

President Rose, Members of the College, and Guests,

Four years ago, I arrived in the Portland Jetport ecstatic to begin my first semester in college. I was accompanied by my older sister who had never been to Maine. As we sifted through baggage claim, she examined the lobsters paintings that decorated the airport with a look of confusion. Then suddenly she burst out asking “Anu, why did you come here?” I stuttered because I did not know how a winter-hating, city-loving, Yoruba girl like myself ended up in Brunswick. However, I was certain that I wanted a challenge.

When we arrived at my dorm, I felt anxious. I compared myself to every student because their lives looked so elegant and luxurious. I felt like an outsider trying to forge her way in, and in order to cope I concealed my identity. I tried to erase the fact that my mother could only send my sister to move me into college. Or the fact that our first meal in Maine was stale grocery store pizza that we ate in our bed-bug infested motel because it was all we could afford. So every time I introduced myself to anyone, I saw an opportunity to reinvent myself saying “Hi, my name is Anu like a-new person.” I needed to prove to myself that I belonged here just like my peers.

As time passed, I became more comfortable and on occasion my Nigerian accent would slip out. Soon after, I found myself watching YouTube videos on how to pronounce words “the American way”. This feeling of self-doubt permeated every other aspect of my experience. In class, I silenced myself. I dreaded the days when my professors would try to pronounce my 10-letter first name. I felt too visible for comfort. To me, my hyper-visibility reinforced the thoughts that Bowdoin was not the place for me.

At the end of the year, I left school with new knowledge and luggage full of experiences to reflect on. Returning home was a rude awakening that my past could not be erased. I settled back into my family’s financial situation working and helping whatever way I could. On my last

day of summer, my mother sat me down to give me a pep talk, she said “ma gba gbe ibi ati wa” which translates to “do not forget where we came from.” My mother’s pride in our history was something I lacked. She constantly reminded me that we only left Nigeria three years before I started college. She encouraged me to learn from our turbulent life in Nigeria and to hope for a better future. Since I was young, she was confident that my siblings and I would one day immigrate to the United States to build a new life. A life with safety, education and abundant opportunities. A life we deserved.

Shortly after returning to campus for my sophomore year, I was determined to experience Bowdoin more freely and authentically myself. This included holding my head up high and feeling proudly African. I was less worried about my accent slipping out or my professors saying my name in class. I walked around campus claiming the space with each step. Though I found new successes, I needed to learn how to fail. Failure can be a difficult yet transformative experience only if you allow it to be. Ironically, it is very easy to fail. In my case, I just had to take ample neuroscience courses. When I received the grades from my first Neurobiology exam, I was shocked. I got a 55%. I frantically reached out to my professor, Hadley Horch, to review my exam over dinner that evening. In one hand, I held my test and in my other hand, a fork full of stir fry. Right as she was about to take a sip of her water, I started weeping. I kept mumbling “I have failed, what am I going to tell my mother?” I wish I knew the power of failure then. Luckily, I was surrounded by peers who supported me and mentors who counseled me. Soon I learned that failure was a fine opportunity to keep trying. After that experience, Professor Horch and I worked closely to boost my performance. My story is not uncommon. All of us have had at least one moment of failure. Whether it was spending all night in Smith Union trying to finish a paper. Or having mornings ruined by a devastating exam grade. Not to mention, the many tears

that flowed in Hawthorne-Longfellow library while struggling to complete a problem set. The struggle was real. Yet, we triumphed. We learned valuable life lessons that no textbook could begin to explain.

Although the classroom is a vital part of our education, we also champion learning outside of the lecture halls. I like to joke that the classroom is the extracurricular at Bowdoin. Every single student in this place has dabbled in at least one activity during their time here. We have embraced opportunities to socially and intellectually broaden our minds. We have engaged in conversation with peers and notable figures around the world. We have listened to memorable speakers including Noam Chomsky, Roxane Gay, Senator Susan Collins, April Ryan and my personal favorite Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. At some point we have taken a leap of faith to learn about marginalized histories. We have organized rallies, volunteered in underserved local communities and hosted discussions that challenge our perspectives of the world around us. We've learned that we can only make changes if we are resilient.

And for some of us, our mere presence is resilient. Our breath, walk, and existence disrupts the homogeneity of institutions like this one. We have grown to love our college while reconciling the shortcomings of its history. Understandably, this journey has not always been rosy. There were days when we felt like imposters in our own school because our skin was too black to blend into the walls around us. Our voices were too loud to remain silenced. We stood out like comets on a dark starry night. With each day on this campus, our presence challenged stereotypes and assumptions. But like the great Maya Angelou said, "still I rise". We rose above ignorance, fear and the preconceptions of what we are meant to be, and we embrace the offer of the college, to be home in all lands. We defied all odds and worked tirelessly to make Bowdoin a semblance of our own home. Like meteorites, we sparked change. From experiencing bias

incidents our first year to hiring the senior vice president of diversity and inclusion, we have grown. As we have struggled and proven ourselves to be resilient, we call Bowdoin to acknowledge its own shortcomings and potential for continued change. Bowdoin, too, must face its failures and be as resilient as its students are. Bowdoin must let a craving for justice guide a lifelong commitment for equity. Together, we can revolutionize the narratives of minorities on campus.

Today, I am amazed by the passion, dedication and drive present in this institution. It is remarkable to see students so willing to make an imprint at Bowdoin and in the world. I matriculated at sixteen years old with little concept of what my purpose was or who I wanted to be, but I was certain that Bowdoin would help me find answers. As I continue onto the next stage in life, pursuing a year of travel, I will cherish the experiences that have challenged me to be a better version of myself. To work towards the common good and to value individual connection. Bowdoin was the first place that taught me the power of unity and restored my faith in society. I am grateful for the opportunities to grow and learn from my peers. Thanks to Bowdoin, we have collectively witnessed the beauty in resilience. And as we prepare to face new challenges, I urge you to reflect on this quote from my late father, “Aye ole, everything will be alright. But, you must use your brain and keep trying.”