

Reunion Convocation 2014 Address

Good morning. Welcome back to Bowdoin. And to those of you “from away,” welcome back to Maine.

After thirteen years, and with one more year to go, it remains a great honor to stand before you as president of this great College that we all love and that has contributed so much to each of our lives.

Again this year, Bowdoin has been the beneficiary of a remarkable level of generous support from alumni, parents, and friends — support that means a great deal financially, but also represents a gratifying level of confidence in the College by people who matter most and who know Bowdoin best: alumni who appreciate first-hand the lasting benefits of a Bowdoin education; friends who see this College as a beacon; and past and present parents who, in addition to meeting the significant costs of educating their daughters and sons here, step forward to do even more.

In a few minutes, you will learn about the impressive level of giving by the classes represented in this arena today. This is your time to take well-deserved pride in all that you do for Bowdoin and, through Bowdoin, for higher education in America. This is our opportunity to thank you once again, wholeheartedly, for your vital support.

As you walk around campus on this beautiful spring weekend in Maine, I hope you also have a sense of pride in your College. Ours is among the most picturesque and historic college campuses in the world. And I am certain that as you stand in the middle of the Quad this weekend you will all remember what an extraordinary place this is and what it means to you.

Today at this Reunion Convocation we will celebrate three people in recognition of their important work for the common good — Mayor Ed Lee of the Class of 1974, and Dr. Richard Bail and Mike Poor, both of our fiftieth reunion Class of 1964. We will have much more to say about each of these great people in a few minutes, but for now, let’s take a moment to reflect on the history and commitment of Bowdoin College to the common good.

At his inauguration in 1802, Bowdoin’s first president, the Rev. Joseph McKeen, noted that:

“It ought always to be remembered, that literary institutions are founded and endowed for the common good, and not for the private advantage of those who resort to them for education. It is not that they may be enabled to pass through life in an easy or reputable manner, but that their mental powers may be cultivated and improved for the benefit of society.”

McKeen’s expression of the common good was a well-known philosophy at the beginning of the nineteenth century, fully ingrained in the religious, political, and philosophical discourse of the day.

Although McKeen does not mention George Washington, the concept of the common good was an important theme in Washington’s farewell address of 1796. It was also a centerpiece of de

Tocqueville's second volume of *Democracy in America*, published in 1840. In fact, as Brown University historian Gordon S. Wood has noted, "...no phrase except 'liberty' was invoked more often by Revolutionaries than 'the public good.'"

So while neither McKeen nor Bowdoin can claim originality, our college can and rightfully does claim a long and enduring association with the value of service to the common good. While others may have moved from one philosophy of education to another in search of an identity, Bowdoin has remained steadfast in its adherence to this fundamental principle.

This is not to say that our definition of the common good has remained as McKeen understood it in his day. Throughout our history – through wars, economic hardship, and social upheaval – Bowdoin's leaders and our students have redefined this notion of service.

Like other early colleges, Bowdoin's earliest mission was to produce learned clergymen and teachers. This was central to McKeen's notion of service to the common good.

Later, for many, the common good included the preservation of the Union and the abolishment of slavery, as a larger percentage of Bowdoin alumni fought for the Union than any other northern college.

In the twentieth century, our notion of the common good continued to evolve. Bowdoin's eighth president, Casey Sills, served from 1918 to 1952, (a prodigious tenure of 34 years that I have chosen not to emulate). For Sills, for the faculty, and for others of the period, the common good took the form of local leadership, with the president of the College establishing himself as a pillar of the community and a familiar moral presence in Brunswick. And for Sills, it included consideration of national issues as he led this College through the period of two world wars and the Great Depression. As Herbert Ross Brown, a well-known professor of English at Bowdoin wrote of Sills, the "public good seemed to stand cap in hand at the Kenneth Sills front door every morning."

Later, as our nation convulsed amid the struggle for civil rights and the war in Vietnam, Bowdoin students took it upon themselves to educate each other and to demand action.

It was a group of students who brought Dr. Martin Luther King to campus fifty years ago this month, and it was students who organized a general strike six years later in protest over the shootings at Kent State and the continued fighting in Vietnam. I was a student here then, and I can tell you that our concept of the common good was squarely behind the challenges we issued to one another and to the conventional wisdom of the day. However, the words "the common good" were not — as my classmates remember — part of the Bowdoin vernacular or discussed generally as College canon.

A decade or so later, the common good would evolve further at Bowdoin. In 1985, Roy Greason — the 12th president of our College — spoke about Bowdoin and the common good in a talk delivered in Brunswick to the Newcomen Society of the United States. He described the longstanding commitment of the College to the common good and then posed questions probably on the minds of those in attendance:

“How does a college set about giving its students a sense of the role it envisions for them? How does it inspire concern for the common good? Certainly not by a president pontificating. It can command the ear of its students only by realizing in its own policies the values it would have students realize in their lives.”

To further illustrate his point, President Greason described Bowdoin’s commitment to Upward Bound and student aid, to the volunteer organizations on campus, and to the work of our faculty and staff as leaders in the community.

This expression by President Greason of the manifold ways this College supported the common good foreshadows where Bowdoin is today.

As I think about the common good at Bowdoin in 2014, I see profound evidence that the charge of our founders is alive and well.

I see it in the opportunity created at Bowdoin for talented students from all walks of life; students of great promise who would not be able to be here without our commitment to admit qualified students regardless of their economic circumstance. Today we have more students receiving financial assistance to attend Bowdoin than at any time in our history, and we rank at the highest level of colleges in America in creating opportunity for talented students from the lowest economic brackets in America, far exceeding much wealthier universities in the Ivy League and wealthier liberal arts colleges considered among our peers. This is possible only because of the shared values between faculty, staff, students, and hundreds of alumni, parents, and friends who support Bowdoin and this priority.

I also see evidence of the common good in the work of hundreds of students, faculty, and staff who have made community service locally, nationally, and internationally, the envy of colleges across America. This is not service dictated by professors, presidents, or student leaders. Unlike other well-meaning colleges that are creating programs to improve local relations or to enhance their own surroundings, community service at Bowdoin bubbles up from individuals — from students, faculty, and staff who recognize a need, assume responsibility as citizens, and combine enthusiasm, imagination, and effort in service to others.

I see evidence of the common good in the lively debates that take place at Bowdoin on issues of the day, and in the positions taken by the College on matters that affect us all. Campus activism on a multitude of issues is on the rise, particularly on the issues related to the environment and climate change. Our College has invested seriously in improvements to our campus and community that have significantly limited our carbon footprint. And, we announced earlier this year that we are about to start a solar installation on the roof of the Watson Arena and the Farley Field House as well as on approximately four acres of the land we acquired at the former Brunswick Naval Air Station. This solar facility will provide nearly eight percent of our electricity and supplement our cogeneration plant that meets another eight percent of our electrical demand.

So, we have much to say about the common good at Bowdoin today. And yet, despite all of this evidence and all of our history, there remain many among us who yearn for a clearer definition

of what we intend by our often stated commitment to the common good. Some even believe that it is high time that we “brand” ourselves and the common good around some vital issue like the elimination of poverty or the preservation of our environment.

From my perspective, our history shows that Bowdoin’s commitment to the common good is much too broad to be attached to or focused on a single issue, even vitally important, substantive issues like these. Rather, I believe our commitment to the common good is essentially about our shared values — the “common” part of the common good. Values deeply rooted in education and in the primacy of our academic program. These values are also rooted in the standards and principles that guide our residential life program designed to allow our students to grow and mature, but also to ensure that they stand to the mark of our College’s values. The values are, in all respects, identified with the genuine excellence of Bowdoin College.

Let’s go back to McKeen’s formulation. He had it right over 200 years ago. Our commitment to the common good is about preparing students through education to become productive members of society or, as McKeen said, to improve “...their mental powers for the benefit of society.” In this sense, our most important work on behalf of the common good takes place right here in our classrooms, labs, theaters, and studios. It exists in the work of educating our students within the liberal arts model — of shaping open and sophisticated minds capable of critical thinking, analysis, and a lifetime of learning.

Too many in our society are absolutely certain about what they believe and advocate, but often live in a fact-free zone. What we do so well here is to teach our students and ourselves how to learn, think, analyze, write, and communicate generally. We arm them and us with the tools and facts to understand science, economics, history, art, mathematics, philosophy, sociology and on and on — the tools and facts necessary to truly examine an issue and to stake out a thoughtful, educated, and informed position for the common good. This is, and always has been, our fundamental strength.

And so today we renew our commitment by honoring Lee, Bail, and Poor for their important work in support of the common good. And later this afternoon, we will have the opportunity to hear from two other graduates of this College who have dedicated their lives and considerable talent to making this world a better place: Geoff Canada of the Class of 1974 and the Harlem Children’s Zone, and U.S. Senator and peacemaker George Mitchell of the Class of 1954.

Let me take a moment for a brief word about our future. This is my final reunion with the 4s and the 9s as president of the College. In future years, I will be limited to sharing with the 2s and the 7s. One of the great experiences of this job is that every year I get to participate in reunion and experience the annual reconnection of our alumni. But, after next year and what will be fourteen years as president of Bowdoin, it is time to move on to make way for new leadership of this great College. I want to thank you all for your support and encouragement. It has been a joy for me to lead this great College, and Karen, our boys, and I are proud citizens of Brunswick and Maine. Our College is strong and our path is secure. As we look into the future, this is the right time for a transition because of the strength of our College. Transitions are by their very nature times of change and some instability, and our College is poised to manage transition very well. This is among the best jobs in the world and I am confident that this College will find a new fantastic

leader. It will be our job as alumni to continue to support Bowdoin and to stay connected. Bowdoin's gold standard is excellence and together, we must never become complacent about our success, and always, always be ambitious for our College.

Karen and I are delighted to have you back on campus with us today, and we look forward to speaking with as many of you as we can this weekend, and to welcoming you again as many times in the future as you are able to return.

Now, enjoy the weekend! I hope you take time to tour the campus, visit with faculty and staff, and take pleasure in your classmates, family and friends.

I hope you'll revel in some nostalgia for Bowdoin's past, take pride in the Bowdoin of today, and recommit yourselves to our important work together to shape an even stronger Bowdoin of tomorrow.

Thank you.