At the height of World War II, as higher education institutions across the United States engaged in activities directly contributing to wartime mobilization, Bowdoin College hosted an Institute on Liberal Education. That Bowdoin administrators and faculty continued to take liberal education as a central concern while in the midst of a total war may seem puzzling, especially considering that, through the draft, the College lost hundreds of enrolled students to the armed forces. Why did College officials refuse to abandon their institution’s historic commitment to liberal education when the nation’s survival was at stake?

In response to wartime demands, many colleges and universities both questioned the value of traditional liberal education and increased opportunities for student technical training and specialization. Bowdoin, too, responded to wartime needs, becoming a training ground for hundreds of military recruits. With various armed forces programs, such as a Naval Radio School, placing servicemen on campus, Bowdoin College appeared to be disregarding its founding educational ideals for the pragmatism that was typical of higher education during the war years. However, Bowdoin administrators and faculty managed to maintain liberal courses of study that would otherwise have been eclipsed by the wartime need for skills training.

During a time when military necessity and liberal education were at odds, College officials retained the ideals of Bowdoin’s founders. Their decision offers insight into Bowdoin College’s role in maintaining a sturdy commitment to liberal education in a society characterized by rapid technological advance and the perception of an ever-increasing threat to national security.

In 1944, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt delivered an address at Bowdoin College entitled “English Youth in the War.” During her talk, Mrs. Roosevelt reaffirmed the value of a liberal arts education, emphasized college students’ responsibility for understanding America’s goals in the war, and encouraged students to actively participate in restoring the peace that would follow.

Utilizing Bowdoin facilities for Naval Radio School training (among other armed forces programs), over 300 recruits lived on campus during the 1941-42 school year. Hosting these servicemen was both a patriotic and lucrative opportunity upon which College officials capitalized.

Throughout the war era, Bowdoin College President Kenneth Sills, seen here greeting servicemen, firmly maintained his commitment to the liberal arts. A Bowdoin education, Sills believed, performed an essential civic function by equipping young men with the ethical and intellectual qualities necessary for democratic citizenship.

In 1943, the draft age was lowered from 21 to 18, making virtually all college-age men eligible. The following academic year, Bowdoin College’s enrollment dropped to fewer than 200 students. Among the Bowdoin students enlisting was William Henry Elliot, seen here being sworn in for service in the U.S. Navy. Among the Bowdoin students who enlisted was William Henry Elliot, seen here being sworn in for service in the U.S. Navy.

Sources from left to right: “Elliot, William Henry” Images: Undated, [3589], Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives; “Delta Upsilon,” Images: 1943, [6897], Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives; “R.O.T.C” Images: Undated, [7778], Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives; “Wartime Campus” Images: 1943, [7835], Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives; “B.O.T.C” Images: Circa 1940-1949, [7836], Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives; 1944 Bowdoin College Bugle

"AN INTREPID IDEALISM AND A HARD PRACTICALITY": Bowdoin College During World War II