

A Liberal Education at Bowdoin College

IN 1906, BOWDOIN'S PRESIDENT, William DeWitt Hyde, wrote "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.

This offer spelled out a vision of the aspirations of a liberal education appropriate to the early twentieth century. Many elements of it still have currency one hundred years later. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a vastly changed College in a dramatically altered world provides a related but expanded offer—of intellectual challenge and personal growth in the context of an active and engaged learning community closely linked to the social and natural worlds.

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.

Since its opening in 1802, Bowdoin has understood the obligation to direct liberal education toward the common good. In the twenty-first century, that obligation is stronger than ever. The challenge of defining a "common good" and acting on it is highlighted, however, in an interconnected world of widely varied cultures, interests, resources, and power. To prepare students for this complexity, a liberal education must teach about differences across cultures and within societies. At the same time, it should help students understand and respect the values and implications of a shared natural world and human heritage. By doing so, a liberal education will challenge students to appreciate and contend with diversity and the conflicts inherent in differing experiences, perspectives, and values at the same time that they find ways to contribute to the common project of living together in the world.

Although a liberal education is not narrowly vocational, it provides the broadest grounding for finding a vocation by preparing students to be engaged, adaptable, independent, and capable citizens.

A student in a residential liberal arts college is removed from many of the immediate responsibilities of daily adult life, making the four years of education extraordinarily privileged ones. Such an education, however, must engage that world—both contemporary and historical, both local and global. This engagement comes through individual and group research, service learning, volunteer activities, summer internships, off-campus study, and more.

The success of a Bowdoin education is evident in the capacity of graduates to be informed and critically analytic readers of texts, evidence, and conclusions; to be able to construct a logical argument; to communicate in writing and speaking with clarity and self-confidence; to understand the nature of artistic creation and the character of critical aesthetic judgment; to have the capacity to use quantitative and graphical presentations of information critically and confidently; and to access, evaluate, and make effective use of information resources in varied forms and media. These fundamental capacities serve as crucial supports for a commitment to active intellectual inquiry—to taking independent and multifaceted approaches to solving complex problems; knowing how to ask important and fruitful questions and to pursue answers critically and effectively; sharing in the excitement of discovery and creativity; and being passionately committed to a subject of study. Graduates should thus have the ability to engage competing views critically, to make principled judgments that inform their practice, and to work effectively with others as informed citizens committed to constructing a just and sustainable world.