off-campus study groups: Beijing, Wollongong, Geneva, the Dominican Republic. Twenty-two extended-programs: Mayan astronomy with Tony Aveni; African politics and society in Zambia with Harvey Sindima; and the advent of the atomic bomb in Japan with Karen Harpp and George Hudson. Other schools offer 3, 4, maybe 6. Irrepressibly Colgate. Academic projects around the world: studying the impact of acid rain in Adirondacks with Randy Fuller, Tim McCabe, and Rich April; saving gorillas in Uganda with Ellen Kraly; discovering ecosystems under Antarctic ice with Amy Leven-ter. Irrepressible.
Irrepressible: Our alumni

Where do I even begin! First, and most powerfully, last year’s Presidents’ Club dinner emcee Bob Woodruff and his wife Lee, who are in all of our hearts for their passion for life and extraordinary will. Kevin Padian and Vic Walzcak, two of the key figures in the Dover intelligent design case. Harvey Picker, whose classic liberal arts passion for both the arts and sciences are highly visible on campus through the emerging Picker Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies in the Sciences and Mathematics and the Picker Art Gallery. The 26 Alumnae who have formed our first-ever Alumnae Council.

Irrepressible: Our campus, our community, our students

140 student-led organizations from clogging to funk, fencing to ultimate frisbee, College Republicans to the Russian club, equestrian, aikido, physics, and debate. Students who take the initiative to start a club are supported as they learn to organize, lead and learn. As we prepare to welcome the Class of 2010, we hear time and time again that our size is key to our strength and to our opportunities. We are just the right size – big/small, small/big – offering both intimacy and options.

Irrepressible: Our faculty

Colgate’s great strength lies in our faculty and this year I had the pleasure of reading eighteen third year reviews, eight tenure files, and six promotion files. These files are composed of self statements on teaching and research, extensive analysis written by col-
leagues, outside reviewers, letters solicited by other key constituents—it makes your normal 360 executive review look paltry.

As I pore over these files, the part I enjoy most is how the faculty write about their teaching. We have world-class faculty who begin and end their evaluations with teaching. Careful philosophy, practice, always learning, irrepressible about helping our students, in turn, become irrepressible. One professor described a job offer he had received from one of the country’s finest research universities. He asked them during the interview about teaching. The answer—“oh, just show up.” He accepted the Colgate position. Our faculty members never, ever just show up.

**Irrepressible: Colgate athletics**

Our athletic program is not just about winning—though we do our fair share of that. Our programs are built on character. Our coaches work with our student-athletes, pushing them, helping them push themselves and, most importantly, supporting them. The result is an athletic program built on athletes who have the confidence to put themselves out there—a quality that doesn’t show up in the media guide, but sure is tough to beat.

It all starts with outstanding coaches. Three-time Patriot League Coach of the Year Dick Biddle. Men’s hockey coach Don Vaughan is starting his own 20/20 club—winning 20 games in a season several times and sending more than 20 players on to the ECAC all-
academic team. Women’s soccer coach Kathy Brawn leading her team to Colgate’s first-ever win in the first round of the NCAA tournament and sending more than 100 players on to the Patriot League Academic Honor Roll. And, of course, lacrosse. Jim Nagle’s men’s lacrosse team toppled powerhouse Navy early on in this great season and played tough in the Patriot League tournament.

Irrepressible: The Arts

The arts are exploding on campus and it is all due to the irrepressible nature of those involved. The Arts! Initiative is becoming an annual event on campus, driven purely by student passion and creativity.

From Shannon Young ’09’s masterful organization of 24-hour readings of Homer’s Odyssey and the Iliad to new theater director Adrian Giurgea’s ambitious and excellent staging of the Decameron, complete with a stage that rose 10 feet from the floor. Our alumni provide great support and energy, as is evident in Paul Schupf whose wonderful exhibition of Serra, Katz, and Close in honor of Harvey Picker.

Irrepressibly successful, smart, gutsy, passionate, and always doing good in the world. We have now sent five groups to Louisiana to help get devastated communities back on their feet after Katrina. The Upstate Institute has our students in the field helping low-income families prepare tax returns. Giving back with impact, it’s the Colgate way.
Why all the emphasis on one word? We have spent a good part of the past year looking into ourselves, seeking to clearly articulate the Colgate story – a project that arises out of the strategic plan. Anyone who knows Colgate is confident that there is something special about this place and about the people who are a part of it. We spent the past several months working to get to the core of that – the identity of Colgate.

We spent countless hours talking about what Colgate is all about – what do we do well and why? What is it about this place that makes our off-campus study program so successful, our faculty-student relationships more powerful, and our athletic teams confident that they can take on the world? What is it about this place that makes it uniquely Colgate?

We relied on those who are Colgate to guide our work. Alumni, students, faculty, parents, staff and others all contributed to this project in focus groups during which we asked them to help us get to the core of Colgate’s story and what our “something bigger” is – what we sign up for in the world.

We learned a lot – the words people used may be different – maybe passion is more powerful than irrepressible; maybe courageous is more classy than gutsy (the word that generated the most debate!). What we learned is that we all tell a common story, and we believe deeply, passionately, even irrepressibly, in its next chapter. Colgate, our story,
has an important role to play in the 21st century.

Let me use some of the words we heard. Just a selection from the real essence of Colgate – the faculty and students.

From a group of students who described Colgate: “It’s the warmth you feel here. There are so many different things to do; we are just the right size. Colgate is all about the spirit behind it. It’s the passion the students have the love the professors have. Colgate is first and foremost about people. Students experience tremendous personal development over for years. Colgate is FUN”

And words from the faculty: “Colgate is about relationships. Faculty-students, students-students, faculty and administrators, students and alumni, faculty and alumni: It’s about relationships. Colgate – it’s a focus on teaching; here we really try to explore what students need. We have great students. Colgate students are doers and thinkers. We are just the right size to combine intimacy and options. That is really what Colgate offers- intimacy and options. The students can follow lots of different paths here, but with lots of guidance on the way. We care about students learning to follow their own passion; we want our students to put themselves out their. Colgate is – well, Joyous!” (Imagine that-students use fun; faculty use, joyous—some things stay the same forever!)
And, finally, words from a student from the Class of 2010 who clearly already gets it.

“At other colleges, everyone talked about how smart they are. At Colgate, everyone
talked about how smart their classmates are”

Friends, I believe that Colgate has the right model and is in the right position to prepare
the liberal arts leaders our world will need in the 21st century. And I stress liberal arts
leaders. At our CEO Conversations event in March, keynote speaker Larry Bossidy put
it well when he said, “Liberal arts teaches you how to learn and how to be adaptable.
I’m convinced it’s the most desirable path to follow. It’s even more important today.”
Liberal arts leaders are smart – smart in learning what then need to learn, smart about
doing and thinking. Liberal arts leaders are fun and social – why is that important as an
educational benefit for 21st century? Because the 21st century world is going to be about
ideas and people – and working with people in a global environment requires social
skills, is empowered by fun and creates, yes, joy when it is done right.

Our small-big or big-small (we really are just the right size) model rests on two funda-
mental foundations. The first is a rigorous academic program geared to each and every
student. Our strategic plan builds upon our strengths, making sure our students know
how to think, write, communicate, create, understand, and build. Even as we dine to-
gether this day, our new library and new science building are rising up.
A new library – in Colgate’s irrepressible way – that breaks out of the 20th century mold of a depository for books and individual cubby holes for study, transformed into a 21st century knowledge center where students and faculty bring together ideas and people using technology. And the science center – the best of the new generation of science centers – will continue to produce thinkers and doers to match Oswald Avery and Harvey Picker, and more recently, individuals such as Gerry Fishbach, Rudy Leibel, Jonah Shacknai and Harvey Berger. Our first foundation is rigorous academics. And in our campaign we will build even more: financial aid for merioticrcatic students from working and middle class, faculty chairs to build our strengths in such key areas as biotechnology, American religion, government and politics, and learning, teaching and research. Institutes for advanced study. Support for our increased collaboration between students and faculty as they explore the edges of discovery and creativity.

The other, equally important, foundation is our irrepressible community. Communities are different and ours is distinct. From the mouths of our students; there is a place for everyone. Lots of different communities and ways of belonging. Intramurals to improvisational comedy, Greek-letter houses (yes the students and faculty do like the new system) to wonderful townhouses to video gamers to science geeks (their description, not mine) religious kids and seekers – the fact is we all intensely belong to Colgate. We build this place each day.
Life has its simple lessons. Here’s one Colgate teaches me. Community is better when people build it themselves. Other colleges prefabricate communities for students, assigning them to this or that college. Many other colleges assign students to communities and try to teach values. In our bold new residential program, we took an irrepressibly Colgate tack. We let the students choose with whom to live and where to join and we coach them in skills to make their choices succeed. Juniors and seniors are required to have a strategic plan, to have a plan for self governance and to reach out beyond themselves. That teaches skills – but the choices are theirs and they are held accountable.

These two foundations rigorous academics and supportive-challenging community end up creating across the four years – graduates who know how to put themselves out there. As members of the Presidents’ Club, you represent so much of what is right about Colgate. As we gather here this evening, look around your table with this idea of an irrepressible Colgate spirit in mind and consider the story of how you’ve gotten to where you are. Chances are that you made your way here by being smart, gutsy, fun and driven. You did it because you have a passion for the climb of life.

Regardless of your chosen path – finance, law, teaching, music, science – all Colgate people have a passion for every climb, who know how to put themselves out there, who drive hard, have fun, give back, and yes, are gutsy and smart. I thank you for your dedication, your commitment, your irrepressible spirit, and your passion for each and every climb.