

“Breathtaking Opportunities”
Ingrid A. Nelson
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President Mills, Dean Judd, esteemed colleagues, parents, friends, and especially you –the students we celebrate this evening. It is an honor to have the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you as we recognize your outstanding accomplishments.

I would like to begin by thanking all of the people who have made this event possible. While students and faculty tend to get top billing on evenings like this, it wouldn't be a success without a much bigger crew. Thank you to the folks in the Events office, to those helping with sound and lighting, the indispensable teams in housekeeping, facilities, dining, to the grounds crew that has shoveled something like 11 feet of snow this winter, and all of those who have built and tended to this institution and its students over the last 200 plus years.

One thing you hear about a lot at Bowdoin—starting your first look at the home page, and those of you who are graduating will hear it more in the next two weeks than you ever thought possible—is the Offer of the College. It stems from the words of President Hyde more than a hundred years ago and has been handed down from generation to generation...with only minor tweaks by the communications office here and there.

Well, I hate to break it you, but the Offer of the College is about to let you down in a serious way. It starts out okay, but the Offer doesn't end the way those of you who are graduating soon probably hope that it will:

It begins...

“TO BE AT HOME in all lands and all ages;
To count Nature a familiar acquaintance and Art an intimate friend...”
Something about appreciating the work of others...
Carrying the library keys...
Making powerful friends...
(My favorite line) Losing yourself in “generous enthusiasms,”
And then we get to the tricky part...
“This is the offer of the college for the best four years of your life.”

Now that sounds pretty good when you’re a senior in high school, but by the time you’re a senior in college that Offer isn’t quite as perky as it used to be. If Bowdoin has just offered you the best four years of your life... what comes next?

Now because this is Bowdoin, I imagine that many of your brains just leapt to thinking about what kind of job you do or don’t have after graduation. But because I work in the sociology department and not in career planning, I want to encourage you to think a little bit more broadly about that question. What comes next?

At the turn of the last century, most folks didn’t stay in school until the ripe old age of 22 or 23. The *high school* graduation rate was only about 13 percent. But over time, things have changed. More young people are being protected from the realities of the adult world for longer and longer periods of time.

For example, how many of you in the room – and this question goes for faculty, parents, students, everyone –how many of you think of yourselves as an adult? A show of hands please...

Legally, you’re an adult when you turn 18, but if we measure instead from the time when you take on adult roles and responsibilities the picture gets a little murkier.

For example, you might be an adult if you've moved out of your childhood home, if you've completed your education, if you're employed full-time, if you've gotten married, or if you've become a parent yourself.

During the 1950s these markers tended to come in quick succession. Yet with the societal changes that have taken place over the last few decades, so too have come changes to what we think of as our most intimate choices. Among 18 to 24 year olds, (you know...kids your age) only about 15 percent are married and 10 percent have kids of their own. By the time we look at 30 to 34 year olds though, more than 70 percent are married, and a little more than half have children. Some scholars say we're seeing an extended adolescence, while others argue that this transition to adulthood is a unique life stage in and of itself.

This time between your teenage years and your early thirties is being characterized as a time of exploration and self knowledge. It's a time of increased independence and identity development. It's also a time characterized by dependence on your family of origin –and increasing inequality, depending on the resources that your family can continue to provide.

The lengthening of this period between adolescence and adulthood not only impacts you, it also impacts our society more broadly. In a nutshell, because you have more time to explore on your own, you're more likely to do things your parents may not approve of. So we're seeing higher rates of inter-racial marriage, inter-faith marriage, and same sex marriage. And we see lower rates of affiliation with political parties and organized religion.

Having choices about where to live, what careers to pursue, how to spend your time, and what kinds of interpersonal arrangements to enter into can be liberating, but it also can be confusing. In another time, when your major choices about vocation, family and community were settled by about age twenty, there was less room for agonizing about what to do with yourself.

So what comes next? You know, after the best four years of your life.

Research on how to help young people like you find purpose during this prolonged process of becoming suggests that congratulating you tonight is likely the wrong approach. For the sake of both your mental health and your character development, studies suggest that rather than singling you out for recognition, we ought instead to be reminding you that it's not actually all about you.

President McKeen's often quoted remarks remind us that Bowdoin began as place with this intention at heart. He said, "Literary institutions are founded and endowed for the common good, and not for the private advantage of those who resort to them." It was his hope that at Bowdoin your "mental powers may be cultivated and improved for the benefit of society."

These days the world is full of problems—big problems. Poverty, violence, climate change, racial inequality, gender inequality...the list goes on. Many of the problems we're facing today have been around for generations. We live in a country built on lands stolen from indigenous people and cultivated by labor of slaves, realities that still haunt our everyday interactions.

You are not the first generation to face big problems. But your generation is different from those who have come before, and you have been given unprecedented liberty to explore and engage with the world around you.

So tonight I leave you with the words of John Gardner, a civic leader who was appointed as the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1964. 1964, I'll remind you, was also a time when we faced a whole lot of really big problems—the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, Kennedy's assassination, etc. etc.

Placed in a position of leadership and faced with a society in turmoil, Gardner's words still ring true: "What we have before us," he said, "are some breathtaking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems."

Over the course of his term in office, Gardner played a key role in enforcing the Civil Rights Act, in launching Medicare and Public Broadcasting, in ushering in massive investments to public education, and more. "What we have before us," he said, "are some breathtaking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems." And they were.

So as you look toward what comes next and you see riots in Baltimore and ice caps melting. As you head off into this period of not quite adulthood to find yourself, to seek your purpose. As you think about what comes next, I invite you, rather than being shut down by the big insoluble problems facing our community and our world, to instead choose to be inspired by the breathtaking opportunities that lie in wait.

Thank you.