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Fred Knubel, Director

April 15, 1985

Following is a letter to students
of Columbia College from Dean
Robert Pollack discussing the
current apartheid protest in
front of Hamilton Hall.

April 15, 1985

Dear Columbia College student,

I am writing to you on the twelfth day of a difficult period in the life of the college. Some of you are blockading the front doors to a building that houses more than thirty classrooms, as well as the offices of dozens of faculty and the entire administration of the College. Whether you call it Hamilton or Mandela, this Hall is the center of your college and mine. Its blockade has been more than symbolic.

Others of you, who live in Hartley, Wallach, Jay or Carman Halls, have been hosts to the demonstrators and their guests. These residence halls have had their lobbies lined with sleeping demonstrators, and the Van Am quad has been filled with music long into the night. All of you are likely to have been affected by the blockade, since almost all of you have at least some of your classes in Hamilton Hall, and since all of you have gotten questions by now from family and friends.

You have also all had more than enough paper on the blockade and on the two issues that underlie it. I have no new comments on the first of these issues, the University's ownership of securities issued by American corporations that do business in South Africa. My position can be found in great detail in a document I helped to prepare, the University Senate's November 1984 report to the Trustees. This report deserves a complete response from the Trustees. I believe that such a response is being carefully prepared and that it is worth waiting for. Only after the Trustees respond will you or I be able to say whether or not we have a disagreement with them. If you wish a copy of the Senate report you may pick one up at my office during regular office hours.

I do think you ought to know my position in some detail on the other issue, the proper response of the College to the violation of University regulations. Some time after 1968 the University Senate unanimously adopted a set of University regulations for political demonstrations. No student member of the Senate dissented, because the rules were seen to be fair. They protect your right to political protest in all forms short of coercion. In particular they do not permit blocking access to a University building, nor do they permit disruption of normal University functions. The blockaders had received copies of these regulations when they applied for and received permission from the University for their April 4 rally. When at the end of that rally they padlocked chains on both the inner and the outer doors of the building and claimed to have "lost" the key, they deprived their classmates of normal access to classrooms and to the many services of the College.

It is true that the demonstrators have not completely blocked access to the building and that they have not tried to occupy it. I believe that the blockaders understand that either of these events would have been even more disruptive to the lives of faculty and students. It is unfortunately also true that regulations and laws have both already been broken: the students blockading the doors are in violation of a temporary restraining order issued more than a week ago by Judge Baer of the New York Supreme Court. Only a small fraction of the thirty-four classes scheduled to meet at any one time in the building did so on any day last week. Many students, faculty and staff whose political opinions are unknown and unsolicited have been obliged by the blockade to make serious and difficult changes in their lives.

Many actions by the Coalition for a Free South Africa have been positive. This demonstration has focused the attention of many members of the University community on the evils of South African apartheid. The self-discipline of the blockaders and their dedication to the principle of non-violence are welcome signs of their seriousness and of their commitment to their cause. The forbearance of those students who do not agree with the blockade has shown their maturity. I am grateful to everyone who has helped to prevent confrontations in the past twelve days.

The Coalition for a Free South Africa has many student members from the College, and all of them remain in all ways a part of the College. We in the College have an equally deep commitment to the rule of law, and to the simple notion that one must take the consequences of one's actions. We are working to peacefully reopen the front doors of Hamilton Hall. However the situation is finally resolved I pledge that University regulations will be enforced in the College on a case-by-case basis with absolute fairness.

I cannot predict the future. I hope that you will join me in trying your best to assure that all members of the College community look back on these days as a period that included -- along with a certain amount of disruption and a certain amount of anxiety -- also a good deal of serious reflection.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Robert Pollack", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Robert Pollack '61
Dean of the College