

Convocation 2019
September 3, 2019
Clayton Rose

Good afternoon. It is good to be with you, and to begin another year at our College.

To my faculty and staff colleagues, welcome back. I hope the summer has been productive and refreshing, and that you also enjoyed time with family and friends. Thank you for everything you have done and will do for our students, for one another, and for the College.

To our returning students, welcome back. It is great to see you, and to begin a new year. To our transfer and exchange students, we are delighted that you'll be continuing your education here, and we welcome you into the Bowdoin family.

And to our 499 first-year students—the Class of 2023—today marks the start of a remarkable journey that, at its best, will include successes and challenges, new ideas and possibilities, engagement and discovery, and ultimately, accomplishments you likely never thought possible.

Only a few weeks ago, we closed a great academic year with two fantastic events: Commencement for the Class of 2019, and a Reunion Weekend that brought nearly 2,000 alumni and friends back to campus for three days of renewal and celebration.

Since then, it has been a busy summer.

Faculty pursuing their research, writing, performance, and course development. Students engaging in research, study, or service here on campus and across the country and world, as well as all manner of jobs in all kinds of places.

Our staff was busy preparing the campus and programs for this new academic year.

We welcome twenty-eight new tenure-track, visiting, or postdoc faculty members to this community of great teachers and scholars.

Over the past several years on this occasion, I have offered thoughts on topics like the challenge of race in America, the essential role of a great liberal arts education, and where the “K-report” will likely be leading us.

Today, I want to speak more personally to the class of 2023.

I know that it has been nonstop for you since you pulled up last Tuesday and moved into your rooms. And this is both one of the most exciting moments in your lives, and one filled with uncertainty and anxiety. One session has followed another, all with important information, but “drinking from a firehouse” doesn't begin to describe it.

What's interesting to me is that, in the absence of any coordination, there are themes that have been repeated in the thoughts shared with you over the last few days. I put mine together for you

a few weeks ago, and was pleased to see how well they fit with what else you have heard – in particular, from Ural last night and the editorial in the Orientation issue of The Orient.

Tomorrow, college begins. It will almost certainly be a remarkable four years for you. A time to stretch yourself, to explore, to triumph, to fail, learn, grow, and change. You will quicken the pace in the lifelong journey of discovering who you will be.

You all know that you're wicked smart. And you're pretty good—actually pretty great—at all kinds of things. That's what got you here. And it's what makes you particularly awesome.

But, in general, you're terrible at one thing: ... asking for help. This needs to change.

An inescapable and important part of this journey that begins tomorrow are the decisions you will make and the challenges you will face. Many will be familiar, modest, manageable.

But, increasingly, you will feel the weight of these challenges and of the decisions facing you. And they will cover the waterfront—academic, jobs, social, personal. Of course, very few are actually going to alter the course of your life, and very few will be inalterable. Life just isn't like that.

Many will be important and difficult, and the big challenges and important decisions do not lend themselves to easy answers and clean outcomes. They require careful thought and an understanding that you can rarely have it all. Something gets left behind, choices need to be made.

These moments may also test your character, so make your decisions with integrity:

- Know yourself—what matters to you, what centers you. Your values should be a central guide in your decisions.
- Recognize the ramifications of your decisions for yourself and for those who are affected.
- Own your decisions and live with the consequences.

As I said to you on the steps of the Museum Saturday evening, you were admitted to Bowdoin in no small part because of your character. I have no doubt that it will serve you well and be strengthened here. Don't seek the easy way out, the short-term expedient answer. Seek the right answer. The one you can live with and for which you can accept the consequences. Hard decisions will test you. You start from a good place, and you'll get even better.

This is the process of owning who you are and who you want to be, and developing the skill to navigate the challenges and decisions on that path. It will almost certainly be hard—really hard, at times—but it is exciting and it is part of life.

So, why am I telling you this?

First, so that you recognize you are not alone. All of you sitting here this afternoon are in the same boat, as are your fellow students who are sophomores, juniors, and seniors. As is everyone else in this room. Me included. These decisions, challenges, and moments test us all.

Second, there is help everywhere. But, you need to ask for it ... there it is—the thing you're not so good at.

You need to develop the skill and disposition to make seeking help a regular part of your routine, here and through your life.

Get data and information from the people who have it. Get advice from those with experience and wisdom. Find a shoulder to cry on. Do a gut check. Get someone to give you honest, direct feedback.

Don't look to others to make decisions for you, look to others to help you make the best decisions you can. Be wary of those who have easy answers. Go to those who have your best interest in mind, who will give it to you straight, and who will be willing to tell you what you may not want to hear.

Of course, seek out your family and friends, but also seek out your teachers, the folks in student affairs, in res life, and your classmates. Any and all of us. You will be amazed by how much we want to help, and how much help others can be. Take in what they have to offer, then go off and make your own best decisions. You won't always get it right but the quality of the decisions you make will be better and the downside will be more manageable.

This is a generous, thoughtful, and caring community. Reach out and engage with those who might be able to help.

This is particularly true for those very difficult moments that life can throw at us, moments of profound personal stress. This is when asking for help is essential. No one weathers these times alone, and this is where the Bowdoin community shines.

This sounds so easy, so obvious.

It's not—particularly not for a group like you. You have accomplished so much - here you are at Bowdoin - and the idea that you are not in total command of yourself and your environment is seen as some sort of shortcoming or failure.

That is simply bogus. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, quite the contrary, it is a sign of strength, of self-assurance. And this is the place to do it because this is a community like no other.

As we begin our 218th academic year, I hope that for each of you it is a year filled with deeply satisfying work and continued discovery, that you enjoy good health, and that you experience the joy of family, friends, and the amazing bonds of the Bowdoin community.

I now declare our College to be in session.

Thank you.

