Using Your Culture

Convocation Address. Jorunn J. Buckley, Dept. of Religion

Welcome to Bowdoin!

You are about to spend four years here, but it does not end with that. Students stay in touch after they leave. The reasons may be recommendation letters to law school, for jobs, internships, etc. Or: some students just want to remain in touch for other reasons. Sarah, for instance, emailed me recently from Italy, unhappy, stuck in a not very satisfying job, and she says: “I’m sorry, I was a mediocre student!—do you remember me?” Yes, of course I do.

Another one, who maybe never finished (I did not check) took breaks from Bowdoin. He stopped by my office, and as we chatted he looked out the window and saw two Bowdoin students on the sidewalk. He sneered, “Bowdoin Students! What a bunch of penguins!” “No,” I said, sternly, “you’re wrong: they’re not all of the same kind, and you know that!” This particular student is a very independent guy, did a self-designed major (you can do that here), an American-Iranian surfer from California.

So, the “bunch of penguins” reaction tells us to watch out for stereotypes, and also that you, the students, carry with you your own
mini or maxi-culture. You should use it. You have automatic
sociological knowledge. Respect it! At the same time: you may use
Bowdoin to get some distance to it. You’re here to discover what you
did not know existed—that’s the risk. Maybe you think you’re
exceptional, maybe you were a candidate for “the madman for the
village” role in your hometown, or maybe you were the town genius.
You can study those kinds of types here, in literature and sociology
courses, for instance. You might get a new understanding of yourself.

Above all: get rid of most high school type orientations—you’re in
college now. You may have been brainwashed in high school, but we’ll
do it over here. You’re not here to be celebrated, automatically, for your
uniqueness, despite what they tell you. Also, if you’re from too-cozy
private education, be warned! Some years ago, a girl in one of my
courses had bad habits: her teachers had coddled her, acted as her
“friends,” and she never took deadlines seriously. I caught her. Realizing
that the situation was serious, she got mad at her high school teachers
back home for having prepared her badly for college life, and she told
them so during Thanksgiving break. She had to leave Bowdoin for a
while—due to inability to hand in work on time. But she came back, and
finished.
Did you go through high school effortlessly? Maybe you can’t do that anymore. At another institution (not Bowdoin!), a girl in my Bible class cheated, plagiarized. I discovered her, and she got so angry. “I cheated all through high school, and now you catch me, here at a research university, in a Bible class!” She practically screamed.

Bowdoin has no pressure to conform: here, you can be free of that. No fashion police. New York and Chicago girls are relieved. You need no fancy shoes! Maybe no shoes. Kurt, my very serious, barefooted student from Montana, a kind of Taoist sage adept, walked around without socks in his sandals in winter, in the snow and slush. His friend from New England imitated him, but got frost-bite.

I told a student who had trouble writing that he should talk to a certain fellow-student in class. “Do you mean the guy with the weird clothes?” he said, incredulously, looking at me like I was mad. I told him, calmly, “James is from a big Southern city, where men still have style. “I didn't say,”—unlike you, who are from a Boston suburb where they have no style.”

Remember: I said that you have a cultural framework already. Use it, although you may be at Bowdoin in order to flee from your background. Now you think Bowdoin will be a free place? Yes and no.
Who am I to speak like this? Let me assure you of the advantages of provincialism. I've never been to college. In my day, my country, in Norway, we had only University, not College. I've been in the US about 40 years, and I had very foggy ideas, at first, of US higher education. Why did it cost money, for one thing? I did some blunders. Maybe still do. I'm not fond of systems, institutions, rules, but I knew, early, that I needed a place to do my own stuff. Despite all signs to the contrary, I had a conviction that there must be a place. If you're in the same boat, you need to find it. It may take a while, years. An intellectual place, like this one, is a possibility.

I grew up at a provincial mental hospital in southern Norway, daughter of the hospital gardener (my father was a socialist, a hunter and a fisherman who began working at 14). I ate a lot of wild food. Somehow, we were convinced that chicken was not food, and I never ate it until I was in my 20s. I had an unusual childhood, and oddly enough, considerable tolerance from my entirely non-intellectual family. Early on, my parents realized that I would go my own ways. At the University, I chose useless avenues (psychology, philosophy and history of religions), and was under threat of losing my student loans. "We'll need people like you in 10 years, but not now, so we cannot encourage your
choice of study areas," they said. I won, nevertheless, and the loans continued.

Here at Bowdoin you may find that courses and professors outside of your prospective major are of greater interest than your parents imagined in their most positive dreams on your behalf. From MIT, I recall a girl from Arizona, supposed to be in physics, who got hooked on courses in the Literature Faculty, and became a Shakespeare fan. The parents got mad at the Literature Faculty! What had MIT done to their daughter, the high school science genius? This is the risk of higher education: you never know what will happen. Even here.

I'll end with a story from the mental hospital (my father told me this): he and some patients were working on setting up a fence. One of the patients looked with suspicion at one of his fellows, saying "You, who are so wall-eyed, you can't see straight: how can you do this work? In the middle of the week, you can see both Sundays!" My question to you is this: maybe you can look in opposite directions and still make a straight fence? Can you hold in your mind several realities at once? Probably. Try it.