

2023 Convocation Remarks

President Safa Zaki

Aug. 29, 2023

It's such a pleasure to be here with all of you as we begin the academic year!

I am delighted to see so many faculty colleagues here today—including new members of the faculty—and, of course, our newest students.

This first-year class and I have already talked about how we share a special bond, a “new to Bowdoin” bond, and that we will find our way together.

To the Class of 2027, I hope your first days have gone well, and that you are looking forward to the Bowdoin lobster bake tonight, and to starting your classes tomorrow.

I love the first days of classes, and I am excited for you to begin this journey. As you read through your syllabi, buy your books, get your course packs, you might feel overwhelmed. Perhaps the reading and ideas seem unconnected and unfamiliar. Perhaps the assignments seem opaque and impossible. When you enter your first classroom tomorrow, you may not know the other students sitting around you, the professor may seem intimidating because of all they've accomplished.

But in less than four months, those readings and ideas will be deeply familiar to you, and you will have developed opinions about them, as well as your own ideas. Those assignments will become eminently doable, those students will have become your intellectual interlocutors and friends, and that professor may have become someone you can turn to for help or may even become a mentor.

This may not happen in every single class in exactly this way, but I know that some version of this will happen in many of them. And that is why I am so excited for you.

You are going to be taking four discrete classes, likely, but over the course of the semester, I hope you will see how those classes are in conversation with each other. You will bring ideas and approaches from your history class into your psychology class; from your art history class into your chemistry class; from your Russian class into your government class. Your classmates will be doing the same, and in that way, the entire Bowdoin curriculum makes itself audible in every classroom.

That sound—that sound of different ideas, different perspectives, different ways of knowing, different disciplinary lenses, different life experiences—that sound is the sound of the liberal arts. It is a sound we can only make together.

I've spent my life in the classroom and in the lab, as a student and as a teacher, and I know that every class is a unique experience. As a faculty member, I particularly loved teaching the same course again and again, and seeing how different each iteration was—not because I changed the readings and assignments, although I sometimes did, but because the personalities, life experiences, and academic interests of the students in that room that semester, each one of those versions of those classes was different and memorable to me.

Bowdoin is one of the most distinguished liberal arts colleges in the world. We have a renowned and dedicated faculty, a skilled and devoted staff, and brilliant and talented students. It's also a college in extraordinarily great shape, thanks to my predecessors, to the faculty and staff, and to the alumni and the friends of the College who hold it so dear.

A lot of national attention is being paid to higher education right now. Some of that attention is useful, some is not. But important questions are being asked about access, about equity, cost, and relevance. And I am proud to be leading an institution that is always asking those questions, always evolving, and always committed to its mission.

That mission is what really drew me here, and perhaps you. Here at Bowdoin, not only do students get an amazing liberal arts education, a remarkable one, but they are also pointed to the common good. We tell our graduates, "You have this thing, now go do something with it." That's a message and an ethos that is truly special and I am really excited to be doing our work in this particular context.

As you start your journey here, I am starting mine. Over my years as a faculty member and then as an administrator, I have learned that I find it enormously exciting and rewarding to support faculty, to support students, and staff in a variety of ways; to solve problems, big and small; to imagine new ways of enhancing and enriching the liberal arts experience; and to be part of an intellectual community that is deeply committed to changing lives. I come to Bowdoin eager to do this work in collaboration with all of you.

Students both returning and new, here is the advice part of my remarks:

Some of you may have heard me talk about how I grew up living in several different countries. My father's work meant we moved frequently. I was always meeting new people, learning about cultures that were new to me. This experience has served me well in the classroom, in my lab, and in my administrative and leadership roles because it has allowed me to be comfortable with differences, with people disagreeing with me, and with perspectives other than my own.

Bowdoin is a community made up of people coming from different places, having different life experiences, holding different beliefs, and practicing different traditions. It is one of the great gifts of a place like this, and I hope you will embrace that gift and learn from each other. I hope you will see differences as opportunities to learn.

I also hope you will seek out and participate in conversations inside and outside the classroom with as many people as you can. Learning, for sure, happens in our classrooms, labs, and performance spaces, but it also happens in the dining halls, on sports teams, and in college houses; by working on the student newspaper or volunteering in the community; and through conversations with staff across the college and with our neighbors in town.

Finally, I hope you will take some risks. Take a class in a subject you know nothing about. Speak up in class even when you're nervous or uncertain. Try out a new activity. Initiate a conversation with someone you don't know. Taking risks is, of course, risky. Things might go wrong. My last piece of advice: when things go wrong, ask for help, share your troubles, know that when things are difficult, this too shall pass. I hope you will come and find me and talk to me when you are struggling, I am hoping to be there for all of you.

To my faculty and staff colleagues: you may have noticed on the program that my official role today is to welcome all of you—along with our students—back to campus, but I have to say how grateful I am for the tremendously warm and generous welcome you have shown me and my family.

We suspected we were joining a community where the people were truly invested in the place and the people here, and we have not been disappointed. My husband, Huff, and I have already come to love Brunswick and already have had so much fun exploring the surrounding area. But while it's been a wonderful summer, I've been eagerly waiting for the school year to start, as I am so looking forward to meeting as many of you as quickly as I can.

Getting to know the members of this remarkable community is truly the best part of this job.

Thank you.