

THE  
BOWDOIN ORIENT

Established 1871

A worthy pursuit

Today, we propose that the College work to integrate a new field of study—journalism—into its curriculum. We propose this field of study to improve students’ ability to understand and interpret the world around them.

For the rest of their lives, students’ impressions of politics, society, science, and history will be shaped by newspaper pages and news broadcasts. Yet so many of these sources currently neglect to serve today’s citizens, with media owners opting for entertainment and sensation over context and importance. Students who think about journalism in an academic manner will be better able to demand the quality reporting necessary to understand their world and their lives on a daily basis. A major study by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation earlier this year even showed that students who study journalism have a higher appreciation for and knowledge of civil rights.

Some liberal arts purists may gasp at the mere suggestion of a journalism curriculum at Bowdoin. But they shouldn’t. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of journalism—rather than a professional one—would be completely consistent with Bowdoin’s liberal arts tradition. A journalism program at Bowdoin could be modeled after the Africana studies program, which consists mostly of courses cross-listed in departments such as history, sociology, and English. A few existing Bowdoin courses would already fit into such a program, but these offerings should be expanded to establish a more complete curriculum.

The purpose of a journalism program would not be to train professional journalists. Rather, it would teach students how to understand and interact with the immediate history of their world; these skills can be so powerful and can be such a force for change. We fail to see how such a program would do anything but promote the common good.

*The editorial represents the majority view of The Bowdoin Orient’s editorial board. The editorial board consists of the editors-in-chief and the managing editor.*

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The Bowdoin Orient is a student-run weekly publication dedicated to providing news and information relevant to the Bowdoin community. Editorially independent of the College and its administrators, the Orient pursues such content freely and thoroughly, following professional journalistic standards in writing and reporting. The Orient is committed to serving as an open forum for thoughtful and diverse discussion and debate on issues of interest to the College community.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

Party politics hinders local governments

To the Editors:

The Town/City Manager form of government, developed by Professor Orren Hormel of Bowdoin and the Bureau of Municipal Research within the Department of Government over 60 years ago, has been adopted by scores of communities, large and small, not only in Maine, but in other states as well.

The precise form that it took in each case varied from town to town.

Two essential elements, among others, were that it was intended to lead to a more professionally run local government, and it specifically discouraged political partisanship in all of its ramifications in the process, including the selection of candidates, the election of them, the selection of administrative leadership, and finally in the discussion and decision making process. In my memory, and up until now, political parties have successfully, for the most part, refrained from active and organized patrician activity at the level of local government. This

has been so, I believe, in Brunswick, and I would hope that we would not be moving away from that original premise; to do so would lead to less collegiality and less effective and productive government; we see all too much of that already at the state and federal levels. As a consequence, we are not as well governed as we ought to be.

Sincerely,  
Richard A. Morrell ’50  
Brunswick, Maine

Conservatives gripe about political bias

To the Editors:

Not long ago, it was common to hear conservative intellectuals rail against America’s “culture of complaint.” They catalogued the dangers associated with thinking like a victim: a tendency to blame misfortune on others, to imagine conspiracies, to over-emphasize slights, and so on. Rhetorical excess notwithstanding, they had a point.

Maybe this is why I find it amusing that Bowdoin conservatives spend so

much time griping about their own victimization at the hands of the faculty. In a recent Orient (“Students question political diversity” 11/18/05), Ferd Convery ’06 complained, “I’ve been marked down on papers because I refused to give in to my teacher’s agenda, and numerous students in that class had the same thing happen to them.”

Yes, Bowdoin would benefit from increasing the number of professors (conservative or liberal) teaching a traditional liberal arts curriculum. And yes, there are a couple (easily avoided) departments that appear to be light on substance and heavy on neo-Marxist mush.

But I had plenty of political disagreements with professors in my four years at Bowdoin and somehow managed to do just fine. Whatever our differences during the semester, I found them perfectly fair-minded when it came time to turn in grades.

Instead of blaming their problems on the institution, Bowdoin conservatives ought to try dragging themselves up by their bootstraps. As the conservative academic Thomas Sowell once wrote, “victimhood is something to escape, not something to exploit.”

Sincerely,  
Taylor Washburn ’04  
New York, New York

Political control hurts academia

by Patrick Rael  
FACULTY CONTRIBUTOR

For some time now, conservative commentators have been criticizing American universities for their alleged liberal bias. According to this argument, which has been made recently on this very campus, most professors are liberal, as indicated by their Democratic Party affiliations. The preponderance of liberal professors, it is claimed, stifles intellectual curiosity and renders conservative students on campus a disempowered minority.

Some members of the faculty disdain this argument as a mere partisan ploy, unworthy of response. But it will not do to dismiss the argument entirely. After all, the “post-” intellectuals—post-modernists, post-structuralists, and post-colonialists—have been making a more sophisticated form of the same argument for several decades now, merely from the other side of the bench. They argue that colleges and universities institutionalize structures of knowledge that are inherently political—that the very ways disciplines are organized have ramifications for the distribution of power in an unequal society. In light of this, it seems rather bad grace, once the argument is made from the other side, to retreat into claims of scholarly objectivism and the virtues of universal truth.

No, the problem with the conservative argument is not that it makes a case that “liberal” professors don’t like. The problem is that it is a political rather than an intellectual argument. It simply has no credibility as an academic claim, for in seeking to measure political bias among campus faculties it uses yardsticks that are completely indefensible. Trying to map the political proclivities of the professoriate through categories such as “Democrat versus Republican” or “liberal versus conservative” is like trying to perform brain surgery with hedge clippers.

As any student of political history can tell you, Republican and Democrat are not historically static categories, but dynamic and contingent ones. Parties

and what they stand for change over time; they are changing before our very eyes, even if we don’t see it. The same thing goes for words like “conservative” and “liberal.” The historical founders of these principles would roll over in their graves to see the modern causes over which their flags wave.

Deep differences divide members of the political parties on a wide range of issues. How can party affiliation serve as a litmus test for hiring? The equally vague categories of “liberal” and “conservative” offer no better compass. Who would determine where potential professors belonged on such a scale? Obviously, for an institution such as Bowdoin to predicate its curriculum decisions on a breakdown of professors’ registered party affiliations or presumed political leanings would be the height of intellectual irresponsibility.

The key point that champions of an “academic bill of rights” miss is this: department hiring decisions are academic rather than political endeavors—complex processes fraught with competing intellectual imperatives. They are well-orchestrated affairs designed precisely to minimize the potential for political abuse of the very sort welcomed by the conservative plan to “balance” liberal faculty with conservative ones. To reduce hiring decisions to mere tests of political allegiance is to disregard the very concerns—for methodological balance, field coverage, disciplinary innovation, student needs, and other kinds of diversity—that safeguard the process from turning into a political football. Healthy academic communities do not need ideological scorecards. Only those concerned with policing ideology, like totalitarian states or McCarthyite America, endorse them.

There is something deeply anti-democratic in this new push for ideological control over the academy. A liberal arts education exposes students to a wide range of disciplines, methodologies, and viewpoints. It does not guarantee that anyone’s views will be left unchallenged. The essence of academic enquiry is contentious, messy debate.

But our culture has become increasingly enamored with cheaply purchased comfort, and we live in a public forum balkanized into vying ideological sects that speak past one another. It has become ever more possible to consider the challenges inherent in thoughtful academic life an invasion of some imagined personal right to comfort. We must remind ourselves that comfort and complacency in our discourse only undermine democratic society.

Ultimately, the conservative argument for liberal bias among the faculty insults the professional integrity of faculty members with a long history of separating their own political views from the material they teach. The “liberal bias” argument degrades our understanding of the scholarly mission—from one wherein we coach young minds toward independent yet rigorous thought, to one wherein we indoctrinate impressionable youth presumed to be incapable of thinking for themselves. It is a cynical projection of the Far Right’s desire for ideological influence onto perhaps the last place where free and independent inquiry are preserved.

If I’m wrong, show me. Show the campus. We should, after all, welcome a serious debate on the place of “politics” on this campus and in our curriculum. We badly need to be shaken out of our inertia, to be reconnected with the broader issues confronting higher education and our society in general.

So make the case. But do it with academic credibility. Without resorting to the empty talking points of professional pundits, without invoking hypocritical rhetoric of conservative victimization, without relying on the flawed methodologies of campus partisans. Conservatives who irresponsibly attack the faculty for political bias owe this academic community more—more than the canned, made-for-TV argument we’ve seen.

In other words, think. That, after all, should be the only thing that really matters at a place like Bowdoin.

*Patrick Rael is an associate professor of history at Bowdoin.*