On May 4, 1970, National Guardsmen patrolling Kent State University’s campus suddenly turned on an assembled crowd of student protestors and began firing. Less than twenty-four hours after gunfire fatally wounded four of those students, roughly 300 of Bowdoin’s own students met in Moulton Union to discuss a possible strike. Only a decade earlier, higher education flourished as a result of its ability to address both student and societal needs in new and creative ways. By the time Bowdoin College President Roger Howell was inaugurated in 1969, however, students across the nation fully embraced protesting by striking at both large and small institutions to force a realization of change.

A student strike presented the possibility of an unprecedented emergency situation for the College’s young president Howell. Rather than growing hostile in the face of uncertainty, he united with students and faculty and gave them a voice in the process of deciding whether or not to strike. In doing so, he set himself apart from many leaders of higher education institutions during this period. Under his careful watch, the Bowdoin Student Strike unfolded civilly. Howell’s leadership throughout the strike encouraged a spirit of collaboration, allowing Howell to realize his vision for Bowdoin. In his inaugural address, Howell declared that the College would have to acquire a “fresh look and a fresh start” in order to survive the rapid evolution of education in America. Howell’s leadership throughout the strike created the precedent that was necessary to enact positive change at Bowdoin while allowing for the institution to obtain the fresh start that was so crucial to its future.

Sources from left to right, top to bottom: “Strike Ballot” Bowdoin Strike Collection, Bowdoin College Special Collections and Archives; “Strike Edition” The Bowdoin Orient, 5 May 1970; all other images: 1970, Bowdoin College Bugle.