Welcome to Students  
August 29, 2015  
Clayton Rose  

Thank you Dean Meiklejohn.  

Good afternoon Class of 2019!  

Welcome back to campus.  

By now it’s sinking in. Packed up your treasured belongings and moved away from home, among a whole new group of people, getting ready to do things you’ve never done before. Will everyone like me?  

OK, ... enough about me.  

As you know, I am new to Bowdoin, having arrived on July 1, and you and I share a special bond – we’re beginning our journey at Bowdoin together.  

I am delighted to have my chance to welcome you, and to share a few thoughts about Bowdoin and the community you’ve joined and that will forever be a part of you. I know you have just returned from your Orientation trips, and are tired and probably in need of a shower. I promise to not make this too long, and I’ll hope you’ll muster the energy to listen and then reflect on these thoughts.  

When you accepted our offer of admission you understood what a special place Bowdoin is. And after your trips I suspect you know it to be even more special than you realized.  

I won’t regale you with the facts or figures – you know them. But consider the [30,000] or so graduates of Bowdoin over the past 209 years. Among them are giants in literature and letters; war heroes; Arctic explorers; individuals who have broken racial and gender barriers; groundbreaking scientists and doctors; great political, government, and diplomatic figures; Wall Street titans; Olympic champions; business and social entrepreneurs; leaders in technology; and great philanthropists. And there are many, many others who have made a difference and lived lives of real meaning out of the spotlight. Like you, they gathered together as we are this afternoon as they began their time at the College. They are you, and you are them.  

Continuing a long standing tradition, in few days each of you’ll visit my office, and you will sign the Matriculation Book, on a desk that belonged to Nathanial Hawthorne, Class of 1825, and have a chance to see the signature of other first-year students dating back to the early days of
the College. This will be a tangible symbol of your permanent link to Bowdoin. And for me, it will be a terrific chance to meet each of you.

Now, I’d like to offer a few observations that I hope will help you get the most from your Bowdoin liberal arts education and experience.

It begins with the faculty. The professors here are simply amazing, and among the finest and most dedicated teachers in American education. They are also great scholars and artists, with research interests that span every human activity and endeavor. They chose to be at Bowdoin, and they are dedicated to working with you, and to helping to educate you. Perhaps the greatest opportunity offered by Bowdoin is the opportunity to forge real and lasting relationships with your professors. As you move through the College you will find faculty who ignite your interest in a subject or who challenge you in exciting ways. Take more classes with them. Craft independent studies to work on issues of mutual interest. Really get to know them, and have them get to know you. These will be among the most rewarding and enduring experiences of your time at Bowdoin.

Our coaches are dedicated to the Bowdoin idea of the scholar-athlete, and focus on character, personal growth and teamwork as much as wins and losses. Our museum folks make the art, history and culture accessible, and connect our collections to our teaching and scholarship.

The staff at Bowdoin — they are simply amazing, and we are so lucky to have them. From housekeeping to the dining hall, security, athletic trainers, groundkeepers—across the campus. They keep everything working and make it possible for the College to operate, and for you to do your work and have some fun. And like the faculty, they are deeply devoted to Bowdoin. Please find time to engage with them and thank them for all that they do for us.

And we have amazing people dedicated to assisting you with academic, residential, social, emotional and health issues. Everyone needs help in navigating life and realizing its promises, and life at Bowdoin is no different. I urge you to use these folks to help you get the most from the College.

One of the gifts that comes with a college education is the rare opportunity to be a blank slate, to define yourself as you wish to be defined, without regard to how you or others defined you in life before you arrived. Embrace this gift and think deeply about who you are and who you want to be. I was able to experience this in the middle of my life when I returned to school for a Ph.D. after my business career. No one in my Ph.D. program cared a hoot about what I had done or been before, it was all about who I wanted to be with them. It was a liberating experience.
Strive to be excellent in everything you do here – intellectual, athletic, artistic, cultural, service, whatever. Do not just show up. I don’t say this because that’s what older people like me always say, but rather because in stretching and pushing yourself you will find what you are really capable of accomplishing, and the satisfaction from this is amazing. This is not say that you won’t fail or come up short of your expectations. You will, and you should. We grow and learn in good part, by failing, by figuring out where we went wrong, and then by moving ahead. This isn’t fun, but again it will be deeply satisfying. And the most successful people I know in all walks of life have learned how to contend with the failure that inevitably comes from pushing themselves.

A liberal arts education is about critical thinking, understanding the various disciplines, being able to communicate effectively, and knowing who we are as human beings – physically, socially, spiritual, political. You will immerse yourself in all of this here.

But at its core, a liberal arts education and intellectual experience is about being uncomfortable, and at times even rattled. It is more about the questions than answers, about challenging deeply held views, and pushing ourselves to comprehend new material, and considering material that shakes us up. A great liberal arts education is not easy; by its nature it cannot be. But it will be deeply rewarding, and it will set you on a path to ambitiously engage the world, to continue learning, to confront hard problems, and to enjoy success. You will learn new ways of thinking about old problems, you will test ideas you hold dear, and reaffirm many of them, and perhaps adjust a few. And in those moments when you are really uncomfortable, when you are struggling to get your minds around a new concept or an idea that challenges your assumptions, I want you to step back for a moment and reflect on the notion that this is exactly why you are here. Don’t avoid being uncomfortable, embrace it. If you think the same way, and think about the same things in the same way four years from now, something has gone wrong.

Deeply tied to this is my suggestion—my challenge —that you each experiment with the academic offerings here. Try new classes, try things you don’t think of yourself as good at, or that you secretly have an interest in but do not seem “practical” or aligned with how you see yourself (remember, you are a blank slate). Worry less about your GPA and more about learning who you are and teasing out unknown passions. Success will follow from opening yourself up to new possibilities.

You should also experiment with people. Now that sounds a bit weird, so what do I mean? The diversity of identities at Bowdoin is breathtaking – by race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, economic means, and political views, among others. It is likely this is the first time, and perhaps the last, that you’ll have to really get to know people who come from so many backgrounds and have so many different views and identities. Get to know your classmates,
learn about them, and share who you are with them. Understand, respect, and celebrate your differing identities. You will be richer for it and so will they. Seek out others with differing views, try to understand why they have the views they do, share your views with them, and develop a way of having a conversation that acknowledges, celebrates and respects your differences, rather than using them as a barrier.

This brings me to the “Bowdoin Hello.” It has been a tradition of the College that we all greet each other, on campus and in town. While the “Hello” has evolved into “hi,” this simple act matters and reaffirms our bonds.

Bowdoin will also be great fun. You will make deep and lifelong friendships. You will goof around, compete athletically, engage in artistic and cultural endeavors, explore the outdoors, and much more. You will marvel at the New England fall, revel in the snow, and celebrate the arrival (finally!) of spring.

A word about our values. We have very few formal rules here. We expect you to use your sound judgement and your sense of what is right and appropriate. You are here, for among other things, to become leaders, and understanding what to do when is essential for leadership. That said, we do have the Bowdoin Honor Code and Social Code. You need to read and understand both, and in the next few days you will be asked to acknowledge in writing that you have done so, and that you will abide by them, which we expect and require you to do. These rules are pretty simple and obvious – for example, do your own work, be diligent about referencing sources, be careful in using the internet inappropriately when writing your papers. On the social side, it is all about respect. And to be clear, under no circumstances do we condone or permit violence to another person, or theft or destruction of property. You will be held to a high standard at Bowdoin, and unfortunately each year there are a few instances where students have a lapse in judgement that has lasting consequences.

Let me say a word about an issue on all college campuses and in society more broadly – unwanted sexual contact. Often in these situations there are two common elements. First, alcohol plays a role, and second, there was a friend that could have gotten one or both parties out of the situation but failed to act. I hope you’ve all had a chance to read Dean Foster’s message about alcohol. If you haven’t, please do. If you find yourself in a bad place with respect to alcohol ask for help – the security folks at Bowdoin are here to help you and keep you safe. Similarly, take care of your friends. If you see someone in a compromised situation, get them out of there. And remember, in any intimate relationship it is your responsibility to make sure that your partner is a willing partner, and that “no” does mean “no.” And keep in mind that someone impaired by alcohol is not capable of providing consent. You will hear more about this in the days to come, and again we have remarkable people and resources here to help you navigate these issues, including your Proctors who are here this evening.
Our first President, Joseph McKeen said, “Literary institutions are founded and endowed for the Common Good and not for the private advantage of those who resort to them for education.”

The idea of the Common Good is lived at Bowdoin every day, and lived by Bowdoin alumni every day. Community service is one great way of honoring and living the Common Good, and almost 75 percent of our students are engaged in some form of community service. I urge you to make room for this in your busy schedules. You will be richer for the experience, and you will make a difference in the lives of others.

I’d be remiss if I did not mention Brunswick and Maine. Brunswick is a remarkable community, and it is your town. Get to know it, the people, the businesses, and all they have to offer. Visit the farmer’s market, skate on the town mall, and get to know your neighbors. And make sure to get to know Maine – it is state with amazing physical beauty 365 days a year, and with wonderful people. Getting to know Brunswick and Maine will be another great part of your Bowdoin education.

Finally, you all know about The Offer of the College.

TO BE AT HOME in all lands and all ages;
To count Nature a familiar acquaintance,
And Art an intimate friend;
To gain a standard for the appreciation of others' work
And the criticism of your own;
To carry the keys of the world's library in your pocket,
And feel its resources behind you in whatever task you undertake;
To make hosts of friends...
Who are to be leaders in all walks of life;
To lose yourself in generous enthusiasms
And cooperate with others for common ends -
This is the offer of the college for the best four years of your life.

This vivid description of the promise of a Bowdoin liberal arts education was written over 100 years ago by our seventh president, William DeWitt Hyde. One of my more recent predecessor, Robert Edwards, said that “The Offer” is just that, an offer. To you. It is now up to you to take it up, and to get the most from it. If you rise to this challenge you will find that Bowdoin will indeed be among the “best four years of your life.”

I am thrilled you are here. I am thrilled that I am here. And I am thrilled we are beginning this journey together. Welcome to Bowdoin College!