A Workshop in Democracy:

Student Government at Bowdoin College, 1945-1980

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“Students now play a more active role in the governance of the College by serving on most of the standing committees. I believe that such service will also teach them a great deal about group psychology, the functioning of an educational institution and practical politics.”

—Acting Dean of Bowdoin College Edward Geary, 1969

One of Bowdoin College’s central historic functions has been preparing students for participation as active citizens in a democracy. Offering courses in political science, for instance, the College’s academic curriculum has sought to educate students for political engagement as well as develop in them the necessary skills for competent citizenship. The extra-curriculum, however, has also frequently served as a site for leadership and citizenship development. One activity, in particular, has fostered this form of learning— the student government. In what ways has student government at Bowdoin served as a practicum in democratic citizenship? What challenges and opportunities has the organization presented to students over time? What structures, roles and processes have historically been in place to allow students to experience government first hand? Finally, how did student leaders negotiate their relationships with faculty and administrators and what obstacles did they face?

Between the end of World War II and the beginning of the 1980s, Bowdoin served as an ideal workshop for student leadership.

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1 Dean’s Annual Report, 1968-1969, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
Through the general willingness of administrators and faculty to allow students to be part of College governance, and through negotiating and elaborating upon the relationships involved in that governance, student government incorporated its members into a comprehensive structure, giving them specific rights and responsibilities. Through the successful, and unsuccessful, exercise of these rights, student government members were able to develop policies and test them through a formal legislative process. Student government at Bowdoin was the “mouthpiece” of the student body, interacting and engaging with College officials as both as partners and as adversaries (as determined by the situation). Through reform processes and electoral politics, students shaped their own organizations in the ways that most suited their needs, while learning about the benefits and costs of particular structures. The mistakes made in the process of student government were as important as the successes, and the organization grew and changed along with the dynamics of its relationship to College administrators.

Carving out a New Role

During World War II, many extracurricular activities were adapted or suspended as the College adjusted to new challenges and opportunities. However, according to the Dean’s Annual Report for the Academic Year 1946-1947, many of these activities had returned to their pre-war status.2 The Student Council was among the activities noted to have returned to normalcy. At the time, the organization was made up of 26 students representing members of the 12 fraternities and the “independent students” (those who were not affiliated with a fraternity). As campus life stabilized following World War II, the Student Council passed its first significant piece of legislation, enacting the Rules Regarding Fraternity House Guests. This document, authored by student government representatives with the guidance of administrators, prohibited undergraduates from the upper levels of the houses during parties, banned women from the upper levels of the houses during parties, banned women from the

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2 Dean’s Report 1946-1947, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
residential floors of fraternities at all times unless accompanied by “an adult,” and strictly limited the hours that women were allowed in any part of the houses. With this policy, the Student Council began to carve out its role in the reoriented, post-war campus—placing itself as a partner to administrators in regulating student behavior.

Not all of the Council’s work would be as ostensibly serious in the immediate post-war years. In October 1948, for example, council President John Hupper wrote letters to the University of Maine and Amherst College student governments requesting the return of a polar bear skin and fraternal flags that each school was respectively blamed for taking after athletic events. Hupper also received correspondence from the Associated Students of the University of Alaska offering to ship an Alaskan birch tree to Bowdoin as a token of friendship. Seemingly frivolous, these activities nevertheless reveal a degree of responsibility and autonomy on the Student Council’s part in its ability to do business with peer organizations at other colleges without the need for assistance from their deans.

Toward the end of the decade, the Student Council began taking on less frivolous activities. In the spring of 1949, for instance, the Council negotiated and authorized an extensive agreement with the Student Union Committee (SUC) delineating the two organizations’ responsibilities. The student group responsible for organizing major social events on campus, the SUC operated separately from the council. Among the points of accord between the two groups, the Council agreed to no longer plan its own social activities, while the SUC acceded to financial oversight by the Council. Although guaranteeing the SUC significant self-government, the document placed ultimate authority with the Council. The 1948-1949 dean’s report commended the student government for its newfound stability and productive tenure. It reported that the council had revised its own constitution, taken a firm stand against corporal punishment and

3 Student Council 1947, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
4 Student Council 1948, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
5 Student Council 1949, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
replaced the Student Disciplinary Committee (a joint faculty-student judicial group) with a more functional Student Judiciary Board with a membership weighted more heavily toward student leadership. This praise indicates the development of a cordial relationship between the administration and the Council as new functions for student leadership arose.

The Student Council was beginning to assert the role of students as a partner in the governing process, taking responsibility for policing and organizing its own structures and social activities. The positive statements about this new arrangement found in the dean’s reports indicate that the Council took on its new roles in partnership with existing College leadership and was operating with a similar agenda. Student government had made itself part of the decision-making process at the College by aligning itself with the aims of the administration.

**Leadership in Social Life**

By the opening of the 1950s, the student government was in a position to build upon its post-war development and appoint students to work directly with administrators and faculty in governing the College. The initiative to place student representatives in College governance processes first structurally manifested itself with a December 1950 Student Council resolution calling for three seats on the Blanket Tax Committee to be provided for student members. The committee, which had not previously included student members, distributed funds received from the fee that students were charged for extracurricular activities. That year’s dean’s report confirms that the Council’s request was fulfilled, and elaborated that the “student government has been intelligent, active and constructive” while lauding the cooperation between his office and the organization. With this

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6 Dean’s Report 1948-1949, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
7 Student Council 1950, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
8 Dean’s Report 1950-1951, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
first formal position in the College’s governance structure, students began to have a voice in distributing their financial contributions to the College and determining priorities in the context of existing campus committees.

It was in student self-regulation that the student government gained the greatest respect from the administration. As early as 1952, the Student Council began intervening in the ceremonies and procedures of the fraternity system by orchestrating the banning of alcohol during rushing in all of the houses.\(^9\) In the 1953-1954 academic year, conflict grew between the Student Council and the fraternities as it tried to further regulate membership procedures — a conflict that the council temporarily lost.\(^10\) Undeterred, the council refocused its objectives as part of the College’s 1955 self-study through a report on the “rough patches” in fraternal process, reexamining the introductory rites they had previously sought to temper.\(^11\) The student government was consciously and strategically preparing itself for a bold move.

In February of 1956, the council began to challenge the fraternal induction process with a comprehensive barrage of hazing regulations. This document limited the time and extensiveness of hazing activities, banned physical punishment, mandated that orientations include a “scholastic program” and established an oversight committee to monitor compliance in collaboration with the Student Judicial Board. The College administration was so pleased with the work that it released a statement to the local and state press notifying them of the new rules emphasizing “the constructive side of hazing” while President James S. Coles declared in his annual report that the student government had “practically eliminated hazing.”\(^12\) In addressing a Bowdoin community issue, the council gained widespread respect in spite of challenging opposition from within. Council members further

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9 Student Council 1952, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
10 Dean’s Report 1953-1954, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
11 Student Council 1955, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
12 Student Council 1956, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives; President’s Report 1955-1956, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
tightened regulations in 1959 and in 1964 Dean of Students A. LeRoy Greason designated the council as the authority for hazing issues.\textsuperscript{13}

Action taken on hazing propelled student government members into a collegial and consistent partnership with the College administration. In February of 1958, President Coles asked the council to nominate two members for the Faculty Lecture Committee, and later that year invited the council president (along with the senior class president and the \textit{Orient} editor) to spend an hour with him “every three or four weeks” informally discussing college business. In the spring of 1960, Coles arranged for two council leaders to travel to Boston to meet with the Governing Boards’ Committee on the Size of the College. This period of collaboration reached its height in the fall of 1961 when College and Council officials issued statements of mutual opposition to discriminatory practices in fraternities.\textsuperscript{14}

The trajectory of these developments indicate a willingness on the part of College officials to accept students into the established governance structures, an openness that developed after significant action aligned the council with the College’s ideals. In this period, a relationship was established based on an incentive structure — in exchange for pursuing policies the College approved of, the council received greater access to other policy decisions. The premise of this relationship was that there was agreement between the two groups. In the following decade, however, this conciliatory basis for interaction was challenged.

\textbf{Disagreement and Protest}

With newfound strength, the student government began to shift its attention from student-managed issues to matters of College policy. As early as spring 1954, the Student Council began calling for changes to the Social Rules it had endorsed in 1947, with a new generation

\textsuperscript{13} Student Council 1959, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives; Student Council Folder, “James Coles, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.

\textsuperscript{14} Student Council Folder, “James Coles, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
of students finding them overly restrictive. A 1957 petition by the Alpha Delta Phi fraternity calling upon the administration to relax the rules gained a significant number of signatures, including that of the Student Council secretary-treasurer and future Bowdoin College President Roger Howell, Jr. In the spring of 1963, the council passed a resolution in support of a movement by all of the houses to radically reform the social code. A summer exchange of letters between President Coles and Student Council President Peter Seaver, however, clarified a miscommunication regarding the student government’s position. Seaver argued that rather than being eliminated, the system required reform. Nevertheless, these initial cracks in the partnership between the administration and the Student Council would soon grow.

In the December 16, 1964 edition of the Portland Press Herald, a short article alluded to a social protest on Bowdoin College’s campus. Although the initial story had resulted from anonymous student sources and contained few specifics, a longer article appeared the next day reporting that a large demonstration had been held, with a march originating at the Senior Center and ending at the administration building (Massachusetts Hall). Precipitated by the disciplining of two students who were found to be entertaining female companions after the official curfew, the event involved an estimated 350 students who were informed by Dean of Students Greason that no action could be immediately taken to revise the College’s social rules. The Herald reported that before dispersing the group, its leader, Student Council President Steve Putnam, warned the Dean that more action would follow. The actions outlined in this report, and the very fact that it was reported, indicate a strong sense of agency on the part of the student government, unlike anything seen previously since World War II. It also signifies a substantial rift in what had seemingly been a cordial relationship between the Student Council and College officials.

One week later, on Christmas Eve, President Coles issued a letter

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15 Student Council 1954, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
16 Student Council Folder, “James Coles, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
18 Portland Press Herald, December 17 1964, p. 49.
harshly criticizing Putnam for placing a social demonstration ahead of students’ academic commitments. He suggested that, by doing this, the student government had subverted the normal processes which had, in his opinion, functioned so well to date. He wrote Putnam that “Responsible government, whether it be student government or other forms of government, requires that normal channels and procedures be observed and that the purposes of the institution for which the government operates be supported.”¹⁹ Five days later, Putnam responded by unapologetically defending the event. He argued that the fraternity presidents organized it in response to Dean Greason’s claim that the faculty had been unwilling to reconsider the College’s social codes. Putnam explained that he supported the demonstration because he did not believe that the College should give “an academic punishment for a social infraction” and insisted that he had encouraged students to attend their classes if they had a time conflict, denying Coles’s accusation that the protest was an academic impediment.

The archived correspondence ends with Putnam’s reply, but it seems that some sort of understanding between the administration and the Student Council was reached. In the council’s minutes from an April 19 meeting that year, a council member announced that the administration had accepted the council’s recommendation that a student be allowed to reschedule an exam if he had three scheduled in two days.²⁰ Coles also sent Putnam a warm congratulatory note for his student government successes at the conclusion of the academic year. Nevertheless, it is clear that the relationship between student government and President Coles had been changed by the protest march. By 1966-67, Student Council President Douglas Bilken struggled for the entirety of the academic year to schedule a meeting with Coles, who had accused him of wanting the administration to run students’ social lives after Bilken submitted an article to the Bowdoin Alumnus criticizing the College’s fraternity system.²¹ Student

¹⁹ Student Council Folder, “James Coles, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
²⁰ Student Council 1965, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
²¹ Student Council Folder, “James Coles, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
government suffered the consequences of breaking its previously stable relationship with Coles. The frustration Bilken experienced undoubtedly made that clear to him and to those who worked with him.

**Struggling with National Forces**

Whatever problems the Student Council encountered due to its fractured relationship with the College’s president paled in comparison to those resulting from student activism in opposition to American military action in Southeast Asia. International forces would eventually overwhelm Bowdoin students trying to work through a student government structure, rendering the Student Council ineffective and purposeless. The first example took place as Roger Howell, Jr. assumed the position of College president.

In late April 1969, the threat of violent student activism spurred the College administration to obtain a restraining order from the courts in order to manage whatever protests might occur. A rumor, which may have originated at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, had spread to Howell indicating that a major student protest action was going to take place at Bowdoin College and would include the seizure of certain buildings. The action came in the context of increasing nation-wide instability in opposition to the American military presence in Southeast Asia. Howell had approached legal authorities for an injunction against student activism on campus, preventing them from taking this action.\(^22\) The Student Council responded by passing a resolution that condemned the distrustful and presumptive nature of the College’s legal action and argued that “the manner in which the administration handled this situation opposes the traditional practice of open dialogue and understanding between administration, faculty and students.”\(^23\)

A week after the resolution passed, Howell responded to the campus community by explaining that the threat of an explosion at

\(^{22}\) George Isaacson. An interview conducted by Dustin Brooks on March 27, 2008 at Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME. Bowdoin College, Brunswick.

\(^{23}\) Student Council Folder, “Roger Howell, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
the College’s heating plant had spurred the action and that he had consulted with several student and faculty leaders, among them the student government vice president.\textsuperscript{24} It is unclear why the vice president rather than the president was consulted and there was no indication that the vice president had shared the information he obtained at that meeting with his peers. At this very first engagement with issues caused by the national student movement, the Bowdoin Student Council got caught up in miscommunication and confusion, with some of its members working with the administration and others condemning it.

The following fall, the Council was more proactive. Newly elected Council Vice President George Isaacson introduced a resolution condemning American military intervention in Vietnam. It passed with a strong majority and led to the planning of a day of peaceful protest on October 15.\textsuperscript{25} Isaacson sponsored the motion to reflect what he believed to be a common sentiment on campus and considered himself a facilitator rather than a promoter of the resolution.\textsuperscript{26} The faculty soon received the document and issued a message supporting President Howell’s decision to be lenient about class attendance on the planned protest day.\textsuperscript{27} President Howell also wrote a cover letter for a letter from Student Council President John Cole to U.S. President Richard Nixon introducing Cole’s message from the Bowdoin students condemning the war.\textsuperscript{28} Through more careful actions, the council was able to work with College officials and President Howell while still defending student beliefs.

The following spring, the student body elected Geoffrey Ovenden to replace Cole and received a welcoming message from Howell: “You are well aware, I know, of the distinguished tradition of student government here at Bowdoin, and of the special importance of

\textsuperscript{24} Student Council Folder, “Roger Howell, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
\textsuperscript{25} Student Council, 1969, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
\textsuperscript{26} Isaacson, interview.
\textsuperscript{27} Bowdoin College Faculty Minutes, October 13 1969.
\textsuperscript{28} Student Council Folder, “Roger Howell, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
its task at this time.” After only one very unsuccessful, but normal, Student Council meeting, Ovenden found himself in the leadership of a community-wide strike, issuing a statement in conjunction with Howell to announce an all-college meeting on May 5 about the possible responses to U.S. policy in Vietnam.

According to Orient coverage, Ovenden spoke after Howell’s introduction at the all-college meeting and announced that the Student Council supported the idea of the strike. At a faculty meeting held later that evening, after the College community voted to strike, the joint student-faculty Student Activities Fee Committee (the successor to the Blanket Tax Committee) requested a re-allocation of funds to the Student Council for emergency activities until the end of the strike. It is unclear exactly what role the council or Ovenden played until the next student strike meeting on the May 7. At that point, Ovenden took over from the unofficial leaders of the movement, allegedly with their approval. At that meeting, he also attempted to make use of unified student opinion to urge a change in the faculty’s grading policy. This attempt to hijack the feeling of community spirit fostered by the strike was met with fierce opposition from the students in attendance and may have alienated members of the faculty. Isaacson recalls these incidents mostly in the context of greater national events, noting that the Student Council was of limited importance considering the growing national movement that the Bowdoin community had joined.

The only other clear anti-war action the Student Council took occurred years later when, on April 20, 1972, council members met with two Bowdoin students who intended to lead a small demonstration at the nearby Brunswick Naval Air Station. Voting to support the activity financially and logistically, council members nevertheless refused to commit the Student Council as a formal sponsor. At the next meeting on May 9, however, council members voted to take over the march

29 Student Council Folder, “Roger Howell, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
30 Ibid.
32 Bowdoin College Faculty Minutes, May 6 1970.
34 Isaacson, interview.
as the primary organizers, believing that they had a better structure in place for managing it. The vote passed and the Student Council formed three committees to deal with advertising, march organizing and negotiating.\footnote{Student Council 1972, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.} Although the march was successful, it marked the last time that the Student Council attempted to become substantively involved with anti-war activism.

**Student Representation**

As the student government became a less effective leader of students, it developed into a strong partner to the faculty in College governance. The 1967-1968 Dean’s Report revealed this development. Claiming that the faculty and students were growing closer, the dean asserted that “both groups will play a larger corporate role in the future than they have in the past.”\footnote{Dean’s Report 1967-1968, Administrative Records, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.} Just months before confronting President Howell about the restraining order controversy, the Student Council secured a huge victory with the publication of the work of a joint student-faculty committee under the title “Student Representation on Faculty Committees at Bowdoin College.” The report called for a wide array of student representation on College committees, with three students serving on most (the exceptions were the Curriculum and Education Policy Committee—CEP—which would not have a student member but would consult with the parallel Student Curriculum Committee, and the Senior Center Committee, which worked with the Senior Class Committee).\footnote{Student Council Folder, “Roger Howell, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.} This report represented a fundamental shift in the way student government related to the College’s policy-making process.

The report was accepted by the faculty after limited opposition by Professor Edward Pols on the grounds that students needn't have specific seats on committees and could be consulted if their opinion was necessary. With that vote, student members claimed representation
on the Athletics, Computing Center, Lectures and Concerts, Library, Military Affairs, Prep Schools and Admissions, and Upward Bound Advisory Committees, while five sat on the Student Life Committee.\footnote{Bowdoin College Faculty Minutes, March 14 1969.} In the fall of 1970, student representation further expanded when the student government received three seats on the CEP and Coeducation Committees and four on the Senior Center Committee.\footnote{Bowdoin College Faculty Minutes, October 12 1970.} In a final realignment of committee representation, the Student Activities Fee Committee increased its student membership to six from three and reduced its faculty membership to four from six, representing the first time majority authority for a committee had passed from faculty to students.\footnote{Bowdoin College Faculty Minutes, April 8 1974.} The descendant of the first committee on which students gained representation, the Blanket Tax Committee passed fully into their hands at the conclusion of a major governance-sharing realignment.

The Governing Boards were similarly welcoming to student representatives during this period. Responding to a January 1970 Student Council resolution requesting the right to send delegates to their February meeting, Governing Board members granted the College’s president the authority to select three students to participate in the activities of the Governing Boards (they were not granted voting privileges). President Howell responded by insisting that the student body would elect these delegates.\footnote{Student Council Folder, “Roger Howell, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.} At their fall meeting that same year, the boards seriously considered making students voting members of their committees but felt constrained by the College’s charter.\footnote{The Bowdoin Orient, October 16 1970.} Indeed, in September the Council had proposed that it be allotted a single delegate to the monthly Faculty Meeting. At the suggestion of Professor Greason, the number increased to two and the overall motion was approved.\footnote{Bowdoin College Faculty Minutes, Sep. 21 1970.}

Although the Student Council was clearly successful during this time, it also confronted a number of challenges. In February 1970, for
instance, the College moved to reestablish the Afro-American Studies Department, to be led by a joint Faculty-Student Committee. Fierce resistance by Professor Pols to student membership on this committee nearly prevented the department’s establishment. Although the faculty overrode Pols’ concerns, other initiatives at cooperation between faculty and students did not reach full fruition. Specifically, through several weeks in October 1970, the Orient reported that the Student Council was seriously considering advocating for the creation of a Faculty-Student Senate. This body would meet in addition to the Faculty Meetings and Student Council and propose legislation to those two groups as well as serve as a forum for dialogue. Mentioned by President Howell in his annual report for that year, the proposal disappeared from the record shortly thereafter.

By the early 1970s, then, student representation had been installed throughout the College governance structure. The faculty, Governing Boards, and President had all acknowledged the value of students in the policy-making process and students had begun to take on institutionalized roles. Structurally and functionally, students had become part of College governance.

**Changing Relationships**

In 1975, following the Student Council’s lackluster performance in actually leading students during the early 1970s, the Council was abolished and replaced by bi-annual town meetings and a Board of Selectmen, who served to enact town meeting decisions. President Howell’s relationship with this new form of student government was more tentative than with the previous structure, but also thoroughly supportive of its work. In response to a list of proposals sent to him by the selectmen, he responded that he was “glad to have these expressions of opinion. Of course, I do not happen to agree with all of them, but it is useful to have what I take to be a valid sample

44 Bowdoin College Faculty Minutes February 9 1970.
46 President’s Report 1970-1971, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
of student opinion on some matters I feel strongly about.” He met with the board under its new chairman in December 1976 and in an expression of at least partial confidence, Howell allowed the board to present a “State of the Students” report to the Board of Overseers at their January 1977 meeting. Under the leadership of the new board, student government had to renegotiate a relationship with Howell and the faculty, replacing existing ties that had linked them to the Student Council. The often adversarial nature of some of this contact predicted additional troubles to come.

In January of 1977, Howell and many other members of the College community received a document entitled “A Proposal for a More Representative Voice of the Students.” This lengthy document called for the abolition of the town meeting as a voting group in favor of a referendum, which would counteract the potential low attendance or vested interests of those who attended the town meetings. The author, a student named Sandy Spaulding argued, “students must understand that, in reality, we have no legal effect on school policy. At the same time, the faculty must understand that through the 60’s and 70’s they gave a voice to the students. Both parties must understand that this voice is neither omnipotent nor inconsequential. On one side, the voice needs to be matured and totally representative. On the other side, maturity must respect maturity.” Spaulding’s letter represented an eloquent and well-thought out critique of the Board’s system of government, and its reference to faculty-student respect was almost prophetic in light of future criticism.

This criticism developed when the Board of Selectmen decided to ban smoking. The board sent out a letter on March 15, 1977, to all faculty members reminding them of the new ban and stating that students “would appreciate [the faculty’s] help in enforcing this ban, both by your refraining personally from smoking cigars, cigarettes, or pipes while in class, and in encouraging students in your classes to

47 Student Council Folder, “Roger Howell, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
48 Student Council 1976-1977, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
49 Student Council Folder, “Roger Howell, Administrative Records,” Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
likewise abstain.” Professor Pols saw this action as justification for his previous opposition. In a letter to President Howell, he asserted that the “neither the Faculty nor the Boards should ever have countenanced” students as a part of the College governance structure. He suggested that the students had come to believe that they actually functioned like a Board of Selectmen would in a “normal political community.” Although he supported the ban and its enforcement, Pols told Howell that he would be making “a grave mistake” if he did not make it clear to the student board members that they were “not the governing body of this institution, that this is not a political community, and that it is an impertinence on their part to presume to address the Faculty in this way...”50 He closed by suggesting that the students’ letter represented an assault on Howell’s authority as college president. A week later, Howell informed Pols that he would speak with the students about their tone.51 The students, at least in Pols’s mind, had pushed too much, been too aggressive, and had overstepped their bounds.

The student government’s over-reaching preceded a time of further change on the part of the Board of Selectmen. The town meeting structure was eventually abolished and a one-per-semester referendum on the board’s work was instituted.52 The experiment in participatory democracy had, under pressure, rapidly begun to moderate. More important, students acknowledged the limited role student government could actually play in administrating college affairs.

**Defending Student Rights**

After these reforms had been implemented, a new student “Executive Board” replaced the Board of Selectmen, yet it never reached the previous body’s level of activity. In his first annual report as Bowdoin College president (1978-79), Willard Enteman politely indicated that the Executive Board was struggling, commenting that “the anemia of student government has led to Orient editorials and

50 Student Council 1976-1977, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
to some failure of confidence on campus in the efficacy of student government.” Although defending student government by noting that it competently performed its administrative functions (especially in relation to committee appointments and chartering organizations), Enteman identified student-initiated policy proposals as being the most troubling for the board, observing, “it has been tentative in deciding which issues it ought to address and how it ought to address them.”53 For the incoming president to have such a negative view of the Executive Board’s viability could only limit its members’ ability to engage the administration.

At the beginning of the 1979-1980 academic year, Amy Homans was reelected as board chair and twelve other student members were elected to the board. The first meeting of the year included a lengthy discussion about student apathy and the appropriate role of a student government relative to its less-than-successful outcomes the previous year. At the board’s second meeting, members voted to support the student protests against the dismissal of the director of the Afro-American Studies Department, citing the “general disregard for student concern and input.” Later in the semester, the board voted to support the Governing Boards’ resolution outlawing discrimination in fraternities. An editorial in the same edition of the Orient announcing this vote asserted, “The debate began in the Executive Board meeting because few care what the body supports or approves, except perhaps the Board members themselves, their support of Governing Boards’ resolutions is meaningless.”54 Clearly this year did not offer much improvement on Enteman’s assessment of the preceding one. The Orient's frank assessment of the Executive Board’s value may not have represented student opinion, but it did represent an opinion—one that was heard campus wide.

Even the basic function of managing student clubs proved to be challenging for the beleaguered board during Homans’ second term. In a November meeting, the board voted to exempt the African-American Society from the standing policy that anyone could join any club he

53 President’s Report 1978-1979, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
54 President’s Report 1978-1979, Bowdoin College Department of Special Collections and Archives.
or she wished as a voting member. The club’s leaders argued that the membership of white students as full voting members was promoting disunity in the group. The Board accepted their argument. Three weeks later, College attorney Peter Webster and Dean of Students Wendy Fairey met with the Executive Board to inform its members that their decision on the African-American Society case violated the College’s By-Laws, endangered the College’s tax exempt status, and may have transgressed the Civil Rights Act’s federal funding restrictions. The board voted without debate to revoke the society’s charter.55 Although the student government did not make the same mistake the following semester when it denied the Christian Scientist Club the right to hold distinctive membership rules, the episode reveals why many students had lost faith in a student government that muddled such a basic function.56

At the October 1980 meeting of the faculty, the dean of the College announced that the Recording Committee had decided to allow student members to be involved in hearing cases of individual student requests as well as policy decisions. The student government’s long-time adversary, Professor Pols, rose to the occasion and questioned the committee’s ability to make that decision on its own. The next month the issue was brought up for debate. Pols moved to prevent student members from being involved in such cases because those decisions required “professional experience.” His motion failed by only one vote.57 The fact that the vote failed so closely indicates that the value of student voices was seriously in question. Between the President’s Report, the Orient comments, and this faculty debate, it is clear that student government was in a very weak position going into the 1980s.

**Conclusion**


57 Bowdoin College Faculty Minutes October 13 1980; Bowdoin College Faculty Minutes November 10 1980.
During the 1980s, the Executive Board became progressively smaller, ending its reduction at around nine members. At the end of the decade the board formed the Student Senate, which met three times a year, once before each meeting of the Governing Boards. Throughout the 1990’s, the Board continued to be the student government’s central organization, eventually adopting the informal name E-9. The Student Senate transformed over time into the Student Congress, which began to meet more regularly but remained subservient to the Board. The Student Activities Fee Committee became almost totally autonomous in this period. By the spring of 2002, the E-9 submitted a new constitution to the students, unifying the three organizations under the heading of the Bowdoin Student Government. Since that time, successive governments have worked to merge the organizations, with the Student Congress and Executive Board merging to form the BSG Assembly (with oversight of the SAFC), which is led by a president assisted by an executive committee. The latest reform package as part of the attempt to define the BSG’s role was passed in the spring of 2008.

Student government at Bowdoin has historically provided a voice to students in the leadership of the College. It served as the motivator and organizer of student involvement in formal governance structures and provided informal information for College administrators on policy. Over time, student leaders negotiated the challenges of their limited citizenship by attempting to enact policy changes that the student body desired while maintaining close, working relationships with the faculty and staff members they occasionally opposed. The student government often struggled to find balance between the needs and desires of the students they represented while working with the fact that they, in Spaulding’s words, had “no legal effect on school policy.”

The mistakes made and restructuring that took place makes it clear that student government had to change the way it worked for different tasks, under different pressures, and as administrative perspectives changed over time. It is in this tenuous relationship that the great potential for students’ learning existed. In negotiating with administrators, communicating with faculty, and organizing student opinion, student government members developed skills and
abilities that would be required for participation in future democratic processes. It is clear from the challenges the organization overcame as well as the ones it did not, that student members had numerous opportunities to experience democratic processes at their best and their worst. In providing student leaders a delicate balancing act in College governance, Bowdoin served as an engaging practicum in democracy.