Walking into Kirby Hall, you might view it as a site for a library, or a hot venue for politically oriented brown bags. Yet, when one steps inside what has been described as “a physical realization of Fred Kirby’s belief in American Constitutional law and in the capitalist system,”1 you can’t help but question: did the man that conceived this structure have a certain type of student in mind for its use?

In fact, before you even set foot inside this undoubtedly remarkable piece of architecture, you are confronted with the bold statement, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own.” Well, surely, would that not depend on what one believes is his own? And if ‘mine own’ means ‘my money’, as many have speculated - then would that not depend on how this money is spent?”

For Mr. Kirby, doing what he would with his own included the building of this particular structure bearing his name. It would serve us well to know exactly what kind of education was intended with the construction of this building back in 1929. A building, which at the cost of $590,000, was declared the finest building at the height of the Great Depression. There is no better place to find this answer than on the plaque that graces the lobby, explicitly declaring these intentions (see insert).

Some have called for the removal of this plaque, translating its message to mean that “Rich white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men rule the world and should forever.”2 Others have defended its presence even today, saying that its existence should serve as a symbol on which to “reflect on the struggle of women and minorities, (to) appreciate the progress we’ve made, and realize there is still much to be done.”3

But whether we call for its removal or its
maintenance, several questions remain: with the college's emphasis on diversity in terms of gender, religion, race, culture, etc., what message does this plaque send to our students? If these continue to be the ideals of the "rich white man," who, by the way, provide plenty to maintain the existence of the school, can we reconcile this stance with those efforts to increase diversity? Several of Lafayette's students of color with whom I have spoken, whether in interviews or on an informal basis, already feel they carry the burden of having to consistently represent their race, culture, religion, and so on. This plaque gives no indication that their efforts, let alone their presence, are welcome.

Granted, this hall of civil rights was constructed in an era where the concept of co-education had not yet taken a foothold at Lafayette. However, thirty years after the pioneer class of women have graduated, nothing in this building indicates that these civil rights should extend to women. Furthermore, we are left to wonder whether these rights apply to people of color or of diverse religions. Unless of course the God mentioned in this plaque refers to the gods of all nations and peoples, which the language in the plaque little suggests.

Kirby Hall was erected at a time when imperialism and colonization were eminent. Clearly, its sponsor did not imagine that eighty years down the line, an African student, descendant of men and women who were being exploited by those who felt it lawful to do what they might with their own, in Africa or elsewhere, would be sitting in these halls. Considering the level of comfort that students of color, international students, women, homosexuals, and other people of diverse backgrounds might feel upon entering these halls, leads to another question: what is the point of the portraits? As a black African woman, I've somehow learnt to ignore the faces of those old white men staring down on me as I grace Kirby Hall's passages with my presence. Yet, I always wonder what these men might think, would they see me now. How receptive of my presence would they be? Would the stern looks on their faces turn to anger when they see their money was going to further my education, and not to "perfecting (their) own life and liberty." Or would they welcome me with open arms?

In questioning who these men are in the first place, I looked to a description provided in a 1952 Alumni Quarterly. This describes the collection of portraits as "a study in the varieties of the American national character or moral genius in its statesmen, generals, Indian fighters, judges, diplomats, pamphleteers, song writers."" It goes on to say that, "These men are the American folk-heroes in these extraordinary faces is the visual history of the national inspiration." I wonder how a student of Native American descent might feel when he reads of William Henry Harrison - an Indian fighter - is romanticized by the school, through its presence in her classroom?

Of course, many of the men in these portraits were emancipators (though some owned their own slaves), but how many of them envisaged white students sitting with their black peers in a classroom setting? Despite the fact that many of these men were presidents and had the power to make things happen, full integration did not occur until 1954. The declaration that all men are created equal seems not to have been fully grasped by those that defended this same declaration.

In reference to the plaque, Roth and Adekannibi (both class of '94) questioned, "At an institution that trumpet so loudly its push for diversity and its willingness for change, why leave up a testament to the glory of rich white men?" Indeed, such elements in academic buildings contradict Lafayette's vision of a diversified community. How committed is Lafayette College to making all students feel at home, when a small population of these students have to confront a building, a plaque, portraits, and other symbols that constantly make them feel out of place? What steps are being taken to let these students know that their presence on this campus is important to the college? How do we reconcile the ideals evoked by this building, with the ideals that the school portrays? In depicting Lafayette as a college with a "national reputation for academic excellence," how does the college make students feel proud in claiming this excellence, when their learning environment is tainted with such images?