

Michael Jashun Edwards

*What are the Odds*

President Rose, Members of the Bowdoin community, my fellow peers, family, and friends.

I am honored and thankful to be given the opportunity to address you all today.

As I reflect on my four years at Bowdoin, I keep asking myself how could I, an African American from the inner-city of Memphis, Tennessee, raised in a single-parent home, earn this extraordinary opportunity to attend a prestigious college like Bowdoin? The answer is simple - it's all about the support system I was blessed with growing up in Memphis. Where I come from, my roots - this is the story. Those roots of Southern Hospitality that I learned from the best role model, my mom, who no matter what she's going through in her personal life, will never say no when someone needs her help. So, I always applied my mom's outlook and positivity in all aspects of my life- even here at Bowdoin.

During senior spring in high school, New England schools were out of the picture because I loved the south - the southern drawl, the music, and the world-famous Barbeque. Representatives from Tufts and Bowdoin came to give me and my fellow classmates information about the schools. Tufts did not sound that interesting but *Bowdoin*, wow, that school might have some potential. Taking advice from my high school counselor, who is originally from Maine, I decided to apply.

When I was accepted to Bowdoin, I immediately ran to my mom and said, Momma, guess what just happened? I got into Bowdoin! And my mom gave me a big hug and said Boy I'm so proud of you! But then I said, but wait, there's something else, and I showed her the financial aid package. Suddenly, she burst out screaming, filled with so much joy and started to praise dance.

Arriving at Bowdoin was an enormous cultural shock. I had to continually adapt to new things and experiences. I was always a picky eater growing up and something my mom told me was "if you don't eat you gone starve," and going to college, I took that wholeheartedly. There was one break when I went home, and my mom cooked lima beans and I told her I would love to have

some. She looked at me and said, “You eat that now? You didn’t like it when I cooked it for you in high school.” And I would laugh and say, “well momma, college does change you.”

Another difference I had to adapt to - the music at Bowdoin. I had to sometimes listen to songs like Sweet Caroline or that song that goes like “Stacey’s Mom got it going it on” or the genre of music called EDM, or House music or a 10-minute-long remix of like 30 songs. In Memphis, I grew up predominantly on R&B, Soul, and Hip-Hop/Rap and now coming to Bowdoin, I had to break out of my narrow-mindedness and be open to new things - even the musical ones. And even in these moments, I had to remember “the odds” of me being here.

At first, I kept myself enclosed in an antisocial cloud because of how vastly different Bowdoin’s environment was. Because of my socio-economic background, I felt very out of place at times when I heard comments from some of my peers about their summer travels to expensive places around the world or talk of endless supplies of Patagonia gear. But surprisingly, it didn’t take long for me to find that group of people that made me feel welcomed and included in an environment like Bowdoin. My roommates were people of color, and they all came from different socio-economic backgrounds and locations from around the world, but we realized that no matter what our background was, that wasn’t an important factor in determining whether we could all be best friends. My first year dormmates from Maine Hall, the Bowdoin Men’s Rugby Team, and my co-workers at the McKeen center, Upward Bound, and Jack McGee's Pub, all helped me break from that cloud I was once in. It’s amazing how we all got to know each other so quickly. And so, I owe a special thanks to Bowdoin’s efforts in emphasizing that community and belonging are two of the many essential core values of the college.

And so, throughout these four years, I have learned about the importance of community, supporting one another, and taking advantage of every opportunity presented to me. I hope that we all have gained and learned from our four years at Bowdoin because there are thousands of young people who would do anything to be in this position we are in right now. To all the people that helped get *me* here, I can’t thank you enough. Lastly, I want to leave with you all is a series of affirmations from a sign that is currently hanging in the house where I live with five of my rugby teammates. I like to think it sums up how I have developed as a person over these four years:

Help Each Other

Share

Do Your Best

Laugh At Yourself

Say I Love You

Try New Things

Be Thankful

Be Happy

Love Each Other

Dream Big

Be Grateful

Think of others before yourself

Use Kind Words

[and] (now) Hug Often

Thank you all for listening, and congratulations to the Class of 2021.