

CONVOCATION  
“Voices from Bowdoin’s Past”  
August 31, 2021

Good afternoon, My name is Janet Lohmann, and I am the Senior Vice President and Dean for Student Affairs at Bowdoin.

Today I get to share with you voices from Bowdoin’s past.

In the spring of 1969, the Report on the Study Committee on Underclass Campus Environment—also known as the Pierce Report on account of the committee chair, William Pierce, Class of 1928—discussed at length the admission of women undergraduates at Bowdoin. “We propose that Bowdoin abandon its long-standing tradition as an all-male college because we do not believe that in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there remain any significant positive values to continuing this tradition.... We feel it is difficult today to justify restricting the offer of a high-quality Bowdoin education to only one-half of an available student population.”

The report goes further to note that “the typical Bowdoin undergraduate’s contacts with women are confined largely to weekend forays and occasional house parties (with heavy emphasis at least in later cases on partying and drinking). Such confinement seriously distorts, at a particularly impressionable stage of life, many a Bowdoin man’s conception of what a young woman is and what the character of male-female contacts ought to be.”

The following year, on September 26, 1970, the Governing Boards of the College officially agreed to coeducation, beginning in the fall of 1971. To some, this was a long time in coming, particularly when one reflects on the fact that President Chamberlain, in his inaugural address ninety-nine years earlier in 1872, advocated for coeducation at Bowdoin, saying “women too should have a part in this high calling [education] because in this sphere of things her “rights,” her capabilities, her offices, her destiny are equal to those of man. She is the Heaven-appointed teacher of man, his guide, his better soul.”

While coeducation wouldn't arrive for nearly a century after Chamberlain first proposed it, the recognition that both men and women should have access to a Bowdoin education was fairly matter of fact in the early 1970s, according to Roger Howell, who was the president when the college made and implemented the decision. "It is an important social factor that men and women are now drawn together in society in a far different way than was the case when Bowdoin was established as an all-male college." The pressure to achieve greater equality was steadily mounting and Bowdoin recognized it was necessary to adjust to this reality.

While Bowdoin made the decision to admit women into the class of 1971, it should be noted that the class of 1970 did have a female student. Susan Jacobson came to Bowdoin in the fall of 1969 as part of a newly formed twelve-college exchange program. She had completed two years at Connecticut College and arrived at Bowdoin as part of a

program that had Bowdoin students going off to other schools and new students arriving in Brunswick. Susan, a Mainer, was the daughter of a Bowdoin graduate—Payson Jacobson, of the Class of 1940. Her uncle Mitchell Jacobson graduated from Bowdoin in 1946. When Susan was five years old, she told her father she would graduate from his alma mater. “There is a slight problem,” Payson Jacobson remembered saying to his daughter. But when the opportunity arose to be at Bowdoin, even for a year, Susan sought it out. After her junior year was completed, she was granted the option to stay at Bowdoin for the fall of her senior year, with plans to return to Connecticut College for her last semester. But when the vote to go coeducational happened in September, Susan went to LeRoy Greason, then dean of the college and Bowdoin’s future president. She asked to stay for the spring and be granted a Bowdoin degree. The statement she made when she was five would come true.

Susan Jacobson not only graduated from Bowdoin, but she was also chosen as a commencement speaker in the spring of 1971. In her remarks she noted “a brief projection of Bowdoin’s giant step forward in admitting coeducation into its fraternal order will allay some of the fears and negative attitudes of administrators, parents, students—including many of the people in today’s audience.... Many wild speculations as to what the coeds will be like and much needless worrying stems from a failure to realize that these girls have wants, interests, and aims similar to the male contingent. Instead of viewing these women as invaders from another galaxy, one should and must accept them as a complement to the male student body. Bowdoin College will one day represent a harmonious microcosm in which male and female members work in complementary fashion to achieve overall unity and productivity.”

Finding one’s place at an institution that had been all-male for 169 years took some getting used to, and the College struggled to address

the needs of women on campus. Whether it was the health center, bathrooms, women proctors, or the availability of athletic uniforms, the college found that in many instances it needed to not only admit women but to think carefully about how to best address the needs of this population.

In 1971, the women's field hockey team became the first women's athletic team on campus and was coached by the College's first woman coach, Sally LaPointe. During its first year, the team played against Bates College and local high schools. Because the College didn't know which sports teams would develop with coeducation, there weren't any uniforms for the field hockey team. Instead, the team was provided with old soccer uniforms from the men's team—uniforms they would wear for three more years until the College finally came up with proper field hockey gear for the players. A little over thirty years later, the 2007 field hockey team would win the NCAA National Championship. Dramatic progress in skill and success—not to mention uniforms!

Next year, it will be 150 years since Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain startled his inauguration audience by suggesting coeducation in an address titled “The New Education.” And this year, we mark fifty years since his vision was realized. The celebration begins later this month.

Be well and thank you for listening.