

Convocation Remarks
Clayton Rose
August 31, 2021

It is so good to be here with you, all together, to begin our 220th year.

I want to begin by thanking my faculty and staff colleagues, and those who are watching, for your amazing work, your dedication over the past year and a half. I know how difficult, challenging and exhausting this time has been. You have made it possible for all of our students to receive a great Bowdoin education in an historic and incredibly challenging moment. And it is your work that has brought us here to today—back together, on campus, in person, and with the prospect of a much more normal year.

I want to welcome back our returning students and thank you for all you that did to work with our faculty, staff and one another. I know how difficult the year was, and how much you missed.

And I am delighted to welcome all of our new students, both first years and our two transfer students—we are so pleased that you have joined our community. I know how difficult it was for you last year, navigating your way through the end of high school and the college application process. You did so under incredibly trying circumstances, where you also missed so much.

A word on SARS-COV-2, the coronavirus. It will be with us for the foreseeable future. It is something we will have to learn to live with. We will need to be flexible and to make public health adjustments as necessary. The work of science over decades has allowed for the development of vaccines that are incredibly effective at keeping us from getting sick, becoming hospitalized, and from dying. This is a true human triumph, due to the persistent dedication of so many in science over so many years. Sadly, on the flip side, there is much that is lacking in the use of vaccines in our society and around the world to their fullest effect: the politicization of the vaccines and public health imperatives, the inexplicable willingness to believe myths and conspiracy theories, and the inability thus far to deliver the vaccine to the developed world. All that said, I know that we will navigate our way through this, and that here at Bowdoin we will do everything we can to keep one another safe.

Class of 2025—our 522 first-year students—and our two transfers, you made it! Today is the start of a remarkable journey. And I want to turn directly to you and share with you some thoughts on this journey and your time here.

A long, long time ago, I was also a first-year college student. I arrived having no real idea what I would study or where it would lead me, but I was super excited to be in college. I was also wondering whether I had what it took to keep up with all these incredibly smart, extraordinary students surrounding me. My first year, I took chemistry, probably with some vague

notion that I would focus on pre-med. I still vividly recall the morning that we received back our first test: C+.

I was very unhappy, and it added significant fuel to the insecurities that I was already feeling. I returned to my dorm, test in hand, head down, to find a letter from my grandmother. She was one of the sweetest people in the world. If you looked up Jewish grandmother in the dictionary, she was there as the exemplar of that stereotype. My brother and I were devoted to her, and we could do no wrong in her eyes. In her letter she told me that everyone in the family was so proud of me and that she knew that I would do great things in college. In one hand I had that test, in the other the letter. It was a double gut punch in a matter of an hour.

Now, in the movie version of this story, I pull up my socks, I buckle down, I become an ace chemistry student and go on to become a world-renowned doctor or scientist. Not so much. Despite working hard, I struggled through chemistry all year. In labs I was fundamentally hopeless. I could never generate enough precipitate to actually do the experiments properly. I received Bs and was never an ace. In class or lab, I would look around and I just knew that the rest of the students were crushing it. Of course, that wasn't true, virtually every one of them was working incredibly hard, many were struggling, and those who weren't were struggling in chemistry had the same set of issues in other courses.

While science wasn't really my strong suit, I was amped up for humanities and the social sciences, that was my sweet spot. In my first-term humanities class, something akin to our first-year seminar, I got my butt kicked. My papers were a sea of red comments, as they should have been. My writing was not good enough, not nearly. The corrections and the criticisms were very tough for me to swallow, but they were spot on and they were given to me with the singular purpose of helping me to learn and to be better.

So, why do I share these old guy stories from the distant past with you today?

I loved college, I absolutely loved it, and I received an amazing liberal arts education. It shaped me in all sorts of powerful ways, it made me who I am today, and it allowed me to do many of the things I have been able to do. To this day, I remain grateful to my faculty who were so dedicated to their craft and so patient with me. But, obviously, from the get-go it was not all unicorns and rainbows. And so, when I hear college described as "the best four years of your life," I worry a bit about how this message is received by all of you and internalized. I know you are excited to be here at Bowdoin and to be starting college. And Bowdoin will be great for you; I have zero doubt about that. But it needs to come with a dose of reality about your expectations of what will happen, and your expectations for yourself.

As many of you have heard me say, some in my office as you signed the matriculation books, a Bowdoin liberal arts education will develop your ability to think critically, to reason well, to communicate, to learn over your lifetime, to collaborate, to be intellectually nimble. You will gain powerful knowledge and insights into your chosen areas of study. You will experience many new things here, meet people who are very different from you, form lifelong bonds with some of them, and you will become a part of this special place and you will make Bowdoin better.

And in all of this, a Bowdoin liberal arts education and experience prepares you in three powerful ways. It prepares you, in a very selfish way, to live a life of meaning by better understanding the natural, social, political, cultural worlds, and the issues, challenges, and opportunities that we face. It prepares you to participate thoughtfully in civic life, something we need now more than ever, and it prepares you for both success and satisfaction in your chosen career or careers.

Now, that is pretty awesome. But all of this takes hard work, perseverance, and help from others, and the path is never, ever straight.

Make no mistake. College will be fun and exhilarating. It will be filled with friendship and camaraderie, the opportunity to take responsibility for yourself and make your own decisions, the opportunity to work and play with an amazing group of students in an amazing group of faculty, staff, and alumni.

Our faculty and staff are devoted to you, and to your academic and personal success and growth. Your teachers will challenge you and push you. They'll also support and mentor you. The staff will encourage you to take responsibility for yourself, while at the same time helping you to think through issues and manage sticky situations. There will be work you find incredibly hard, mistakes you will make academically and socially, you will doubt yourself, you'll look at others from different backgrounds and wonder how do I build common bridges? You may well suffer heartbreak in friendships and love, and you will wonder why you are the only one wondering about these things. Please hear me—you are not. Far from it. This is part of college for everyone, and part of the four years that you will spend here.

Now, you're thinking at this point: "Man, this guy is such a buzzkill." Not so. In fact, just the opposite. In offering these insights into the reality of college, it's to help you recognize the day-to-day challenges, issues, and questions are all part of it. And that dealing with them—successfully in some cases, not so much in others—is part of what makes college great and important, and so deeply meaningful for so many of us for the rest of our lives.

So, please do not wonder why every day is not "the best." Don't wonder why you are the only one wondering—you're not. Do not pay attention to the toxic fiction of social media where everyone else is living a life of rainbows and unicorns. They are not. And *please*, do not deal with the challenges, the issues, the doubts, and the anxieties by yourself. We are a

community, we have one another, and we have among the best resources of any college in the world to help you—academically, socially, mentally, physically...whatever.

My humanities class was not the exception, it was the norm. My papers were constantly critiqued throughout my college career. The good news, I got better. I became a halfway decent writer. I still work hard at it. I take the lessons from those days with me every time I sit down to write something. I've never regretted taking chemistry. It taught me a lot about myself, helped me to understand where my passions lie, helped me to understand the power of science, and to see the world through a specific kind of lens, and to appreciate the remarkable skills and passion it takes to be a great scientist.

Let me leave you with a final story.

One night I was in the library writing a paper for a course that I have long forgotten. But I vividly remember sitting in a carrel struggling to sort out that paper and write something halfway decent. At that moment the professor who lived in my dorm appeared. He was an older guy who had fought in the Polish Underground during World War II and had come to the United States after that. He was one of the leading scholars in medieval French literature and linguistics—a star at the school and in his field. He leaned over my carrel and said, “Ah, Mr. Rose, you're writing a paper?” I responded “yes,” and he said, “writing is like giving birth to a hippopotamus.” And off he went.

There it was, one of the very best teachers on campus, in a very funny, very kind way telling me to go easy on myself, that writing was hard for everyone, including him.

Bowdoin is a journey, one that starts now and lasts the rest of your life. Pace yourself, give yourself room to grow, to change, to change your mind, and to make mistakes. Give yourself grace, and give support to those around as they do the same.

If you do these things, these *will* be among the best four years of your life.

And with that, I declare the College open.