PRESIDENT'S LETTER

GRINNELL COLLEGE, GRINNELL, IOWA 50112

April, 1969

TO: Alumni, Parents, and Friends

FROM: Glenn Leggett, President of the College

The "disrobing" incident of February 5 has been the subject of a great deal of publicity and comment, with some corresponding misinterpretation, and I believe it would be useful if I gave you a plain account of the matter.

On Wednesday, February 5, Mr. Brice Draper, the college promotion manager of Playboy magazine, was on campus for discussions with students. He was one of a series of persons who had been invited, at different times, by a committee of students and resident advisers to present a point of view that would speak to an aspect of "The Social, Psychological, and Sexual Aspects of Interpersonal Relationships." Among the other invited speakers had been Dr. Evelyn Gendel, an expert on child care and maternal health; the Reverend Mr. John Hedger, Episcopalian priest; Dr. Lester Kirkendall, an expert on family life; Dr. Zane Parzen, psychiatrist; and Dr. William Roy, gynecologist. However individuals on the campus might feel about Playboy, the committee felt that the magazine had a wide circulation, that its philosophy was widely promoted, and that a thoughtful and open discussion of this philosophy would be desirable.

The discussion in question took place in Gates Hall Lounge, starting about 4 o'clock. According to the evidence given me, about 75 persons were present, including two or three resident advisers and the president of the student body, Mr. Tom Thomas. Mr. Draper made a brief opening statement about the "Playboy Philosophy" concerning relationships between men and women. After his opening remarks, there was a discussion for 10 or 15 minutes. Then six women and four men, all students, who had been sitting on the floor off to one side of the lounge, rose, disrobed, resumed their seats, and sang "You've Got to Walk That Lonesome Valley." During this period, some other students (they were dressed) passed among the others in attendance, handing out the following statement, entitled "Playboy Magazine Is a Money-Changer in the Temple of the Body":

> Playboy claims to espouse a philosophy that asserts the body is good and the body is beautiful, but Playboy demeans the human body. Pretending to appreciate and respect the beauty of the naked human form, Playboy in actuality stereotypes the body and commercializes on it. Playboy substitutes fetishism for honest appreciation of the endless variety of human forms.
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> Playboy says the body is good, but posing as liberator it offers us a sexuality of "subjects" and "objects" -- of those who desire and act, and those who are desirable and acted upon. Thus sexual activity is dehumanized and depersonalized.
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> We believe that the human body is good and beautiful, but a sensual and aesthetic appreciation of the body cannot be divorced from an appreciation of and respect for persons, of both sexes, of all shapes and sizes. We protest Playboy's images of lapdog female playthings with idealized proportions and their junior-executive-on-the-way-up possessors. The Playboy bunny is an affront to human sexual dignity.

While this statement was being handed out, several other persons who had come with cameras photographed the demonstrators and some others present. Some of the nude demonstrators did stand, but at no time did any of them posture or walk around. After the brief period of singing, the discussion between Mr. Draper and the audience continued. Some of those students who had disrobed participated in the discussion, challenging Mr. Draper over the view of women represented by Playboy, that sexuality can be divorced from personal meaning. After some fifteen minutes, the students who had disrobed put their clothes back on. The discussion then continued for about thirty minutes longer.

Within an hour and a half, local "stringers" had put the story and photographs in the hands of the Des Moines news media, one of which was a wire service which distributed one or more of the pictures on its national wire. There is no point in our saying that the news media "sensationalized" the case. The incident did happen, and we are all aware by this time that what makes front-page news is "newsworthiness" and is not subject to our own notions of fair play or conscience.

When the student deans and I met the next morning, we agreed that the first step was to get accurate identification of the demonstrators, then talk to them individually and notify their parents. Accordingly, Deans Low and Thompson talked to students and resident advisers who had been at the meeting, secured the names of the demonstrators, and then sent copies of the following letter to them:

> You have been identified as one of a group of students who disrobed in Gates Lounge on the Grinnell campus last Wednesday, February 5, with the stated purpose of protesting the visit of a Playboy magazine representative and his magazine's unsavory commercial exploitation of womanhood.
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> By a process of reaction that by now has become very familiar to college campuses, the incident has done harm to the college's educational effort by damaging its public reputation. Most probably, your action will finally have less impact on the problems you describe than it will in confirming many in their belief that appearances do count, that the college "looks bad," and that when its good action is publicized, even that will be somehow suspect. At any rate we do make the point that your action has left the human issues less usefully defined, and in some quarters has generated a reaction antagonistic to the college and to its educational goals.
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> On a personal level, we note that the problems generated by a conflict of this sort (that is, problems created by doing impulsive damage to the institution that you presumably are benefiting from) are becoming steadily more complex.
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> We are sending a copy of this letter to your parents and would invite you and/or your parents to discuss the implications of this incident with us.

The process of talking individually with the students took some time. Several of the students resented the fact that their parents had been sent copies of the letter. But the College is clearly obligated to inform the parents of students who may be involved in a disciplinary action; this obligation is particularly urgent if the national news media are publishing an account (and a picture) of what the student has done. While the deans were talking to the students involved, several other students began to circulate petitions questioning the method used by the demonstrators and to express concern over the way the news media had handled the demonstration.

In the meantime, the Grinnell demonstration, along with some troubles at other campuses in Iowa, led several members of the Iowa Legislature, then in assembly in Des Moines, to speak out their thoughts on college and university "disorders" on the floor of the

General Assembly. The Attorney General of the State, Mr. Richard Turner, was reported in the news as saying that he was "inquiring into the nude demonstration at Grinnell and the use of obscene language at Iowa City and Ames to see if any laws have been violated." Shortly after this report, I was called upon in my office by an Assistant Attorney General who explained courteously that he and several of his associates were visiting the campus and the community to inquire into the matter. They understood and approved of my desire to confer with the legal counsel of the College before talking at any length with them about the matter. After such a conference, and after further discussion with the student deans, I decided to halt any further college procedures, to advise the students to seek legal counsel, and to consult with their parents. (Both the College and the civil authorities have standards of behavior they expect from persons within their communities, and each authority has the right to its own function. But I do not believe that in this case these functions can be operable simultaneously.)

The presence of the Assistant Attorneys General was immediately widely known on campus through the wonders of those communication devices, more psychical than real, which all small communities have. The Student Senate passed a resolution calling for students not to cooperate with investigators, and those students who had been circulating statements and petitions disapproving of the "demonstration" ceased their efforts. Part of the news account of this reaction went as follows:

> /A Grinnell student/ said plans to circulate petitions denouncing the nudity incident were dropped because state officials "intruded" on campus.
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> He said he believes a majority of Grinnell students would have signed the petitions but "now the campus is really united against the attorney general's office."
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> "They are not defending the demonstrators," he added, "but rather themselves."
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> Thomas /Tom Thomas, president of the student body/ said he felt the majority of the Student Senate agreed with the principles of the protest but not necessarily with the tactics. He paraphrased the sentiment this way: "I might not have done it that way, but I'll defend your right to do it."

The incident continued to be the subject of news reports, special features, and editorials, and letters to me and staff persons from alumni, parents, and interested onlookers. In a few days it became clear that the investigators had identified the demonstrators who would be summoned before a local justice of the peace for a preliminary hearing on the charge of "indecent exposure," a misdemeanor under Iowa law. The preliminary hearings were held in Grinnell; the justice of the peace then remanded the case to district court, which at the point of this writing has not yet met to hear it.

Attitudes toward this whole case have been characterized from the beginning by strongly expressed and diverse opinions. These opinions exist not only in the student body and among the faculty but also in the community, and among alumni and parents. The following selections from letters addressed to me by concerned alumni illustrate the point:

> "Does Grinnell have extraordinary success in recruiting neurotics, psychotics, and exhibitionists, or are the faculty and administration exceptionally skillful in transforming fairly normal students into kooks and jerks?"
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> "May I ask WHY a representative of Playboy was allowed on campus and WHY there was no one in authority there to break up the meeting when it got 'out of bounds'?"
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> "I hope the students can see that the embarrassment to the college far outweighed the damage to Playboy. In the meantime you can console yourself with the fact

that at least the students were not joined by faculty members, and classes were not interrupted -- nor did police have to be called. Compared to many other college presidents you have much to be thankful for."

"Grinnell students have typically avoided any means of protest which gives a lie to their ends. Thus, recruiters don't get locked in cars or barred from buildings, but are confronted with a military cemetery in the middle of the campus. Buildings don't get burned down at Grinnell when students disagree with rules. Instead, students energetically attack the problem with more constructive means like discussion groups, meetings with administrators, symbolic rule-breaking, and persistent persuasion. Though students at most colleges are very susceptible to the contagion of adolescent-type rebellion, protesting the most minor annoyances, the few Grinnell students who saw fit to speak out against the graduation ritual /last May/ had the maturity to see the reasonableness in their president's gentle chiding, so that instead of demonstrating over caps and gowns, Grinnell seniors made better use of graduation by taking the opportunity to protest against a fearful and disgraceful war. A white dove (pigeon) being freed from a graduate's gown was a beautiful gesture, typical of Grinnell thinking and priorities.

"The Playboy philosophy is alien to everything that a progressive coeducational college like Grinnell stands for. But it is so seductively put forth in all the mass media, that many men and women, even at a college like Grinnell, are subtly influenced by it and blind to its implications. Therefore, I was greatly impressed that Grinnellians showed an awareness of the significance of the Playboy representative's participation in a sex education discussion, and made a courageous public criticism against this hypocritical philosophy."

As I write this letter, the students involved are going through the painful, and expensive, process associated with legal action. I think it the better part of wisdom for the rest of us to remain concerned but not impatient. This kind of incident, like a few others that have occurred on the campus, is particularly susceptible to the kind of attention the news media wish to give it. We have a lively, concerned, articulate student body (with an uncommon number of talented photographers and journalists), and the inevitability of occasional sensational publicity is a misfortune the College must live with and must ask its alumni and friends to understand.

The revolution going on in American educational institutions is real and pronounced, and the constructive part of it, which is the result of unglamorous and sometimes painful procedures, is not going to receive the same public attention as does the exhibitionistic or the generally sensational. Colleges can only hope that alumni, parents, and friends will continue to be supportive and understanding.