“An Intrepid Idealism and a Hard Practicality”:

Bowdoin College During World War II

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As World War II reached its pinnacle, and as higher education institutions across the United States directly contributed to military efforts, Bowdoin College hosted an Institute on Liberal Education. Amidst a national crisis, the College celebrated a commitment to liberal education rather than a contribution to the war effort, which was otherwise embraced by numerous colleges and universities. President Kenneth C.M. Sills wrote in his annual 1942-43 report that he had, “seen the war closing in on the College gradually but inevitably; and [had] witnessed the change from a college of liberal arts with nearly 600 students to a college devoted to the training of men in the armed forces, with only 300 civilians left...”1 Sills acknowledged Bowdoin College’s shift in attention away from the liberal arts to the national interest. In shifting attention back to liberal education for the anniversary of the College’s founding, however, Bowdoin’s administrators signaled that while Bowdoin was resolved to assist in the war effort, it would not abandon its historic

1 Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year 1942-43, p.16
tradition of educating men liberally. Bowdoin’s administration, though flexible and responsive to the demands of the war, also made an effort to reassert its educational ideals—the liberal arts at Bowdoin were not sacrificed during the war.²

World War II defense mobilization necessitated a swift, adaptable response; college and university administrators were required to make educationally significant decisions on a daily basis. In the decades leading up to World War II, technological and industrial progress created a new need for technical training and specialization. As higher education institutions responded to this demand, many called into question the contribution of traditional liberal education to students. This educational tug-of-war between applied science and liberal arts existed as a theoretical discussion prior to World War II, and so a small liberal arts college, though perhaps losing ground against the emerging multiversity, was able to maintain a voice in the debate. However, defense industries’ need for technically trained young men scientists and mathematicians put a premium on specialized learning in a way that eclipsed the theoretical discussion about the purposes of higher education. Even the oldest liberal arts schools, such as Bowdoin College, were compelled to respond to the call.³

This study examines the relationship between Bowdoin College and World War II. First, a description of the role that colleges and universities were expected to fill during the war years will illustrate both the opportunities many higher education institutions embraced and the constraints they confronted. Then, the College’s administrative decisions in response to the war crisis will be described in an effort to further locate Bowdoin in the context of the national emergency. Third, the paper will examine the difficult decisions Bowdoin’s administrators made in order to contribute to the war while remaining committed to the liberal arts.

Bowdoin’s 1944 Institute on Liberal Education acted as a reaffirmation of the institution’s identity as a college of the liberal arts. During a time when military necessity and liberal education

³ V.R Cardozier, Colleges and Universities in World War II (Westport, 1993).
were at odds, Bowdoin’s administration retained the liberal ideals of its founders. It is hoped that this study will offer insight into the role of a liberal arts college during periods of national crises, which tend to call into question the importance of liberal education.

**Colleges and Universities in World War II**

Upon the United States’ declaration of war in 1941, American college and university administrators faced intense pressure to contribute to the war effort. College officials understood that education would have a role in the war effort, even though the government did not immediately define that role’s specifics: “When the schools closed on Friday, December 5,” wrote the members of the United States Educational Policies Commission, “they had many purposes and they followed many roads to achieve those purposes. When the schools opened on Monday, December 8, they had but one dominant purpose—complete, intelligent, and enthusiastic cooperation in the war effort.”

Further, colleges and universities faced potential closure due to lack of tuition from the hundreds of thousands of men who were drafted into the armed services. Men majoring in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, osteopathy, law, engineering, architecture, chemistry, and accounting were suddenly defined as necessary and in high demand due to the deficit of individuals with these skills on both home and battle fronts.

The federal government assisted colleges and universities in two ways. First, the government created contracts with higher education institutions to engage in scientific research to increase technological knowledge for the war. Second, it contracted with colleges and universities to train young men in the application of scientific knowledge.

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5 I.L. Kandel, *The Impact of the War on American Education* (Richmond, 1948).

6 Memo from the state headquarters of selective service of Illinois. Kenneth C.M. Sills, Administrative Records:1886-1956 [1.2.8.3 Box 5], Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives.
in all these fields.\footnote{Dorn, \textit{American Education, Democracy, and the Second World War}.} Given that Bowdoin College was an undergraduate institution with limited research capabilities, the primary source of government funding for Bowdoin during the war was the training of students or other officers. Bowdoin was unexceptional in this regard; many colleges and universities began training men for war as a part of these programs.\footnote{Cardozier, \textit{Colleges and Universities in World War II}.} Stanford University administrators, for instance, viewed acquiring government contracts as a necessary step to survive the war years. Indeed, by 1943 servicemen outnumbered civilian undergraduates by over a thousand—a trend not uncommon at colleges around the country, including at Bowdoin.\footnote{Dorn, \textit{American Education, Democracy, and the Second World War}; \textit{“Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1943-1944.”} Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1944.} Capitalizing on the opportunity to secure funding from the federal government, Stanford also sought to establish itself as a research center during a time of national technological crisis, both out of financial necessity and in the name of patriotism. As Stanford’s Committee and University services declared during the war:

The problems confronting the nation at war require that institutions of higher learning re-appraise their activities in order to ascertain if they may better contribute to the welfare of the country. It would seem clear that the immediate objectives of Stanford should be to turn its facilities for study and research into those channels, which will make for the winning of the war and the successful foundation of constructive and enduring peace.... All research in areas which do not specifically contribute to the war effort or bear directly on the problems which immediately will follow should be suspended.\footnote{Stanford University Archives, Stanford War Records, 1917-45, Box #22, Folder, 182, “Committee on University Services, “Stanford University-Committee on University Services-A Statement of Principle.” Cited in Dorn, \textit{American Education, Democracy, and the Second World War I}, p. 32.}

Answering the call to support the war effort was seen both as a potentially lucrative opportunity and as a patriotic act nationwide.\footnote{Gerard Giordano, \textit{Wartime Schools: How World War II Changed American Education} (New York, 2004).}
Bowdoin’s administrators and faculty supported the war effort for financial reasons, and were not resentful of wartime demands in light of their shared spirit of nationalism. President Sills, for instance, gratefully observed campus cooperation: “I can truthfully say that never in my administration has there been shown a finer spirit of cooperation and of unselfish devotion to the best interests of Bowdoin. The faculty agreed at once to teach in such a summer session without additional compensation.... Incidentally, it seems to me that the arrangement of these plans was in accordance with the best American democratic tradition.”12 Nevertheless, the “arrangement of these plans” significantly altered the College’s operations in numerous ways.13

**Bowdoin and the War**

During the war, Bowdoin became home to hundreds of members of the armed forces while it simultaneously lost to the draft hundreds of students who had been enrolled. During the 1941-42 school year alone, over 300 service men lived on campus and utilized Bowdoin facilities in conjunction with the Naval Radio School for junior officers. Although this school remained independent from Bowdoin, the school’s director, Lieutenant Noel C. Little, was a professor in Bowdoin’s physics department and was largely responsible for establishing the unit in Brunswick.14 The naval officers’ presence altered Bowdoin students’ routines, as the two groups adjusted to sharing the gymnasium, the library, the swimming pool, and the union.

The impact of the Navy on campus increased the following year, when radio school classes increased from 50 men at a time to nearly 150. These detachments remained on campus, rotating out every few months to go to Massachusetts Institute of Technology or the Washington Naval Research Laboratories to finalize training.15 When

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13 Giordano, Wartime Schools: How World War II Changed American Education.
14 “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1941-1942.” Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1942.
15 “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year,
it became clear that the unit would train in Brunswick, Bowdoin’s administration eagerly agreed to assist.16 The following fall, the administration began actively investigating ways the College could help with the war effort.

At the November 23, 1942 faculty meeting, Associate Professor Kammerling presented an evaluation of Bowdoin’s potential contribution to the war effort, the result of research conducted by the Committee to Investigate the Scientific Resources of the College for the Use of the Government. Committee members believed that given the College’s small size and limited resources, it could best contribute by providing basic scientific training on an elementary level.17 As the Committee reached this conclusion, the College was advised that it was an eligible location for a pre-meteorological unit of the Army Air Force.

Upon notification, Bowdoin’s administration submitted its application, recruited numerous instructors in physics and mathematics, and prepared dormitories. By February 1943, 220 men had begun their pre-meteorological training under the newly hired professors. Professor Hammond of the Physics department was appointed the director of Basic Pre-Meteorological Unit C.18 Any graduate or senior who was at least 20 years old and who had taken differential and integral calculus as well as a year of college physics could participate in the program. Upon acceptance, students were inducted into the Army or Navy and were provided a stipend of $127.50 per month and $185 per month following the course’s completion. After studying at Bowdoin, the men finished their training at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before entering active service.19

As the administration was preparing for the arrival of the pre-

16 “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1941-1942.” Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1942.
17 Records of the Faculty, November 23, 1942. Brunswick: Bowdoin College.
18 “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1940-1941.” Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1941.
19 Letter from B.M. Kimball of MIT to Dean Paul Nixon, January 9, 1942. Sills administrative papers: Subjects Files, Folder: Aviation Course. Brunswick: Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives.
meteorological unit on campus, faculty members, including Professor Hammond, negotiated with the Army to include English and other humanities and social sciences in the program’s curriculum. History and government were ultimately included in the course of study as well. Sills expressed hopes that such a curriculum would become a model that other colleges and universities could use to emphasize the importance of a liberal arts education during wartime.\textsuperscript{20} Even as the administration took initiative to immediately and effectively contribute to the war effort, its members defended the pieces of a liberal education that were eclipsed by the wartime need for skills training by influencing the development of military program curricula.

In addition to hosting and training the unit, Bowdoin also became home to an aviation course with the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA). Bowdoin students and area residents learned the groundwork of flying from Bowdoin physics faculty and then underwent in-air training with a private company called Airways, Incorporated (for which Bowdoin had no responsibility).\textsuperscript{21} The course required 72 hours of groundwork and 35 flying hours, which prompted many New England colleges to contemplate awarding credit to students who successfully completed the program. Bowdoin College, Wesleyan College, and Dartmouth College were among the first institutions to agree to award credit to students. In fact, Bowdoin’s dean of students, Paul Nixon, facilitated a discussion among New England college deans by inquiring in writing about their CAA courses. He wrote in a similar letter to Dartmouth’s dean, Lloyd K. Neidlinger: “Do you know yet what Dartmouth’s policy will be with regard to giving graduation credit for the work in aviation, in case you do have this government aviation program in 1940-1941.... To me personally this amount of work, plus the necessary hours of preparation, seems to justify our calling it a semester course toward graduation.”\textsuperscript{22} Most college officials replied to Dean Nixon

\textsuperscript{20} “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1942-1943.” Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1943.
\textsuperscript{21} “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1940-1941.” Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1941.
\textsuperscript{22} Letter from Dean Nixon to Dean Neidlinger, September 6, 1941. President Sills Correspondence, Folder: Aviation Course, Brunswick: Bowdoin College.
indicating that they had no current intention of awarding credit for the course. That Bowdoin’s peer institutions hesitated in this matter is no surprise, as the vocational nature of the CAA course was unpalatable to many liberally minded New England college administrators. Even Nixon expressed distaste for the notion of giving credit in his closing sentence to Neidlinger, writing: “we should hesitate to commit this sin unless we sinned in good company.” The College ultimately voted to award credit out of deference to the students’ work load and commitment, but not without hesitation due to the course’s vocational nature.

When the federal government requested that colleges and universities offer accelerated programs in order to shorten the interval between coming of age for the draft and graduation, Bowdoin’s governing boards and the faculty adjusted the college calendar and instituted a series of summer sessions. In fact, Bowdoin was one of the first colleges to announce an accelerated program of study. Administrators changed the date of commencement exercises from the traditional weekend in June to Memorial Day weekend in May so that students could graduate several weeks earlier. Additionally, faculty allowed enlisted students to take special exams early in order to honor their hard work. In accordance with the call for accelerated education programs, in 1941 the Recording Committee agreed to award credit for summer courses taken at other institutions prior to arriving at Bowdoin as long as the student had the approval of the individual department. Bowdoin faculty and administrators made these decisions out of the national call for accelerated programs in higher education even though in some ways the changes compromised the quantity of education accepted for degree eligibility.

23 Ibid.
24 Cardozier, Colleges and Universities in World War II.
26 Faculty records of Bowdoin College May 5, 1941. Brunswick: Bowdoin College.
27 Faculty records of Bowdoin College, June 30, 1941. Brunswick: Bowdoin College.
In January 1942, at President Sills’ prompting, the Curriculum Committee and the Committee on Freshman-Sophomore Curriculum developed a plan for summer work.\textsuperscript{28} Several weeks later, the joint committee presented this plan to the faculty, proposing that summer school start on an experimental basis with two six-week sessions. Each course was to meet five times per week, students were limited to two courses per session, and each course earned a student one semester credit. After taking two courses for each of two summer sessions, a student was considered to have completed one semester’s worth of work, allowing students to graduate several semesters early. In order to make summer school a reality, Bowdoin faculty agreed to teach throughout the summer without compensation. Members of the Curriculum, Freshman-Sophomore Curriculum, Recording, Major Examinations, and Calendar Committees, however, emphasized in a 1942 report to the faculty that although the war required certain significant adjustments, the College would reinstate tradition as soon as the emergency was over. The report stated:

The Government has requested the colleges of the country to accelerate their work... Naturally, the College responds to this request.... In making the necessary emergency adjustments to the novel conditions that confront us, your committee believes the present emergency is no occasion for far-reaching reforms in our educational methods. The existing structure is the result of historical development; it has a reason for its form and organization.... Our changes are those made, therefore, solely because of the emergency and they are to operate, presumably, only during its existence.\textsuperscript{29}

Although the College responded to the need for acceleration by instituting the summer session and adjusting exam dates for students, the faculty was careful to stipulate that these changes be accepted and maintained with the spirit in which they were made—as a part of Bowdoin’s responsibility to the country that only temporarily took

\textsuperscript{28} Records of the faculty, January 6th, 1942. Brunswick: Bowdoin College.
\textsuperscript{29} Records of the Bowdoin Faculty, Reports of the Curriculum Committee cooperating with the Freshman-Sophomore Curriculum, the Recording, the Major Examinations, and the Calendar Committees, January 21, 1942. Brunswick: Bowdoin College.
precedence due to war.

With hundreds of Army and Navy men on campus, the campus appeared as completely altered as it had when the College hosted the Student Army Training Corps during WWI.\textsuperscript{30} President Sills, for instance, observed:

Except to those whose memories of the College go back to the Student Army Training Corps of the fall of 1918, it is a strange sight to see squadrons of young men march to class and to the Union for meals; it is strange to hear in place of the rising bell the bugle’s reveille at 6:15; it is strange and thrilling every evening to have retreat held by the Memorial Flag Pole. And while students still stroll to classes in desultory friendly groups and while the Army marches, young Naval officers very business-like go their way to class and laboratory.\textsuperscript{31}

This image of the Quad during wartime highlights the noticeable presence of the servicemen as well as the dramatic reduction in civilian students that were enrolled as the war progressed. During the 1940-41 academic year, Bowdoin’s enrollment decreased by only 24 students. However, between 1941 and 1942, the enrollment dropped from 623 to 577. In 1943, the draft age was lowered from 21 to 18, making virtually all college-age men eligible. One year earlier, Sills expressed his concern regarding the possible lowering of the draft age, later stating, “...I told the faculty what I thought would happen, that the draft age would be lowered to 18, that the armed forces had little interest in liberal education, and that probably, within a few months, we should have only a very few regular students left at the college...”.\textsuperscript{32}

Anticipating changes to the selective service requirements, Sills was concerned that a much larger portion of Bowdoin’s student and prospective student population would be drafted. He also seemed concerned that the remaining civilian youth would see little reason to attend a liberal arts college because the armed forces had a general lack of faith in, or use for, liberal education.

\textsuperscript{30} “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1942-1943.” Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1943. p. 16

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32} “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1942-1943.” Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1943, p. 7.
Sills’ predictions about the draft age and about the College’s enrollments were accurate. When the draft age was lowered to 18, Bowdoin’s enrollment fell from 585 to 306 civilian students.33 During the 1943-44 school year, the college enrollment never exceeded 160 civilian students.34 These marked decreases in enrollment, as well as the military presence on campus, created an era of weary persistence for the College and the Sills administration. Sills wrote, “Under these circumstances, it is impossible to plan for more than immediate needs; the administration of the college must keep its options open as never before and simply be ready to cross the bridges as it comes to them on the torturous road to victory and peace.”35 Given the College’s desperate situation, any decisions that increased Bowdoin’s commitment to scientific application of knowledge were at least partly motivated by the struggle for institutional survival. To a large extent, Bowdoin officials reacted to World War II out of practical self-interest. Yet they did so in a national context that gave most institutions of higher education little choice.

**Bowdoin as a College of the Liberal Arts**

With many servicemen on Bowdoin’s campus through various military programs, college officials may have appeared to be disregarding the institution’s liberal ideals for the pragmatism that was so typical during war years.36 On a daily basis, the administration was challenged to accommodate war needs by making difficult decisions. President Sills acknowledged as much as in 1943, when he wrote, “for every major problem to be decided twenty-five years ago, there were twenty five to be decided today.”37 Nevertheless, although the war challenged the capacity of the Sills’ administration to make quick

33 Ibid.
34 “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1943-1944.” Brunswick: Bowdoin College,
decisions, Bowdoin’s leaders remained committed to liberal education throughout the war years.

President Sills, for instance, frequently affirmed his commitment to the liberal arts alongside his commitment to the war effort: “Undoubtedly, if the present emergency deepens we shall have to make many changes both in our schedule and in our courses provided there is no weakening of a liberal education...”\(^{38}\) The Sills administration also viewed the war as an opportunity to reflect on and discuss the direction of liberal education on campus. Indeed, with so few civilian students enrolled, faculty had reduced teaching loads, providing the necessary time for such reflection. “The fact that so many classes will be small,” Sills wrote, “and that several members of the faculty may not have too heavy a teaching load furnishes an opportunity for a careful examination of our work in the field of liberal education...”. He continued:

> I never have had less doubt as to the validity of a liberal education nor of its increasing importance in the future. The college of liberal arts all over the country is showing both its vitality and versatility in the many ways in which it is contributing to the war effort. When the war is over there will be just as important service to render. If the mind is to be kept free, if the intellectual curiosity and intellectual resourcefulness are to be encouraged, if idealism, not materialism, is to rule, finally if the past and the present are to be properly interpreted in their relation to the future, liberal studies must not only be maintained but extended throughout the whole wide world.\(^{39}\)

Sills’ claim both reveals his commitment to liberal education and questions the popular notion that answering the national call for a trained military required liberal arts colleges to betray their ideals. In fact, evidence suggests that not only did Bowdoin manage to maintain these ideals, Sills viewed them as a necessity given the war emergency—rather than despite it.

During a Chapel Talk address to students on August 28, 1944,

\(^{38}\) “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1940-1941.” Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1941, p. 15.

Sills expressed this perspective, saying:

Personally I am convinced that the college of the immediate future will pay more attention than it has done in the recent past to the fine arts, to philosophy, to religion. As my youthful correspondent wrote: “God is still interested in the curriculum.” And by religion I mean religion in the widest and deepest and broadest sense of that term. Listen to these words of one of the great philosophers and prophets of history: “It is not,” says, Plato, “the life of knowledge, not even if it included all the science, that creates happiness and well-being, but a single branch of knowledge—the science of good and evil. If you exclude this from the other branches, medicine will be equally able to give us health, and shoemaking, shoes and weaving, clothes. Seamanship will still save life at sea and strategy win battles. But without the knowledge of good and evil, the use and excellence of these sciences will be found to have failed us.” I wonder how many of you have ever thought that there is such a thing as the science of good and evil. If not, it is high time you think of the place such a science should have in your education.  

Sills used this address, delivered at a mandatory student assembly, to challenge young Bowdoin men to use their liberal education as a vehicle for the crafting of sound morals. This Chapel Talk allowed Sills to assert that training men in the sciences without attending to the soundness of their motivating morals and convictions may not yield positive results. His reference to Plato, who suggested that the study of good and evil is a science, underscored his point and implied a warning that the nationwide prioritization of scientific learning to the neglect of the liberal arts was dangerous. Sills reminded his students that even in wartime, an aim of a Bowdoin liberal arts education was to provide young men with the philosophies and morals to inform decisions—to live a good life.

Despite the many practical constraints on small, liberal arts colleges during World War II, Bowdoin’s leaders as well as the leaders of Bowdoin’s peer institutions seemed to share Sills’ concern with the fate of liberal education. The Report of the Eighty-Fourth Meeting of

40 Kenneth C. M. Sills, “Chapel Talk: Office of the President of Kenneth C.M. Sills -1952 Address,” Kenneth Sills Administrative Records [1.2.8.2., Box 13, Folder: Sills Papers- Addresses 8/28/44], Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives.
the Association of Colleges in New England, for instance, indicates that college representatives spent more time discussing the role of liberal education in the emergency and how best to support the liberal arts than any of the other pressing concerns. When a representative from Yale University posed a question about the fate of liberal education after the war, “the general tone,” according to one report, “was one of gloom, at times verging on something approaching despondency, and often characterized by an apparent feeling of helpfulness.” But this gloom was hardly an indication of surrender for these administrators:

Professor Smith of Yale argued that the college must make every effort to keep alive the idea of the value of other things than the narrowest sciences....[President Carmichael] believes it was not a question simply of the interests of the college but of the future of the country.... Dean Buck stressed the necessity of keeping at least a skeleton of the liberal arts alive through the war.... President Butterfield, of Wesleyan, spoke at length on using the war as the occasion for an attempt to rediscover the liberal ideal and give it more significance.”

As New England college leaders considered the future of the liberal arts, they acknowledged the strains the war was placing on liberal education, but also thought strategically about how ensure the survival of liberal ideals. Many of the ways Bowdoin changed during the 1940s demonstrated the necessity of adjusting to wartime demands. However, it would be misguided to interpret these administrative actions as showing disregard for Bowdoin’s commitment to liberal education. The fact that Bowdoin hosted military units and adjusted math and science curricula to meet the needs of a nation at war does not reveal the degree to which the College’s administration considered the theoretical implications of the war and its own wartime decisions for the liberal arts.

41 Reports on the 84th Meeting of the Association of Colleges in New England, Tufts College, Medford, MA October 6-7, 1942. Records of the Faculty, 1804-. Faculty Committees: Official Reports 1927-1950, Faculty Committee Reports 1942-43 folder (Hawthorne-Longfellow Library, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME).
42 Ibid.
The Institute on Liberal Education

At first glance, it is puzzling that in the midst of wartime transformation on campus, the College would host an Institute on Liberal Education. Were one to examine a timeline of Bowdoin-related events during the war years, for example, this Institute would seem out of place. Moreover, such a timeline would undoubtedly fail to provide information about how concerned liberal arts college officials were about the future of liberal education. The planning stages for the Institute were already underway when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Yet, as the war progressed, Bowdoin officials significantly scaled back ideas for the summit as a central component of the College’s sesquicentennial celebration:

It is obvious that we shall have to change entirely our dreams for an elaborate celebration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the College that will take place in 1944. It will be impossible to put up the new buildings that we had contemplated, or to ask for any large sums of money. We shall have to mark out anniversary in other ways...by emphasizing the things of the spirit, those characteristics, principles, and qualities that really count...”.

Although Bowdoin celebrated its anniversary in more modest ways than initially planned, college officials’ desire to do what was “appropriate in war time” did not reflect a weakening of the commitment to liberal education. In fact, during a time when the war challenged college administrators to defend liberal education, plans for the sesquicentennial institute acted as a timely pronouncement of Bowdoin’s opposition to the utilitarianism and specialization pressures of the university. At the 1952 Commemoration of the Opening of the College, for instance, Herbert Ross Brown delivered an address entitled “Bowdoin and the Common Good” in which he claimed: “... we are compelled almost daily to listen to funeral obsequies sung over such colleges.... Other prophets of doom point to the spectacle of the

43 “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1941-1942.” Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1942, p. 17.
college of the liberal arts being jostled from below by junior colleges, harassed on all sides by powerful state universities and teacher-training institutions, and pressed down from above by graduate and professional schools. There is little left of us, we are asked to believe, but a mind as confused as a Spanish omelet.”

Brown responded strongly to such criticism, reaffirming the value of the College’s ideals and declaring, “Bowdoin is nothing if she is not a college of the liberal arts.”

Although Bowdoin’s administration demonstrated the flexibility and pragmatism that was typical of many colleges during the war, it also negotiated the problem of serving the common good while maintaining liberal ideals and methods. As Herbert Ross Brown indicated in his 1952 address at the final celebration of Bowdoin’s sesquicentennial years, the deft balancing of war-related needs and the cherished ideals of liberal education echoes the same struggle which led to the College’s founding. Brown proclaimed:

> It was an abiding concern for the common good which, in 1788, induced the association of ministers and justices of the peace in Cumberland County to petition the General Court of Massachusetts for the foundation of a college in the District of Maine. The petitioners themselves...were moved by considerations which happily unite two of the most precious elements un the heritage of their Puritan ancestors: an intrepid idealism and a hard practicality.

The Sills administration acted with both idealism and practicality in its response to World War II. It could be argued that the College, in being flexible, gave in too greatly to the demands of the war and that Bowdoin students in the early 1940s left the college with an incomplete liberal arts education. Bowdoin’s goal in these years, however, was to educate as many men as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

The question of importance is less whether Bowdoin successfully educated every wartime student in the liberal arts but whether the

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48 “Report of the President of Bowdoin College for the Academic Year, 1940-1941.” Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1941, p. 15.
administration remained engaged in the longstanding fight for liberal education despite a war which seemed to silence the debate.

Bowdoin College’s administration was pragmatic in its problem-solving during the war; compromise was essential to the college’s survival. However, in considering the administrators’ rhetoric that equated national service with “the common good,” one can see that many of Bowdoin’s most practical decisions were informed by a patriotic commitment to service through training soldiers, thus placing Bowdoin’s identity as a liberal arts institution at odds with its historic dedication to the common good. If Bowdoin had willfully ignored liberal education for the period of the war, the administration would have implicitly surrendered to the champions of the multiversity and applied skills training. That Bowdoin remained engaged in asserting the value of liberal education throughout the war speaks to the administrators’ beliefs about the applicability of liberal arts to the war effort. More importantly, Bowdoin officials’ attendance to the theoretical implications of wartime decisions insured that the college betrayed neither its foundational principle of learning for the common good nor the liberal arts vehicle for this learning even when current events made it inconvenient to do so.