Listening to our Auditors  
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Bowdoin College’s auditors add a unique dimension to the courses they take alongside enrolled students. After three years at Bowdoin, I’ve grown accustomed to finding one or a few of these non-traditional students in my classes at the start of each semester. The opportunity for alumni, community members, Friends of Bowdoin, college employees, and students to audit courses was introduced to me during my campus tour as a prospective student, and between the 24 courses I’ve completed, I can approximate that I have shared classrooms with 15 unique auditors. Though I tend to feel indifferent to the presence of auditors in the classroom, I have always been curious to know specifically what motivates them to attend classes, and how they find the experience of being the odd-person-out.

To satiate my curiosity, I devised a project that—I thought—would allow me to learn about auditors and their experience auditing. I put letters requesting the contact information of auditors in as many professor’s campus mail boxes as I could, and as I received responses from professors I e-mailed or called the auditors to set up meetings. At the meetings, I recorded our conversations, which were prompted by a series of questions I thought productive: Why did they audit? What was their background, both educational and career-wise? What did they think of current Bowdoin students? How did they think contemporary Bowdoin compared to their own undergraduate experience? In addition to those questions, I asked questions I formulated on the spot, relating to different topics that came up in the conversations.

My findings can be categorized into two groups: the expected and the unexpected. Going into this project, I anticipated that most of the auditors that I would speak with would say that they audited because they were perpetual, life-long learners. Nearly everyone I spoke with said something to that effect. I also correctly anticipated that auditors would remark on the quality of professors and students, and that they would express gratitude to the College for allowing them the opportunity to audit. The findings I couldn’t anticipate were those that made me interested to pursue this project in the first place, because I wanted to get beyond what I could reasonably assume. I was surprised to hear so much about how out of place some of the auditors felt in the classroom. Then again, I was also surprised to hear that, for many auditors, being surrounded by undergraduate-age students was one of their biggest draws to auditing, as they had few (if any) other opportunities to interact with people of our generation. Another finding that struck me was the reoccurring desire of auditors to study historical events that they’d lived through or been involved with in some capacity.

An aspect of this project that I didn’t expect to develop—and I’m hesitant to categorize as a “finding”—is how personally involved I became. I felt that I connected with many of the auditors on a level beyond our designated roles of interviewer and interviewee, especially as many of them were curious to learn about my personal background. The conversations I had with the auditors often provided comprehensive overviews of what they did after completing college, and I came to recognize that there was a bit of significance in my seeking out the insights of this particular group as I head into my final year of college, given their returning to an undergraduate institution after having (for the most part) a lifetime of experiences.

Over the course of the summer, I spoke to 22 auditors and recorded 30 hours of audio. I am still in the process of finalizing the audio narrative piece I set out to produce, and intend to pursue an independent study in the spring. I anticipate the design of the independent study will incorporate fine-tuning the narrative construction of the audio piece, in addition to research into the politics of biographical narrative, audio documentary theory, and likely a few other areas of study.

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