

David Zhou: A love letter to learning

President Rose, Members of the College, and Guests...thank you for giving me the chance to speak this afternoon. Today I want to share my personal love letter to learning.

I have spent roughly two years here at Bowdoin researching gravitational waves or small ripples in spacetime from the early Universe. These are signals from billions of years ago at frequencies too high for current detectors to see and at length scales too small to matter. And in my pursuit to learn more about these ancient and seemingly inconsequential gravitational waves, I have spent my waking hours burning my eyeballs against a computer screen, struggling to interpret some squiggly lines or graphs all while furiously scribbling down some math that, more often than not, ended up being wrong anyway.

Given all this, people might ask, “Why? What are you going to do with this information?” And in fairness, knowing more about billions of years old squiggly lines isn’t going to solve climate change, or end world hunger.

But while it’s not solving any of those problems, this pursuit of knowledge is still valuable for me. Not surprisingly, I have picked up some more practical skills. For example, many of my hours were spent asking Python to sift through hordes of text files filled with hordes of unintelligible numbers just to plot something meaningful, like a gravitational wave. That’s not surprising. What may surprise you though is that, embarking on this project has transformed me from a pretty timid and awkward human being to a more confident, decisive, and awkward human being. When I get stuck on a problem and don’t know how to proceed, I have learned to just...try something. Taking risks and studying something that I just found fascinating has given me confidence.

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Meeting new people here was hard for me. I was scared that you all would think I was a weirdo, scared that one of you would become my mortal enemy. But I learned to just try something; to say “hi!” or do that head-nod thing or just ask for a meal at Thorne. And instead of meeting my mortal enemy, I’ve met friends among you all. So in a surprising way, studying gravitational waves has improved my social experience with you all here at Bowdoin. It’s reminded me that my curiosity is worthwhile. It’s improved my confidence, and has made me a better decision-maker and risk-taker. And all those things have immense value wherever I end up after Bowdoin.

Another reason I loved studying gravitational waves is because it was a more open-ended pursuit. So much of our lives can feel so narrow and closed. Study for this exam so you can do well in school. Do well in school so you can get into a good college. Get into a good college so you can get a good career. Get a good career so you can earn a good living. And so on and so forth.

What a gift to spend time studying gravitational waves. And even though gravitational waves have nothing to do with my immediate life after Bowdoin, the chance to study something I loved – simply because it was fascinating – has given me all the skills I need to succeed. Studying what I loved has given me a sense of my own value as a malleable thinker, a more confident decision-maker, and risk-taker.

Many of you also studied something you loved. Maybe you spent your time here zapping lobster hearts, or sculpting cardboard shoes, or proving that one is greater than zero. Maybe you studied a foreign language or learned to dance over Zoom. Whatever it was, you studied something you loved, and because of that love, you were more motivated. You worked harder,

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thought more carefully, and were more fully engaged with your learning. And in doing so, you stretched and grew your abilities to greater heights.

In my four years here, I have learned that there is real value to be had from studying what you choose - what you love. And through that choice, choose who you are and who you want to become. Today, we finally bid Bowdoin farewell. But before we run off to our next stage in life, let's take the time to celebrate the gift of pursuing something that excited us. Let's celebrate a pursuit that inspired us to connect with mentors, build communities, and become better versions of ourselves. Let's take the time to look back with pride knowing that learning something we loved has prepared us to thrive long after we've left this campus. Thank you and congratulations!