

Baccalaureate 2015 Address

Barry Mills

Baccalaureate Ceremony

Sidney J. Watson Arena May 22, 2015

Good afternoon. This is the time of year when we gather to celebrate the achievements of our graduating seniors, to reflect on the academic year now coming to a close, and to rededicate ourselves to the founding values of this College—particularly the ideals of liberal education and our historic commitment to serving the common good.

Baccalaureate has its origins in a “sermon” delivered to a graduating class, and I *could* join the voices heard all over the country this time of year giving you advice about what is to come and urging you to go forth and do this or that with the degrees you have earned. But my approach here has been to focus less on each of you—there will be plenty of that tomorrow—and rather, to speak to important issues affecting our College and higher education in America.

I am not an advocate of frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance and also keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as a civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbaric ancestors.

These are the words of Thomas Jefferson written in a letter to Samuel Kercheval in July 1816. They are engraved on the walls of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington D.C.

Jefferson was, of course, speaking about a new nation, but his words, with a generous sense of humility, are especially relevant to all institutions, including Bowdoin.

Ours is a College born at the dawn of the American republic. Jefferson had been president for only eighteen months when Bowdoin opened for the first time in September 1802, and he and our James Bowdoin III were colleagues, with James Bowdoin serving as Jefferson’s ambassador to Spain from 1805 to 1808 (although he apparently spent all that time in Paris and London).

The mere fact that our College is among the oldest and most venerable in our nation creates for us a responsibility to be true to our values: the liberal arts tradition and our sense of the common good as expressed over our history so clearly and in a steadfast nature. Change does not and should not come easily to Bowdoin. In fact, who are the most conservative (with a small c) people on campus? They are the faculty and our students who are eager for their place to remain as it is.

But, of course, institutions must change and do change. Bowdoin is not the same College it was two hundred years ago. It is not the same College it was fifty years ago. Our curriculum is richer and more sophisticated. Until 1971, the College was a place for men only. Until the late 90s, the entire residential experience at Bowdoin was grounded on the Greek system. And, over the past

fourteen years, our College has changed quite dramatically as we have admitted students from across America and around the world, creating access and opportunity for all who ought to be at Bowdoin.

Over these past fourteen years our gold standard has been excellence. And, we have worked thoughtfully to create opportunity for students, faculty, and staff. We have embraced and encouraged innovation and change throughout our College. And, hopefully, history will judge that innovation and change as having been embraced and implemented thoughtfully and appropriately for our College.

And now, as I end my time as president of this great College and transition to my new role as “civilian alum,” I too wonder about the future. I expect that the College will continue its steadfast commitment to the liberal arts, to its important residential life system, and to the common good.

But, we must remember the words I quoted in my inaugural talk that have guided us over the past fourteen years. Roger Howell, a historian and the president of Bowdoin at my own graduation in 1972, said in his inaugural speech:

“We should remember that no institution can live on its past, no matter how praiseworthy that past may be. If the study of the past leads to a stimulation of our minds for the future, then the effort is a laudable enterprise. If it lulls us to complacent inactivity, then it is fatal.”

I am confident that our College, like all liberal arts colleges in America, will face new and daunting challenges over the next period. The forces are well documented, if not well understood.

And so, I hope the College will continue in its traditions, but will also embrace change and innovation designed to enhance our core mission. How one determines the right course is not easy, but I think the guiding principles we have used over these last fourteen years have enduring value for the future.

The central questions are:

- What is right for Bowdoin?
- When is the correct moment for Bowdoin to make the choice to innovate and change?
- What is the right pace for change?

These are the fundamental questions—whether that change is a small tack or a significant new direction.

I am confident in the future of Bowdoin, soon in the hands of our new president, Clayton Rose. Clayton, together with his partners—our talented and dedicated faculty, incredible staff, and enthusiastic and passionate students—will determine our future course, together with committed and wise trustees and enormously loyal alumni, parents, and friends. Our future, focused on excellence, is bright and strong as long as we remain committed to following the right path for

Bowdoin and as long as we remain committed to excellence in everything we do or represent here at the College.

Finally, let me take you back fourteen years to when I began this journey as president. I spoke in my inaugural address of moral leadership and the challenge of being a person of substance and integrity. Back then, I quoted from Robert Coles's book *Lives of Moral Leadership*.

You have a real honest talk with yourself and find out who you are and what you really believe is right, the correct choice, and why that's it, and then, with your values figured out, the reasons you have why you are ready to do something. That means you have to act, act on your beliefs, and you have to behave right, not just talk right, and you have to convince others to go in the direction you are going....A leader is someone who knows how to persuade others to keep others company, to stand for what she believes in, the good, the one hundred percent right thing to do....

This is the lesson of leadership I have personally endeavored to live and lead by at Bowdoin and the lessons I hope we have inscribed upon our doorposts and our gates. For me, it is the essence of our historic commitment to the common good. This is our responsibility as leaders of Bowdoin and as engaged citizens going forth into new communities.

It has been a joy to lead this great College for these past fourteen years. I thank you all for what has been the opportunity of a lifetime.

This is my second senior year. To the Class of 2015, I look forward to our years together as classmates. Tomorrow, you become the future of Bowdoin. Be ambitious for yourselves, for your families, for your communities, and for your College.

Now, as we prepare to close this academic year, a word of gratitude to the Bowdoin faculty:

Thank you for your dedication to our students, to your scholarship, and to Bowdoin. I wish you all well as you continue throughout the summer months on your scholarship, research, and artistic work. You are the heart of our College, and I thank each and every one of you for your friendship and commitment to the College during my time as president.

To our dedicated and fantastic staff: Thank you!

And, to our graduating seniors: We wish you all the very best as you prepare to leave Brunswick. We are proud of you and of everything you have accomplished here, and we look forward to saluting you on the Quad tomorrow morning.

Finally, let us remind ourselves of where we started four years ago with "The Offer of the College," those words of William DeWitt Hyde from 1906:

[T]o make hosts of friends who are to be leaders in all walks of life; to lose oneself in generous enthusiasms and cooperate with others for common ends.

To the Class of 2015—you future artists, leaders, statesmen, and stateswomen—to each of you who will bring even greater pride to Bowdoin in years to come, I wish you success and a life of learning and deeds well done.