

Standard One: Mission and Purpose

Bowdoin College's fundamental mission remains the offer of a challenging liberal education for undergraduates in a residential setting that supports the values of the common good while embracing and reflecting a complex and diverse world. We believe that the best undergraduate education benefits from opportunities for close interaction between faculty and students, and that to teach well in their disciplines faculty must be excellent and engaged scholars and artists. Moreover, we are committed to the creation of a vibrant intellectual community based upon the active scholarship of our faculty throughout their careers. Its residential character allows Bowdoin to extend students' learning and growth as citizens and leaders beyond classrooms and laboratories.

The Mission Statement

Over 100 years, Bowdoin's mission has been expressed through two historical, guiding documents and through other current, and more specific, interpretations of those documents. These interpretations have reflected the self-critical nature of the College—not as a place with a changing mission, but as a dynamic institution that is constantly assessing how its core liberal arts mission should be expressed.

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 in whatever 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.*

William DeWitt Hyde, 7th President of Bowdoin College, 1885-1917

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.

Joseph McKeen, in his inaugural address as the first president of Bowdoin College, 1802

The themes of President McKeen's inaugural statement and President Hyde's Offer of the College are the touchstones of the College. Both are open enough to permit change as we continue to debate the meaning of the common good and to reinterpret both the Offer and our understanding of what a liberal education means in the twenty-first century. These two statements are the bedrock principles supporting Bowdoin's purpose as an exceptional residential, coeducational, liberal arts college that has remained true to its mission over its more than 200-year history.

Most recently, two important documents at the College since the 1996 reaccreditation visit have strengthened and clarified Bowdoin's strong sense of mission: the formal mission statement approved by the Trustees in 1999, which provides a more current interpretation of our historic mission documents for students and families and faculty considering the College; and the 2004 redefinition of a liberal education that accompanied the adoption of new distribution requirements. Both appear in the College Catalogue. The curricular statement importantly builds on the Offer in articulating the core mission of the College to promote liberal education:

A liberal education cultivates the mind and the imagination; encourages seeking after truth, meaning, and beauty; awakens an appreciation of past traditions and present challenges; fosters joy in learning and sharing that learning with others; supports taking the intellectual risks required to explore the unknown, test new ideas, and enter into constructive debate; and builds the foundation for making principled judgments. It hones the capacity for critical and open intellectual inquiry—the interest in asking questions, challenging assumptions, seeking answers, and reaching conclusions supported by logic and evidence. A liberal education rests fundamentally on the free exchange of ideas—on conversation and questioning—that thrives in classrooms, lecture halls, laboratories, studios, dining halls, playing fields, and residence halls. Ultimately, a liberal education promotes independent thinking, individual action, and social responsibility.

Institutional Effectiveness

In 2006, the College has a clear sense of mission and direction, and is proud of the mission articulated by the "Offer" and by McKeen's statement. Hyde's Offer and McKeen's call to action for the common good receive prominent attention in College publications, Bowdoin's Web site, and at a number of campus events, including Convocation, Baccalaureate, welcoming events for parents, student convening dinners, alumni meetings, and on campus tours. They helped to frame the faculty's most recent statement on liberal education, which will receive increasing attention and prominence as it takes effect in Fall 2006 and faculty members begin to use it as reference for advising students.

The Offer and McKeen's call to action also will serve as we go forward to support the College's renewed commitment to the educational and community benefits of diverse student, faculty, and staff experiences and perspectives; and to promote Bowdoin's mission of preparing principled leaders from all walks of life.