

Overview

Context for the Self-Study

Bowdoin College's 2006 reaccreditation self-study takes place at an important time in the College's history. Bowdoin finds itself with record numbers of high-achieving students applying each year. We attract the very best faculty because of our talented students and our commitment to scholarship. Our financial resources are the most significant and stable in our history and we have a loyal community of alumni, parents and friends. Bowdoin's sense of itself as a liberal arts college has been reinforced by a new statement on liberal arts education and by a new faculty vision for general education. And we have a College community—students, faculty, staff and alumni—who share a commitment to the Common Good.

However, we are also mindful that this self-study takes place in a national context of continuing uncertainty about the place of liberal education in our society. On the one hand, liberal arts colleges continue to graduate “leaders in all walks of life,” to use the language of Bowdoin's Offer of the College, and to exert a disproportionate influence in the nation and around the world. At the same time, enrollment at liberal arts colleges is declining as a percentage of the total college-going population (now less than 4%), while the college-age cohort is declining at a faster rate in the northeast than in other areas of the country. Moreover, the role of liberal arts colleges is less well known in many other areas of the country where population increases are projected over the next decade and where Bowdoin must recruit increasing numbers of students.

Bowdoin College's central educational mission cannot be taken for granted in such a context. We have a distinguished history and are proud of it. But Bowdoin and other liberal arts colleges cannot afford to rely uncritically on traditions and past practices. Unless we regularly examine and redefine the importance and delivery of liberal education, we may be perceived as isolated and “irrelevant” enclaves, out of touch with the vitality, ideas, and global intellectual communities of the new century. We at Bowdoin recognize the responsibility to articulate clearly our aspirations for liberal education in this time, and to be attentive to institutional effectiveness and critical self-analysis so that we can continue to improve.

Efforts to champion liberal education take place in a nation focused on accountability in education generally and obsessed with measuring quality through standardized tests. As an institution that in 1970 dropped a requirement for submission of standardized test scores, Bowdoin is justifiably skeptical of standardized measures. We do have a long history of thoughtful assessment, and if one measure of success is the ability of our graduates to make important contributions to their communities, the nation and the world, Bowdoin can provide countless examples. We are particularly interested in assessment as a way of gaining insights about what we do well and where we could improve in achieving our mission. We share with other small liberal arts colleges the challenge and responsibility of developing approaches to assessment that can usefully inform our educational practices.

In higher education more generally, tuition costs continue to increase more rapidly than inflation, and questions abound about the affordability of college and access to it. These issues are pronounced in private liberal arts institutions like ours with both high tuitions and strong traditions of assisting 35% to 45% of our students with the cost of attendance. Although the market (with increasing numbers of student applicants and relatively high yield rates) tells us that Bowdoin remains highly attractive, we also know that cost and cost controls matter and that need-based financial aid, though at risk, is vitally important to our mission. As colleges and universities compete for the best students, pressures expand to shift from need-based aid to merit aid. These issues challenge us to reexamine regularly our priorities, how we use our resources, and how we think about recruitment of students.

Approach of the Self-Study

In responses to earlier reports to NEASC's Commission on Higher Education, the College has been chided for being too self-critical and for failing to take credit for significant achievements. Indeed, as we prepare a forward-looking self-study, it can be easier to see the unsolved problems and the challenges ahead than to recognize past accomplishments and institutional strengths. In this self-study we have been attentive to achievements while continuing to be thoughtful and self-critical.

The format of the self-study includes summary sections of institutional effectiveness at the conclusion of each Standard, but we have also tried to embed some of the details of appraisal and projection throughout the document.

In looking back on the past decade, we are excited and somewhat surprised by the extent of change and innovation that has taken place, and we believe those changes have made Bowdoin a stronger institution. The following section highlights some of those major accomplishments while noting briefly some of the key challenges that the College must address going forward.

A Decade of Change: Major Themes and Findings of the Self-Study

1. In 2004, the faculty developed and approved a statement on liberal education and a new set of distribution requirements that will take effect in 2006 (Standard 4). The statement on liberal education draws upon the core documents of the College (Standard 1) and provides a clear educational vision for Bowdoin. The most significant challenge is to continue implementation of the general education requirements and to work with departments to balance contributions to that program with the delivery of strong major programs. A further challenge will be to revise the College's approach to academic advising in light of these changes.
2. During the past ten years, Bowdoin has endowed new faculty positions, expanded the percentage of the budget supporting the academic program, increased significantly the number of faculty, and reduced the student/faculty ratio. These

- changes have helped to strengthen the curriculum, reduce class size, and continue the College's commitment to providing students with significant opportunities for close interaction with faculty. A new \$250 million capital campaign promises to add another twelve faculty positions. (Materials relating to the capital campaign are included in the Team Room.) Challenges ahead include finding appropriate space for new faculty, continuing work to balance reduced class size with student access to courses, and managing the strains created by heavy burdens of recruiting and reviewing that go with an expanded faculty (Standards 9, 4, and 5).
3. By unanimous Trustee vote in 1997, Bowdoin began implementation of a new residential life plan, phased out fraternities, and adopted a statement on the "Values of a Learning Community." We then created a new and inclusive College House system, built new residence halls and renovated former fraternities for housing, constructed new central dining space, and reorganized support and staffing for residential life. Students' sense of community and belonging on campus has improved dramatically. Major continuing challenges and goals focus on continuing progress in integrating intellectual and residential life, enriching a pluralistic campus community, and managing the challenges of alcohol use on campus (Standard 6).
 4. Through a campus-wide effort, new strategies for recruiting, and increased commitment to financial aid, the College has substantially enriched the geographic, socioeconomic, and racial diversity of the student body (Standard 6). Bowdoin has expanded the proportion of aid recipients, remained need-blind, and doubled the percentage of students of color on campus. The most pressing future challenges are to raise endowment dollars to sustain these initiatives and to continue to adapt admissions and financial aid practice and policy in a changing and competitive environment.
 5. The College is a member of the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC), a highly successful and competitive NCAA Division III athletic conference. In conjunction with members of the league, Bowdoin has developed more rigorous admissions standards for admitted students; we have also made intentional efforts to ensure the integration of athletic programs into the College's residential life experience.
 6. The College has significantly strengthened its support for scholarly and artistic work of faculty members and has established a set of expectations for new faculty that make clear the high value that Bowdoin places on both excellent teaching and scholarly accomplishment. To maintain balance among these expectations and foster their achievement, the College intends to support an enhanced sabbatical program and provide increased numbers of competitive sabbatical supplement grants through the capital campaign (Standard 5).
 7. Bowdoin has developed a variety of courses and co-curricular supports to assist students in achieving academic success. The challenge is to make these varied

- programs and activities work together as a coherent whole with clear leadership and with benchmarks for assessing the success of the overall enterprise. To do so requires close coordination among the admissions, academic affairs, student affairs, and institutional research offices. That coordination is emerging in 2006 and is a major institutional priority (Standard 4).
8. Bowdoin has become significantly stronger financially through successful completion of one capital campaign and expansion of annual giving as well as through vastly improved management of the endowment, which has grown from \$276 million in 1996 to \$578 million as of June 30, 2005. This record of growth provides the foundation for confidence in the success of a new \$250 million capital campaign that will be publicly launched in November 2006. Successful completion of that campaign is a major institutional priority, as is expansion of annual giving by alumni (Standard 9).
 9. The College has improved financial management, in part through changes in budgeting to a “sources and uses” format that provides a straightforward view of income and expenditures each year. Building reserves, managing position control, restraining debt, and meeting the rising costs of health care and energy are central budget challenges (Standard 9).
 10. Although Bowdoin does not have a “strategic plan,” it has established a record of targeted and coordinated planning initiatives and of successful implementation of planning recommendations. Examples include a residential life plan, a plan to diversify the student body, a Campus Plan, and a plan for a new capital campaign. A major planning challenge is posed by the impending closure of nearby Brunswick Naval Air Station (Standard 2).
 11. Although Bowdoin continues to rely on course-by-course assessment of student learning, it has been engaged with other colleges and on its own in expanding faculty involvement with assessment issues and in specific projects related to departmental programs and to efforts to understand student learning throughout a college career. A short-term challenge is to move forward on a project to assess student writing and to support faculty in developing their skills as teachers of writing (Standards 2 and 4). The longer-term challenge is to work with other colleges both to learn from them and to develop strategies for assessment that enhance teaching and learning.
 12. The College climate for women has changed dramatically since 1996 with the elimination of the fraternities, increasing numbers of women faculty and administrative leaders, a range of new policies, and new resources to support women’s athletics. The Oversight Committee on the Status of Women continues to monitor these issues to help ensure that the College remains vigilant about the climate for women students, faculty, and staff (Standard 11).

13. The decade of building and renovation in the 1990s has continued apace, both through major new construction (science building, residence halls, theater, dining hall, and outdoor leadership center, for example) and through significant campus renovation and renewal (Museum of Art, academic buildings, recital hall, residence halls, College Houses, admissions office). This work, now occurring in the context of a campus plan, continues to transform a historic campus to meet the needs of a contemporary and changing program. The significant institutional challenge is to sustain this level of effort as needs for new and renovated space continue to present themselves (Standard 8).

14. Information technology continues to transform communication in higher education, to change the ways that faculty can teach, and to shape the development and to some degree the acquisition expenditures of a continuously adapting Library. Bowdoin has reorganized support for academic computing twice since 1996 and created an integrated support system in Information Technology that has expanded assistance for students and for classroom teaching while providing resources for specialized faculty projects. The challenges ahead include management of the costs of technology and understanding the directions of future development in ways that can enable us to plan wisely for capital and other expenditures (Standard 7).

