“A Fresh Look and a Fresh Start”:

Bowdoin College President Roger Howell and the Student Strike of 1970

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ANGRY CHANTS AND TAUNTS OF STUDENT PROTESTORS GAVE WAY to the sharp staccato of gunshots as National Guardsmen patrolling Kent State University’s campus suddenly turned on the assembled crowd and began firing on May 4, 1970. Across the nation, angered and grieving young people responded by joining the student strike movement that had been gaining momentum since its start in the early 1960s. Within hours of the shootings at Kent State, students at Bowdoin College began debating whether they should conduct a school-wide strike.

A student strike presented the possibility of an unprecedented emergency situation for the College’s young president Roger Howell. When thirty-three-year-old history professor Howell was inaugurated president in 1960, many Bowdoin community members still held an idealized image of “dear old Bowdoin” as a school steeped in centuries-old tradition. Howell recognized, however, the dangers of clinging to tradition at a time when the direction of education was rapidly evolving. He argued that “the hardest lesson for a college like Bowdoin to learn is that the past is not and cannot be sufficient justification for
the present; certainly it cannot be for the future.” Howell declared that in order for Bowdoin to survive, the College would have to acquire a “fresh look and a fresh start.”

Aware of the difficulties facing him, Howell noted, “it would be foolish and vain to promise success in facing what will be the College’s most challenging years.” He could not, however, have anticipated the crisis which developed less than a year into his presidency.

Only a decade earlier, it seemed that higher education flourished as a result of its ability to address both student and societal needs in new and creative ways. In the intervening years, however, students grew frustrated with the “business as usual” policies of many colleges and universities and began to question the value of higher education, which seemed depersonalized and detached from pressing “real-world” issues. Students embraced protesting from the start of the Civil Rights movement through to the antiwar movement, striking at both large and small institutions to force a realization of change. As historian Michael C. Otten recounts, “each month and week the list of disturbances grew, as the smell of tear gas drove out the nostalgic odor of autumn leaves burning in front of the fraternity house.” Renowned educational leaders, such as University of California President Clark Kerr, tried and subsequently failed to quell the movement, while other institutions struggled to address students’ demands. According to educational historian Diane Ravitch, by the end of the decade, “American society was pervaded by a national mood of foreboding, which on many campuses was so intense as to seem apocalyptic.”

At Bowdoin College, as alumnus and Vietnam War veteran Everett B. “Brownie” Carson recalls, “there were a number of us who felt that classes ought to stop, business as usual ought to stop, and that the College... should learn more about the war, should take some kind of

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2 Howell, A New Humanism, p. 15.
5 Ravitch, p. 183.
The events at Kent State served as a sobering reminder of the consequences of mishandling such crises. In contrast with universities such as the University of California, however, Bowdoin was able to persevere and grow stronger as an institution of learning instead of suffering as a result of the strikes. How did Howell accomplish what other prominent college presidents could not?

The Bowdoin Student Strike of 1970 followed many of the patterns and trends exhibited by similar liberal arts colleges. As scholars such as Richard E. Peterson and John A. Bilorusky assert, many students who joined the movement following the Kent State shootings favored less extreme views and tactics than radical student protestors of the 60s, and as a result demonstrations “were overwhelmingly peaceful and legal.” At Bowdoin, a variety of factors, including the beliefs and strategies of the students involved, may have influenced the strike’s evolution. Of crucial importance to the strike’s progression was the course of action which Howell decided to pursue. While some presidents tried to discipline or to accommodate their students, Howell made a different choice: he joined them. He made this decision despite his personal reservations and the subsequent protests from parents and alumni. Under his careful watch, the strike unfolded civilly. Students, faculty, and members of the administration participated peacefully. Howell’s leadership throughout the Student Strike encouraged a spirit of civility and collaboration which ensured its successful resolution, and which also created an environment for Howell in which to give Bowdoin a new outlook and a refocused purpose.

Student Protest in the Sixties

Throughout the 1960s, whether on behalf of civil rights, free speech, or the antiwar movement, students across the nation called into question the very purpose of institutions of higher education. The adherence of many colleges and universities to “business as usual”

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6 Everett B. Carson. An oral history conducted by Elyse Terry on April 2, 2008 at Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME. Bowdoin College, Brunswick.
policies in the face of injustices occurring both at home and abroad led to student advocacy for change. By the end of the decade, however, student protests had begun to founder, and the movement gained a generally chaotic and disjointed reputation, presenting a challenge to all the campuses involved, including Bowdoin’s.

At the beginning of the 1960s, many Americans viewed universities and colleges as institutions that were ideally suited to equip students to become competent citizens and productive workers. Rapidly expanding universities were expected to serve their surrounding communities and the country by developing their capacity for research, to work for the government, and to conduct projects for the private industry. University of California President Clark Kerr expressed the prevailing belief that “what the railroads did for the second half of the last century, and the automobile for the first half of this century, may be done for the second half of this century by the knowledge industry, and that is to serve as the focal point for national growth.”8 In 1964, however, students within Kerr’s own university began to promote change, challenging previously held conceptions of higher education’s civic functions. Student protests over restricted First Amendment rights at the University of California, Berkeley, evolved into the Free Speech Movement, creating, according to New York University professor and author Robert Cohen, “a new and complex mixture of issues, tactics, emotions, and setting that became the prototype for student protest throughout the decade.”9

The Free Speech Movement gained momentum and began to encompass additional issues as the sixties progressed, especially with respect to the outbreak of the Vietnam War under President Johnson and subsequent conflict escalation under President Nixon. As Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) president Paul Potter declared in 1965, “the war in Vietnam has provided the incredibly sharp razor that has finally separated thousands and thousands of people from their illusions about the morality and integrity of this country’s

8 Berkeley in the Sixties, dir Mark Kitchell (First Run Features, 1990).
purposes internationally.” 10 Many college students shared this sense of disillusionment, and began to call for change as a collective body. As Berkeley alumnus Susan Griffin recalls, “victory in our struggle for Civil Rights and free speech made us confident that we could change the course of history. Then we learned about Vietnam, and stopping the war became our consuming cause.” 11 Students across the country also began to take up “the cause,” especially when President Nixon further heightened U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War by authorizing American troops to invade Cambodia. While large and prestigious universities garnered much national attention in response to student protests, many smaller institutions were also affected. In fact, Peterson and Bilorusky report that 458 or approximately 60 percent of four-year liberal arts schools similar to Bowdoin in terms of their size experienced a “significant impact” on campus operations in reaction both to the Cambodian invasion and the events at Kent State. 12

Still, within the context of its own history and circumstances, Bowdoin’s strike appeared to be both unique and unprecedented as well as deeply unsettling. Historian Charles C. Calhoun describes as the Strike as having generated a “crisis” situation for President Howell. 13 As Bowdoin alumnus and current college President Barry Mills recalls, while other striking schools could have served as models for Bowdoin, Bowdoin remained fairly “provincial, and very isolated.” 14 Although the college community had previously experienced one strike, in 1880 when students protested state-required military drills occurring on campus, many students, faculty, and perhaps some administration members were confronted with an unfamiliar level of political activity. 15

Howell was a popular president, yet he was also inexperienced. In an era of increasing student alienation, his popularity did not

10 Berkeley in the Sixties.
11 Berkeley in the Sixties.
12 Peterson and Bilorusky, p. 42-3.
14 Barry Mills. An oral history conducted by Elyse Terry on May 14, 2008 at Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME. Bowdoin College, Brunswick.
15 Calhoun, p. 231.
guarantee that he would successfully meet the challenges of student protest. Indeed, the impending threat of conflict resonated on campus in conjunction with Bowdoin’s five-mile proximity to the Brunswick Naval Air Station. Active ROTC recruitment of Bowdoin students underscored the reality of a military environment and heightened a sense of risk and tension within the community. Further, while the majority of strikes were generally peaceful, at several prominent institutions they became violent. In 1968, for instance, campus conflict at Columbia University led to the injury of over two hundred students and faculty members, and resulted in the arrest of many hundreds more students. At Berkeley, increasingly frustrated and isolated students began embracing hippie counterculture. The SDS, which had once been a powerful student activist organization, splintered into radicalized groups. Closer to Brunswick, student protest was extremely disruptive on Harvard’s campus. As the sixties came to a close, it seemed, according to educational historian Diane Ravitch, that “academic freedom - the right to teach and the right to learn - was once again under attack, not by the external forces of reaction but by student ideologues and their campus sympathizers.” The shootings at Kent State compounded this sense of rapid, chaotic change. Even for a small, liberal arts college such as Bowdoin, the threat of violent protest was a real and frightening possibility that was to be avoided at all costs.

The Student Strike

On May 4, 1970, less than twenty-four hours after the shootings at Kent State, roughly 300 Bowdoin students met in Moulton Union to discuss a possible strike. Members of the Bowdoin community spoke in favor and against striking, and considered other possible protest actions. After discussing and debating their options, the students voted

18 Ravtich, p. 183.
to strike for one day.\textsuperscript{19} Professors were also present at this meeting, offering opinions and advice. Missing, however, was President Howell. The Bowdoin administration had yet to publicly comment, positively or negatively, about the students’ form of protest.

Howell, however, was not hesitant in making his objections to the Vietnam War public. In October 1969, he signed a letter representing the opinion of fifty college and university presidents supporting total withdrawal from the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{20} Months later, on the same day as the Kent State shootings, he again signed a letter, along with many other presidents of higher education institutions, asking President Nixon to “consider the incalculable dangers of an unprecedented alienation of American youth and to take immediate action to demonstrate unequivocally your determination to end the war quickly.”\textsuperscript{21} While it seems from these letters that President Howell shared the concerns of many Bowdoin students, as of May 4, 1970, it was unclear how he would respond to the possibility of a student strike on his campus.

The next day, however, Howell met with a group of students and issued a joint statement with the president of the Bowdoin Student Council calling for an all-college meeting later that night. The announcement explained that the meeting’s purpose was “to determine the sentiments and wishes of the College Community on American foreign policy in the East and its impact on the campus.”\textsuperscript{22} In issuing the statement, Howell signaled that he would let members of the Bowdoin community decide how to proceed — whether or not to strike. On the night of May 5, more than 1,000 students met with faculty members and administrators at the all-college meeting to debate potential courses of action. Notably, Howell joined many students


\textsuperscript{21} Bowdoin College News Service, p. 2.

and faculty members in expressing reservations regarding the Strike, telling the assembly that he was “not convinced” that a strike was the best way to convey disapproval and apply pressure to President Nixon. Nevertheless, Howell upheld the Bowdoin community’s 727 to 207 decision in favor of a strike.  

Many college and university presidents chose different courses of action. University of California’s Clark Kerr, for example, maintained an adversarial relationship with striking students, declaring that “one of the most distressing tasks of a university president is to pretend that the protest and outrage of each new generation of undergraduates is really fresh and meaningful.” His administration’s choices often contributed to students’ sense of anger and alienation. In fact, the Free Speech Movement was originally sparked by the Kerr administration’s decision to restrict students’ political activities on campus. Columbia University President Grayson Kirk’s administration was also, according to scholar Ellen Kay Trimberger, “remote and unaccountable,” failing to acknowledge students’ frustration. Howell, in contrast to both of these presidents, recognized and respected his students’ concerns. In giving students and faculty a say in deciding whether or not to strike, Howell set himself apart from many leaders of institutions of higher education during this period. Indeed, Howell’s approach helped ensure the Bowdoin Student Strike’s peaceful and successful conclusion.

At the all-college meeting, Howell declared, “we should deplore the events at Kent State and we should deplore the climate which has led to their possibility.” In joining students rather than opposing them, he took an important first step in establishing a new

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23 Bowdoin College News Service, p. 4-5.
24 Berkeley in the Sixties.
25 Ravitch, p. 191.
26 Becker, p. 28.
27 Peterson and Bilorusky, 18. Peterson and Bilorusky write that “when asked by whose decision or order the shutdown occurred, almost one-third (31 percent) of the presidents said it was by their own order, 14 percent indicated it was by the president with concurrence of the other campus constituent groups, 12 percent said it was a faculty decision,” but they do not ever mention a decision which included administration, faculty, and students.
28 Bowdoin College News Service, p. 4-5.
“climate,” at least at Bowdoin, that was both conducive to positive change and in line with his vision for the College. When he delivered his inaugural address in October 1969, Howell outlined his vision of Bowdoin’s guiding philosophy, which he called “a new humanism.” Howell defined this as “as sympathetic awareness of the oneness which unites humanity despite its many racial and ethnic diversities” and “a deep concern for what we, as individuals, can do for mankind.” 29 In the days following May 5, 1970, students, confident that the faculty and the president supported their decision, displayed the kind of deep concern that Howell had called for. Harry Warren, who was serving as director of Moulton Union and as the director of career counseling at the time of the strike, recalls that during this period, Bowdoin students “proved that they cared deeply about something, and enough to do something that wasn't going to be totally popular.” He adds that as the strike began, “we weren't sure just what was going to happen, but there were students behind the information desk right as you walk down the hallway, they were having a student activities workroom, they were making posters and busy at work, and they'd be getting organized and getting our tables to take downtown and do their thing.” 30 For the students, “doing their thing” included letter-writing and door-to-door campaigns to express their views and the decision to strike, creating discussions and seminars to address concerns about foreign policy, and establishing guidelines to ensure that the strike was successful. 31 Through their actions, students began to translate Howell’s vision from abstract concept to productive reality.

Not everyone viewed the strike as a positive development, however. While Bowdoin’s faculty members issued a majority resolution calling for an end to the war and reconfigured classes and graduation requirements to accommodate both striking and non-striking students, not all professors were pleased. Some voiced doubts as to what students, and the institution itself, were losing by striking. As Professor Karl P. Magyar declared, “Never have I seen so many pay so much to study so little and to pursue their objectives in such a

31 Bowdoin College News Service, p. 5.
futile manner.”  

Further, some in the Brunswick community were less than receptive to the Strike. In a letter to the editor of *Bangor News*, for instance, David H. Oakes wrote that during the strike, “Bowdoin students set out to make a spectacle of themselves, and they succeeded in superlatives,” describing how “adolescent and irresponsible free thinkers brought down upon themselves the indignation of many parents, the wrath of countless alumni, and the condemnation of the Town of Brunswick.”  

Support for the Strike seemed to balance criticism, however, as with John N. Cole’s editorial in *The Maine Times*, which declared, “in spite of the incredible fears of some of the older generation - including the mentally and spiritually senile elders of the Brunswick town council...Maine students are working for the noblest of purposes.”  

Members of the Brunswick community were not alone in their “incredible fears,” however, as the deluge of letters from furious parents and alumni proved.

President Howell received hundreds of letters and telegrams following the official start to the Student Strike. Many parents and alumni expressed opinions similar to Captain Peter A. Anderson, Class of 1960, who called Bowdoin students “indulged youth” and wrote that “this strike is a temper tantrum. I weep for Bowdoin. I am glad I have no ‘sons to send to Bowdoin in the fall;’ it would not be worthy of them.”  

Some letters carried an additional blow, as their authors threatened to stop making donations to the College until the strike ended. As Warren Wheeler, Class of 1952, declared, “When the administration, faculty and students of my college come to their senses, I might be persuaded to donate. In the meantime, I intend to go on my own private financial strike.”  

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32 Bowdoin College News Service, p. 4.  
Howell consistently and firmly defended the Bowdoin community’s decision.

In his letters, Howell argued that “there is nothing but futility in expecting them [colleges] to be tranquil spots of repose in a society that is badly divided,” adding that “the overwhelming majority of students and faculty are seeking answers to the problems which plague society. They have the honesty to admit the existence of such problems and to face them.”37 He acknowledged the concerns of the letters’ authors, which ranged from campus violence to Communist activity, but remained supportive of Bowdoin students and faculty. In one letter written after the strike’s conclusion, for example, Howell had an opportunity to further explain his unwavering defense, writing:

Obviously not everyone agrees with the stand taken by the majority of resident members of the College. ...They took that stand out of deep love and respect for their country. One may disagree with the particular course of action, but the honesty and integrity of their concern should be respected. Perhaps we shall never know who was right and who was wrong in May 1970, but all of us can reflect on the fact that the duties of a citizen were performed by all those who had the concern to stand up and be counted in support of the views they espouse.38

This letter goes far in explaining Howell’s choice to support the striking students, despite his initial doubts and intense pressure from parents and alumni. In his estimation, students were enacting the new humanism he had hoped to introduce at Bowdoin. His respect for “the honesty and integrity of their concern” allowed Howell to foster a trusting relationship with his students rather than a hostile one. Charles Calhoun writes that Bowdoin “handled the crisis in a

civil fashion, thanks to the moral authority of Roger Howell,” and in many ways he is correct. Calhoun suggests that Carson’s leadership was crucial as well, while Carson, himself, has claimed that Howell’s main role was to “set a tone of civility” that persisted throughout the strike. However students may have perceived Howell’s influence both before and during the strike, his actions were crucial in establishing a sense of trust and unity, allowing the strike to progress peacefully until its conclusion at the end of the academic year.

The Strike’s Impact

At the end of the 1970 school year, as Calhoun describes, “a mass meeting of 1,500 people had been held in the gymnasium (5 May), the normal academic routine had been disrupted (though much instruction went on), the Brunswick Town Council had condemned the College...and students at a small college in Maine had participated in the great generational upheaval that had swept the country.” That is what happened. But what was actually accomplished?

Certainly, the strike impacted Bowdoin’s academic functions. Technically, the College remained open throughout the strike, with Howell frequently emphasizing, “it goes without saying that the College has seen and continues to see its role to be that of an educational institution. It seeks to maintain a climate in which it is possible to pursue this aim.” However, one of the most frequent concerns cited in parent and alumni letters was that strike activities were lessening the quality of teaching and learning at Bowdoin. In response, Howell allowed that “normal classroom activity has been severely curtailed,” yet he also emphasized that “individual members of the Faculty are making themselves available to students who seek to continue their instruction.” According to Peterson and Bilorusky, roughly forty-
three percent of independent four-year colleges registered a “perceived 'detrimental impact on academic standards’” in the spring of 1970, and despite Howell’s reassurances the same seems to have been true for Bowdoin. Administrative and faculty efforts to satisfy students still seeking a traditional education were not very successful. According to Howell, however, there were far more significant measures of the strike’s impact.

By Howell’s estimation, success lay in the fact that “in a time of passion there has been no violence; in a time of intense feeling there has been much constructive and civil discussion; in a time when some other colleges have been forced to close, Bowdoin has remained open.” Reflecting on the impact of the strike, Brownie Carson muses, “I think it helped shape some of us as individuals,” but adds that “I don't know that it shaped the Bowdoin community.” Barry Mills offers similarly ambivalent views about the Strike’s impact on Bowdoin. Harry Warren remembers, however, that for many students this was the first realization that “if they care enough” about a cause or challenge, “they can...see some changes made.” Further, he asserts that the strike began a process that allowed the College to become something “new and different, and Bowdoin came out on top” in spite of lost alumni donations or conflict with the Brunswick community. At least for some students, then, the environment Howell established during the Student Strike allowed for the realization of the kind of “new humanism” which he called for in his inaugural address.

Following the Student Strike, Howell had the opportunity to begin implementing some of the changes that would give Bowdoin the “fresh start” he had called for when first taking office. Howell’s original agenda was ambitious. He wanted to expand both the college’s size and diversify its curriculum by including programs such as ethnic studies.

Folder, “Roger Howell, Jr. Administrative Papers,” Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives, Brunswick.

43     Peterson and Bilorusky, p. 36-37.
45     Carson, oral history.
46     Warren, oral history.
The connections Howell forged through his skillful leadership during the strike provided a platform for him to make changes to Bowdoin’s curriculum and admissions policies, which helped transform Bowdoin from a “conservative, all-male, sports-minded college” to a dynamic and increasingly diverse institution.47 During his time as president, Bowdoin began to admit women and the College further diversified its student body when it made SAT scores an optional part of the application process.48 The College also established an environmental science program as well as an Afro-American studies program and African, Asian, and Latin American history courses.49 Further, while many angered alumni threatened to withdraw financial support from Bowdoin, Howell was still able to launch a post-strike campaign that garnered over $40 million dollars. In fact, Warren recalls that in their first year as alumni, members of the Class of 1970 made a record-setting contribution to the alumni fund.50

Two alumni letters further highlight the Strike’s impact on Bowdoin. John Emery, Class of 1967, wrote to Howell three years following his graduation to praise the college’s actions, explaining, “this excellence and pertinence is all the more amazing to me in view of my memory of social and political indifference at Bowdoin not too long ago.” He then went on to add, “if anyone dares doubt the value of a liberal arts college in this period of depressing specialization, I hope that they will carefully inspect Bowdoin’s record since the Cambodian invasion.”51 In another letter, alumnus H. K. Heggenhougen declared, “my memory of Bowdoin is tainted by the atmosphere of general apathy and of fraternity house binges which were much a part of college life in the late fifties and early sixties.” He then explained, “It is therefore particularly rewarding to learn of the spirit of concern and the constructive attempts for change now taking hold of the college

47 Calhoun, p. 232.
48 Warren, oral history.
50 Warren, oral history.
community.” Both these letters serve as testaments to the changes set in motion by the Student Strike of 1970. While once the College might have been called an “ignorant” or “apathetic” institution, it was now beginning to embrace Howell’s new humanism. Thanks to Howell’s leadership, Bowdoin’s Student Strike was both peaceful and productive.

Conclusion

When he first took office, President Howell stated that “I take my mandate to be the making of a fresh start. It is no easy mandate, though it is made easier by the support of the wide community of friends that is the Bowdoin family.” Less than a year later, the Bowdoin family faced a stern test when many students, in concert with youth across the nation, refused to accept “business as usual” and sought to craft a meaningful response to the troubles and injustices they saw in the world around them. Rather than growing hostile in the face of uncertainty, however, Bowdoin’s Roger Howell united with students and faculty. In doing so, he helped realize his own vision of establishing “a new humanity” on campus. The Bowdoin Student Strike of 1970 did not instantly transform the College into a modernized institution. Howell’s leadership throughout the strike, however, created the precedent he needed to enact positive change at Bowdoin and allowed for the institution to obtain the fresh start that was so crucial for its future.

53 Howell, A New Humanism, p. 15.