In 1914, Bowdoin College established the Bureau for Research in Municipal Government to foster research into municipal practices as well as develop promising students to serve as local civic leaders. A historical sketch of the bureau and its successor, the Public Affairs Research Center, however, shows that these institutes were not sustained over time. Why did this component of Bowdoin College’s mission dissolve over the course of the twentieth century?

This study reveals three related reasons. First, faculty interest in municipal government declined over time, corresponding with a general trend away from the subfield in the political science discipline. As a result, the faculty had no one willing to lead the project. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the College chose to discontinue financing these organizations in part because they increasingly focused their activities away from students. Third, these events did not occur in a vacuum. The decline of civicly oriented research institutes at Bowdoin represented a national decline of the Progressive Era ideals that characterized the bureau’s early activities.

In 1950, Bowdoin faculty members Orren C. Hormell and Lawrence L. Pelletier published The Manager Plan for Maine, a document that played an important role in the development of Maine’s municipal manager system. Twelve years later, James Wilson, director of the Bureau for Research in Municipal Government, and Bowdoin Undergraduate Research Fellow Robert W. Crowe produced Managers in Maine, which described a process for evaluating the manager system by practitioners.

In March 1956, Associate Professor of Economics James Storer published Maine Economic Development and the Community Survey through Bowdoin College’s Bureau for Research in Municipal Government. Storer’s project was sponsored by the Maine College-Community Research Program, an organization comprised of Maine businessmen as well as economists from Bates, Bowdoin and Colby Colleges and the University of Maine.

Fifty years after Bowdoin College established its Bureau for Research in Municipal Government, the Bureau published A Maine Profile: Some Conditioners of Her Political System. Written by Assistant Professor of Government David B. Walker, the publication, according to bureau director J. Clarence Davies III, examined “with great care and thoroughness those factors of Maine’s population, economy, and governmental system which provide the basis for her politics and which must set the bounds for any policy proposals.”

Calling projects such as Maine Public Utilities “a valuable service to the public,” Bowdoin College President Kenneth Sills claimed, “As I have said so often, such a service is clearly one of the functions of a college or university. The college depends in no small measure upon the confidence and goodwill of the public; in return it seems reasonable that it should give to the public from time to time such disinterested contributions as may be of help in forming and in guiding public opinion.”

The closing of Bowdoin’s Public Affairs Research Center did not end the story of public affairs centers in Maine. In 1965, the University of Maine, Orono, established a Bureau of Public Administration, and Colby College launched the Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement in 2003. Indeed, Bowdoin is in the middle of its own public affairs institute resurgence. With the opening of the Joseph McKeen Center for the Common Good, the College also anticipates establishing the Maine Social Research program, which will provide students with opportunities to conduct research projects that meet the needs of communities in Maine. Noting that similar ventures at the College had not survived because they perhaps were “not integrated with Bowdoin’s undergraduate mission,” Professor Craig McEwen observed that the Maine Social Research program is “primarily an educational venture—although with an important service component.” As such, these new programs will take student academic, civic, and leadership development as a central concern. Perhaps Bowdoin’s newly established McKeen Center for the Common Good and Maine Social Research program will provide a new vision for the College’s relationship with local and state governments in the twenty-first century.


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