

Pirate party spurs heated debate

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By Brian Fung
NEWS EDITOR

Cook Commons found itself under fire from College community members last weekend after sponsoring a "Surrender Your Booty" party on Oct. 5 that included the screening of a pornographic film. An R-rated version of "Pirates," the highest-budget pornographic movie ever made, was initially selected to complement the party's swashbuckling theme, but the choice faced stiff criticism from Feminist Action at Middlebury (FAM) and Men Against Violence in

the days leading up to the party.

"While we believe that it is a personal choice whether or not to watch pornography," wrote FAM President Kolbe Franklin '08 in an e-mail, "we do not feel that a social, school-sponsored party is an appropriate place to project this type of movie."

The Cook Commons Council, a student-run body, had raised the idea of a pirate-themed party at its first meeting of the year. But according to Commons Tri-chair H.Kay Merriman '10, because the Council held a vote on the potentially sensitive issue

at the same meeting, the assembly had little time to inform students of its plans.

"We acknowledge the fact that we did not properly alert the Commons that this topic was going to be discussed," wrote Merriman in an e-mail. "In light of that, we reopened the discussion."

Because the Council functions democratically, all students belonging to Cook Commons are free to participate in Council meetings. Tri-chair Rachel Lincoln '08 emphasized that the decision to display "Pirates" was made by Cook students attending the first Council meeting and did not represent a unilateral move by the Commons Council.

"The difference may seem subtle," wrote Lincoln in an e-mail, "but it has huge differences in connotation."

Representatives from both FAM and Men Against Violence addressed the Cook Council at a subsequent meeting. Because only members of Cook Commons can vote in Council meetings, however, most members

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of the two organizations were unable to cast ballots in a second vote held to reconsider the propriety of showing the video.

"We made it very publicly known that we were going to re-discuss the issue and then re-vote," wrote Lincoln. "Anyone that wanted to attend the meeting and voice their opinion was invited into the meeting. It was very open, and we had a good turnout and excellent discussion. Afterwards, as always, any Cook student that was present was allowed to vote on whether we would still project the movie."

Lincoln explained that the second vote — conducted by secret ballot to prevent peer pressure from influencing its outcome — upheld the Council's initial decision to play "Pirates" at the party.

Debate regarding the party came to a head on Oct. 4 when MiddBlog editor Sarah Franco '08 wrote a post reporting on FAM's criticism of the party. Members of the College community responded in force to the post, with students and faculty publishing more than 50 comments on the blog over the next day and a half. While some were incensed by what they saw as the party's lack of respect for men and women in that it encouraged "threatening structures of male sexual dominance," others were indifferent to it, suggesting that opponents to the party should "calm down."

The comments introduced what would become the weekend's most controversial issue — whether in its sponsorship of the party, Cook Commons — and by extension, the College — was sending the wrong message. When one student claimed that Cook's actions were tantamount to an endorsement of the pornog-

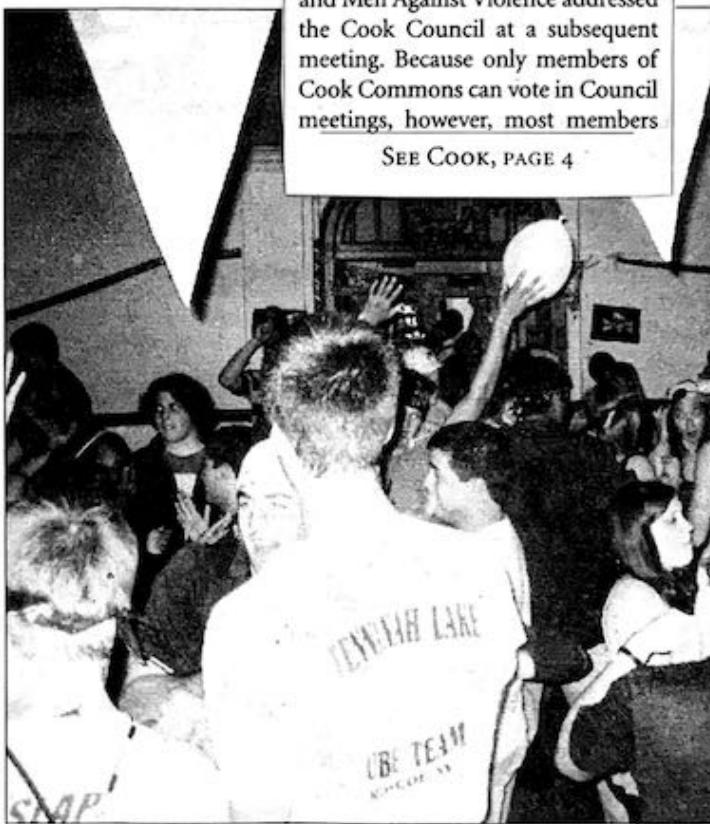
raphy industry, another fired back, calling such an argument "shortsighted."

"People often complain about things," wrote the anonymous student. "Middlebury College and Cook Commons obviously do not condone violence or the dehumanization of any gender/ethnicity/what have you."

Dean of Cook Commons Matt Carluzzo, in his own comment, both acknowledged the Council's failure to communicate effectively with students at the outset of the episode and called upon opinionated individuals to recognize their right to participate in future pre-event deliberations.

"To shirk or ignore the opportunity to exercise that right and responsibility leaves one in the (possibly) unenviable position of feeling 'put upon' by the will of others," wrote Carluzzo. "In point of fact, however, as we all know, the decision not to engage in community-based decisions is still a decision."

Despite rumors of a protest, Franklin said



Courtesy

Students dance to music at the "Surrender Your Booty" party on Oct. 5.

that FAM never planned to stage any demonstration against the Cook party.

"FAM had never planned a protest for the night of the party," she said. "What we did do was print out fliers encouraging people to make conscious decisions whether or not to attend the party and not to just go because it was seen as what was expected or accepted at Middlebury."