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Move to ban frats at Amherst College resisted

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 24, 2014

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Carlos Bello and Jasjaap Sidhu in front of Delta Kappa Epsilon, near the college campus. About 100 students participate in Greek life at Amherst.

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Many Amherst College undergraduates, the school's student government, and some faculty and alumni are calling on administrators to overturn a new ban on underground fraternities.

While the prestigious liberal-arts college formally banned on-campus Greek organizations in 1984, the groups have continued to operate off campus. But earlier this month, the college declared it would no longer look the other way.

The crackdown comes amid heightened concerns about alcohol-fueled partying, hazing, and sexual violence at Amherst and campuses elsewhere.

Some students counter that Greek organizations offer invaluable positive experiences for members and the

broader campus community and are no more susceptible to problems than other student groups. They also contend that the move signals an attack on student freedom that could set a dangerous precedent.

Fueling the outcry, critics say, is the fact that trustees passed the measure in early April but kept it quiet for a month, announcing it on the last day of classes before final exams, with almost no warning and little student input.

“It’s triggered the biggest conversation about social life at Amherst I’ve seen in my four years here,” said Jasjaap Sidhu, a senior and member of the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity.

Last week, the student government drafted a referendum demanding that the college reverse its decision. On a campus of about 1,800 students, more than 1,000 cast ballots, with 70 percent voting to support the referendum, said organizers.

“Prohibiting student participation in off-campus organizations is an unprecedented incursion on the liberties of Amherst College students and . . . continues a disturbing trend of disregarding the key stakeholder on critical matters of Amherst College student life: students,” the referendum said.

Students also decried the new policy at campus-wide forums that administrators hosted after the announcement.

Fraternity members and supporters staged a small protest on campus, and some alumni are petitioning the school to reconsider.

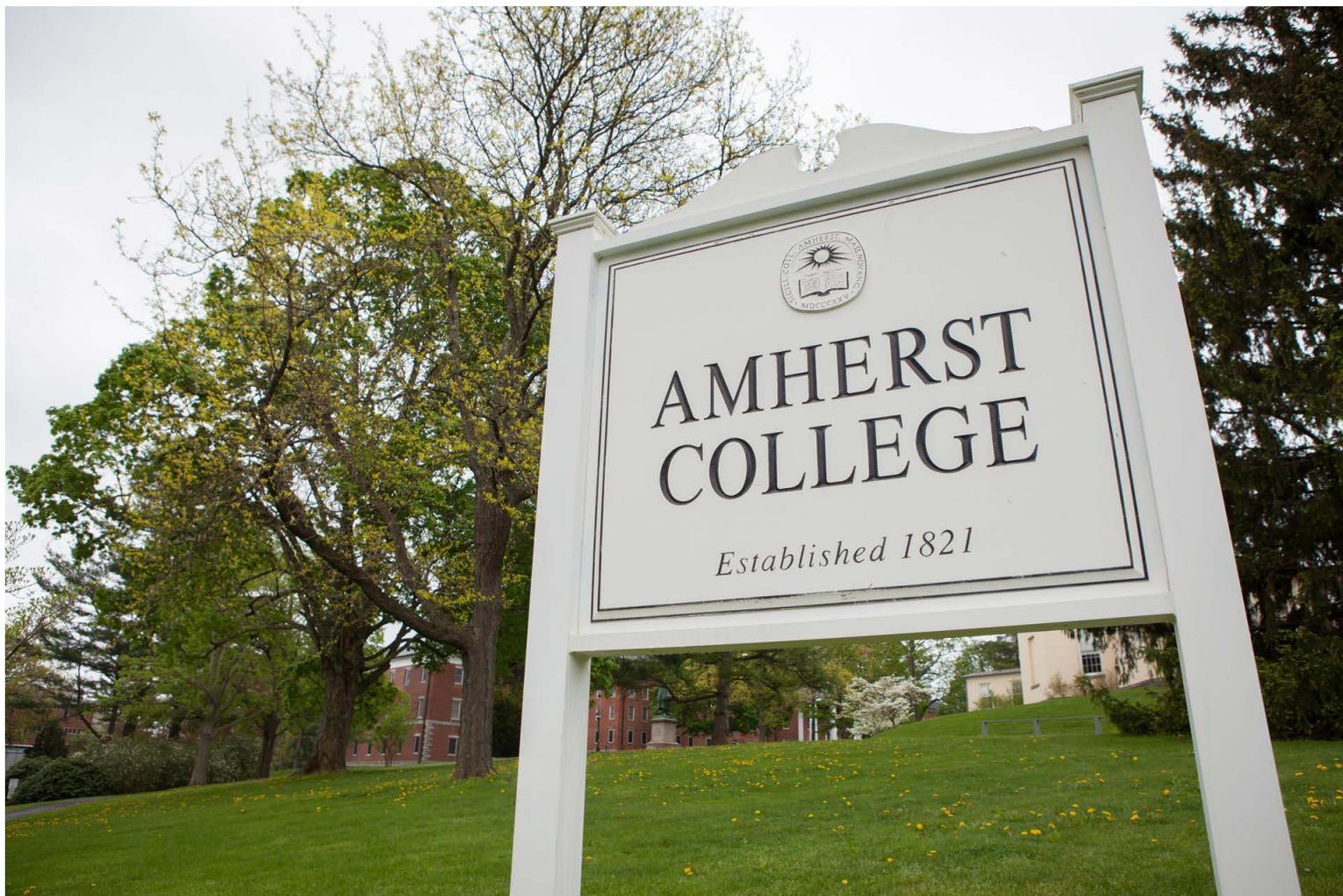
But administrators are not budging.

“We respect the views of those who disagree with the board’s decision,” said Amherst spokeswoman Caroline Hanna. “The board and administration have also heard from many students and alumni who support the decision.”

An estimated 100 students participate in Greek life at Amherst, which was all male until 1975. In addition to Delta Kappa Epsilon, there are two other fraternities: Chi Psi, which also is affiliated with a national or international organization, and another group known as OT, which operates independently. There are no



sororities.



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Amherst College was all-male until 1975. Starting July 1, students who violate the new rules will face sanctions.

On May 6, college trustees announced that — in a move “to reaffirm, unambiguously, the spirit and intention of the 1984 decision” — students will be banned from participating in fraternities and sororities or “fraternity-like and sorority-like” organizations, regardless of where they are located.

Starting July 1, students who violate the new rules will face sanctions including suspension or expulsion. Trustees also announced the college will work with students to create organizations that could serve as alternatives to Greek groups.

Over the years, a handful of other schools — including Middlebury and Bowdoin — have taken steps to replace Greek organizations, banning the groups altogether or forcing them to become co-ed.

After allegations of administrators downplaying reports of sexual assaults and fraternity members donning misogynistic T-shirts made national headlines two years ago, the college formed a Special Oversight Committee on Sexual Misconduct.

In a report last year, the committee said it did not find evidence that fraternity members have been disproportionately guilty of sexual assault. Nonetheless, the panel recommended that the college clarify its stance on Greek life. That recommendation led to the trustee review and the recent ban.

Earlier this month, the US Department of Education named Amherst on a list of 55 colleges that face federal investigations into their handling of sexual assault and harassment complaints.

Some say fraternity members are being unfairly targeted and stereotyped as predominantly rich, white men prone to wild partying. But supporters say almost half of all Greek members receive financial aid, many are nonwhite, and the majority get good grades and are active in extracurricular activities.

“It’s very unlikely that I would have joined a fraternity elsewhere, but we’ve created a unique group here because of how diverse Amherst College is,” said Sidhu, who belongs to Delta Kappa Epsilon. “It’s something that’s very positive and different from what Greek life is like elsewhere.”

Francis G. Couvares, a professor who opposes the ban, said fraternities and sororities have become scapegoats for problems on college campuses.

“I think it’s delusional to expect this will have an impact on drunkenness or sexual assault and all the problems supposedly associated with fraternities,” he said. “They’re complicated issues, and none of them can be resolved with some dramatic gesture.”

Others praised the school’s decision. Chloe McKenzie, a senior, said that she has been harassed by fraternity members and that the organizations breed misogyny and sexism.

“Why can’t you just have a group of friends who you throw parties with sometimes, without all the pledging and rushing and other rituals?” she asked. “I think getting rid of fraternities will not completely eradicate the problem, but it’s a first step.”

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