

# 210th Commencement 2015 Address

*Barry Mills*

*Commencement Ceremony*

*May 23, 2015*

Good morning and welcome to this joyous occasion and to our beautiful campus in the glorious State of Maine. This is a special day for our graduating seniors and for their families and friends. I congratulate you all.

This is the 210th Commencement of Bowdoin College — a college justifiably proud of its history, its traditions, its commitment to the liberal arts, and its dedication to serving the common good.

Four years ago, I greeted an exuberant first-year class on the quad one beautiful Saturday evening. We looked forward to your Bowdoin time — with this day far into the future. I am delighted that we meet again on the quad for this magnificent day of celebration.

Today is a fantastic day filled with pride, accomplishment, and celebration. To the Class of 2015 — you have achieved so much over these four years. I have been honored to be with you. I will miss you.

Before I hand out any diplomas, I want to ask our graduating seniors to rise.

As we sit here today honoring these graduating Bowdoin students, we recognize the commitment, love and family that has brought these students to this day. In what has become a tradition of respect and appreciation at the College, please face your parents, friends, and family — those who have supported and nurtured you — and thank them with a hearty round of applause.

Now, back to that Saturday night on the quad four years ago — the night when we greeted each other. On that night, I challenged you as you began your Bowdoin career. It was a challenge meant to encourage you to become intentional, active learners who engage in all that Bowdoin has to offer.

I am pleased to announce that you have all met my challenge with distinction. I congratulate you and the Bowdoin faculty and staff who, through their excellence, hard work, and commitment to you and to this College, have helped you immeasurably along the way. So, please stand again, and offer a second round of applause for the Bowdoin faculty — and staff — who have been committed to your pursuit of learning these past four years.

Thank you.

Thank you, Senator Angus King and Joan Benoit Samuelson, for your greetings from the State. Senator King, we thank you for your important leadership of our country and your leadership in the State of Maine. And we thank you for being such an excellent teacher at Bowdoin, neighbor

and good friend and supporter of Bowdoin College. Karen and I, and our boys, value our friendship with you and Mary and your family deeply.

Thank you, Joanie for all you do to make Maine a more sustainable, green state. You represent the best of Maine and your college.

I also want to welcome and congratulate our honorands, each a magnificent example of what we value here at Bowdoin: a commitment to excellence, to thoughtful examination, criticism and inquiry, to creativity, to principled leadership, and to good deeds — David Swensen, Molly Neptune Parker, Jill Lepore and Karen Gordon Mills.

And I especially want to thank the parents and families of our graduating seniors for your commitment to Bowdoin. It seems like yesterday that I greeted you as new members of the Bowdoin community. It is always a sad day to see the seniors leave, and it is also a day filled with emotion as we say goodbye to the wonderful families here today — many of whom I know as friends. You are part of Bowdoin forever. Please stay close.

It has been my tradition at Commencement to speak with you all briefly about leadership; to offer a challenge to leadership for our graduating seniors.

For the last four years you have experienced a Bowdoin education grounded in teaching and learning in the liberal arts tradition. You have grown and matured in our residential setting intentionally created to give you the space to grow as individuals. And, today you sit among your classmates with a new focus on life after Bowdoin. A life where we have challenged you to lead — to be important to your families and to your communities with a profound and genuine sense of the common good. In my view, there are two critical components of leadership among all the others you have learned and adopted at Bowdoin: a sense of humility and a sense of humor. At Bowdoin we understand that leadership requires empathy — at its best it requires a person who understands in their heart and head the issues and problems they seek to solve, and the situations they aim to improve. A Bowdoin leader leaves their ego at the door — it is not the volume of your voice, but the power of your ideas. And so, on this very important and celebratory day, I remind us all of our responsibility to lead but also our responsibility to continue to learn and to listen. Listening is a much-underrated element of leadership.

All of us at Bowdoin are appropriately self-critical, and we often lament the “Bowdoin Bubble” on campus. We have faced up to serious issues in our residential community, and there is more work to be done. It is a place where you have lived, actually lived, among people very different from you — who have different traditions and life ambitions and values. And now you are about to leave for a world that is much more challenging in many respects than Bowdoin. Four years ago I told you that this college experience is unique because we pick your neighbors — people of diverse backgrounds and told you to live together — we assembled the community and you over these past four years created community. Many of you — when you leave here — will find yourselves in self-selected and self-reinforcing communities of like-minded people. In comparison, you may come to realize that Bowdoin is truly a place where difference is respected and reinforced. Break out of those comfortable surroundings when you can, and test yourselves.

You will be well served if you remember your education at Bowdoin — the liberal arts education.

And, please remember the art of the “perhaps.” James Freedman, the former president of Dartmouth wrote that “...a liberal education seeks to impress upon students that one of the most important words in the English language is ‘perhaps,’ and that we would all do better if we prefaced our most emphatic statements with the modest qualifier. Liberal education teaches the importance of tempering profound convictions with a measure of tolerance and a judicious sense of humility.” These are lessons well learned at Bowdoin and lessons I hope you will remember as you leave the relative “safeness” of this learning and living community.

Remember too that among the most underrated component of leadership is the ability to maintain a sense of humor. As we seek to lead by tackling serious issues and problems, we must also leave room to not take ourselves too seriously. A sense of perspective and irony are essential. Dwight Eisenhower reminded us that “...a sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done.”

And from T.S. Eliot: “Humor is also a way of saying something serious.” And from my muse, a Bowdoin Parent — Harry Newton — you can be serious about having a sense of humor, being solemn is boring.

Knowing and admiring this Class of 2015 as I do, let me take a moment to compliment them on their achievements. The talents in this class of students make us proud. They have completed their studies at Bowdoin at the highest level of achievement. We count students among us today who have completed elegant honors projects, played glorious music, created fantastic art, danced with grace, and performed magically on the athletic field. Congratulations to Erin Silva, our pole vaulter extraordinaire, who is sure to vault to new heights on the track and in life.

College presidents have an appropriately distant and complicated relationship with the media, including the Bowdoin Orient. I want to compliment Garrett Casey and Kate Witteman for their leadership this year, while I didn’t always agree with everything they wrote or published — it was a challenging year and they did a terrific job of journalism.

And, the leadership of Bowdoin Student Government over the past year has been impressive. I want to thank in particular Chris Breen and Charlotte McLaughry for their leadership and advice to me over this year.

Our country has faced turmoil this year as issues of race and class continue to vex our ambitions for a more perfect society. Bowdoin is not a “bubble” and I want to acknowledge the leadership of Symone Howard, Felix Emiliano, Jared Kennedy Loving and Ahrea Marshall for their sensitive, thoughtful and important leadership on our campus.

While it is fair to say that Matt Goodrich, Bridget McCoy and Hugh Radcliffe and I do not agree on certain tactics, I do admire their passion and acknowledge that their activism has raised to an even higher level the commitment for education and action of this College around the challenges presented to all of us and the entire world by climate change.

And, I want to recognize Mac Caputi who yesterday morning was commissioned into the Marines — another example of Bowdoin students working for the common good — we wish you well.

These young women and men sitting before you understand leadership and accomplishment. They have lived it here at Bowdoin. We have every confidence and an expectation that they will continue this achievement and this leadership — this *principled* leadership — into the future, reflecting vividly the principles of service to the common good that we at Bowdoin so proudly represent. You have the tools and the skills to succeed. You have taken advantage of the opportunity Bowdoin creates, and now it is your responsibility to go from this place and continue to contribute and achieve.

And now, a final word to our graduates:

Look around you. You are surrounded by people who will be your friends for your entire life — not only your classmates, but also the faculty, staff, and even the president of this College. Bowdoin is grounded on yet another essential principle — the fundamental value of personal friendships that endure. My best friends in life are people who sat with me over forty years ago at my commencement. I am confident that in another forty years, when you return for Reunion, you will say the same.

Within the hour, you will become alumni of Bowdoin College. In doing so you will join the most loyal and enthusiastic group that any college or university would be proud to call their own. Among these fellow alumni you will find old friends, and meet new ones. You will discover mentors and supporters ready to reach out and assist you throughout your lives. I know from experience. Take advantage of these relationships and stay connected and devoted to each other and to your college.

And now, let us return to where we began: *The Offer of the College* by William DeWitt Hyde, the seventh president of Bowdoin. Hyde set as Bowdoin's mission a liberal arts education that prepares us for a life of working with others for "common ends." He promised us the best four years of your life on this College campus. As you sit together as a community of Bowdoin students, I know this was for nearly all of you a fantastic four years. But, you will only truly reach Hyde's promise for the best four years of your life if you go forth from Bowdoin and continue to learn, to listen, to lead lives based on the principles and mission of this great College. These are the best four years of your life simply because they prepare you for a life worth living in the Bowdoin tradition.

Congratulations to the Class of 2015, and Godspeed to you all!