

Everything Wrong with “The Bowdoin Project”

Introduction

On April 22, 2011 I co-authored an op-ed piece for the Bowdoin Orient with my classmate Sean McElroy.¹ The piece was a response to Thomas Klingenstein's article “A Golf Story” which appeared in the spring 2011 edition of *The Claremont Review of Books*.² To my surprise, my defense of Bowdoin received several online responses within the first day, and conservative blogs began to cover the story. I valiantly – or foolishly, I'm not sure which – followed the debate onto the blogosphere. Ultimately, this series of events culminated in the National Association of Scholars (NAS) study of Bowdoin College. Throughout this series of events, both sides have made impassioned arguments, but have done little to convince the other side. Has any of this been constructive?

I suggest that the explicit labeling of Bowdoin as a “liberal institution” and the *Claremont Review of Books* as a “conservative journal” hindered constructive discourse from the outset. Mr. Klingenstein's original attack on Bowdoin was fueled by president Mills' 2010 convocation address, which recounted a dispute over a game of golf. Mills did not paint a particularly nice picture of Mr. Klingenstein (whom remained anonymous in Mills' original speech), which set the stage for an emotionally-charged conflict, rather than a fair-minded debate. In turn, Mr. Klingenstein's article in *The Claremont Review of Books* was premised upon a negative view of liberalism; Bowdoin's “antiseptically liberal” environment was exposed by a cursory look at the college curriculum, rather than an honest attempt to connect with faculty and students. Responses from the Bowdoin community were scathing – Mr. Klingenstein had not only challenged our community values, but insulted the intellectual work of hard working faculty. Subsequent responses by Mr. Klingenstein, NAS president Peter Wood, and other conservative commentators were unyielding. By the time the NAS report was announced, the Bowdoin community was sufficiently skeptical to forgo cooperation. Each party had a predetermined conception of the other, which defined and restricted our thoughts and behavior.

Unfortunately, the recently released NAS report on Bowdoin continues down this tired adversarial path. First, the report is uninterested in correcting false and inflammatory statements in Mr. Klingenstein's original attack on Bowdoin, and painstakingly omits basic and readily accessible facts that complicate its narrative. Second, the report, in line with previous NAS

¹ “Klingenstein’s article gives an inaccurate account of Bowdoin curriculum” (April 22, 2011) <http://bowdoinorient.com/article/6383>

² “A Golf Story” (April, 2011) http://www.claremont.org/publications/crb/id.1800/article_detail.asp

publications, takes an alarmist tone. We are told that the problems with Bowdoin's curriculum completely undermine critical thinking, and endanger the future of the country. Third, the report and previous NAS publications exude a condescending tone about students and faculty, which, when combined with a superficial understanding of the academic environment, is felt as a personal insult. The report does not present itself as a concerned peer, but as an intellectual superior.

All three of these conditions inhibit honest and open debate. But is that even the goal of the NAS report? The apparent purpose is to sell a viewpoint and place pressure on Bowdoin's administration, rather than engage in constructive dialogue. Mr. Klingenstein admitted as much at the annual conference for the NAS, during which he discussed the forthcoming report, "90 percent of everything is marketing... What matters here is how we can sell this product—great buzz, great pressure. We want Bowdoin to respond." To my knowledge, Bowdoin's curriculum and administrative practices have not been revised in light of Mr. Klingenstein's arguments, and I suspect the NAS report will be similarly ineffectual because of its adversarial tone.

Nonetheless, the Bowdoin community should consider ways of improving their dialogue with conservative critics of the academy. The future of higher education depends on a public consensus – both to provide higher levels of financial support, and to promote greater participation. To do this, I suggest that we take the task of de-politicizing the academy seriously, regardless of our opinions on the particulars of the NAS report. Beneath the disagreeable rhetoric and philosophy of the report lies a real problem. The politicization of academic issues leads to intellectual gridlock, as this very debate between the Bowdoin community and the NAS demonstrates. More broadly, the politicization of climate change research has slowed the translation of scientific consensus into public understanding (including the understanding of those at the NAS). Similar arguments can (and have) been made for the field of economics,³ constitutional law,⁴ and virtually every other issue of public importance.⁵ In the final section of this essay, I suggest a few constructive courses of action for the Bowdoin community.

Section I. Factual Inaccuracies and Half-Truths

When I first read Mr. Klingenstein's article "A Golf Story," there was one particular quote that I

³Ferguson, Charles H. "Inside Job." Released Oct 08 2010. Sony Pictures Classics. DVD.

⁴Hamilton, Eric. "Politicizing the Supreme Court." Stanford Law Review Online. 65. no. 35 (2012): 35-40.
<http://www.stanfordlawreview.org/online/politicizing-supreme-court>

⁵"Why Everything Is Politicized Even Though Most Americans Hate It." The Atlantic, Mar 26, 2013.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/03/why-everything-is-politicized-even-though-most-americans-hate-it/274359/>

took issue with, and it is worth quoting at length:

Do Bowdoin alumni know their alma mater offers not one history course in American political, military, diplomatic, constitutional, or intellectual history, and nothing at all on the American Founding or the Constitution; that the one Civil War course is essentially African-American history (it is offered also in Africana Studies); and that there are more courses on gay and lesbian subjects than on American history?

This statement is (and was) factually incorrect. Ironically, it was the openly conservative faculty members of the government department who suffered the greatest insult. These faculty members are among the highest paid, most senior, and well-respected within the Bowdoin community; moreover, they teach classes on the precise topics whose absence is lamented by Mr. Klingenstein – constitutional law, military history, and contemporary politics, to be specific. They have even published work in the *Claremont Review of Books* and other conservative journals. Other Bowdoin faculty members teach classes on the “American Founding” (History 233: American Society in the New Nation, 1763-1840), intellectual history (History 230: Evolution in America), and diplomatic history (History 288: the Cold War). Below is a non-exhaustive list of courses that were offered during my years at Bowdoin College, all of which directly cover the political process of this country from a historical perspective:

HIST 14c. The Nuclear Age
HIST 15c. Frontier Crossings: The Western Experience in American History.
HIST 139c. The Civil War Era.
HIST 230c - ESD. Evolution in America
HIST 231c - ESD. Social History of Colonial America, 1607–1763.
HIST 232c - ESD. History of the American West.
HIST 233c - ESD. American Society in the New Nation, 1763–1840.
HIST 274c - The Shot Heard 'Round the World: The History of the American Revolution
HIST 288c - IP. The Cold War.
HIST 330c. The United States Home Front in World War II.
HIST 332c. Community in America, 1600–1900
HIST 336c. Research in Nineteenth-Century United States History.
GOV 11b. The Korean War.
GOV 150b. Introduction to American Government.
GOV 202b. The American Presidency.
GOV 203b. Political Parties in the United States
GOV 204b. Congress and the Policy Process
GOV 206b. Public Policy in the United States
GOV 210b. Constitutional Law I.
GOV 211b. Constitutional Law II
GOV 250b. American Political Thought.

In the past, I have been criticized for “narrowly critiquing” the facts of Mr. Klingenstein's points rather than the broader philosophical issues.⁶ A recent post on the Bowdoin Orient's website under the username “Old Bear” states: “rarely does a single mistake or misperception negate an entire point of view. Unless one only seeks to discredit and not to explore.”⁷ However, there are real consequences when a scholarly journal publishes inaccuracies, especially when they are used to launch an attack on the reputation of an institution. Klingenstein's comments have been cited as if they were facts on a large number of blogs and websites.⁸

“The Bowdoin Project” was an excellent opportunity for the NAS to set the record straight, and it was sadly missed. In fact, the report slyly refashions Mr. Klingenstein's original attack:

While the government department offers ample opportunity to study American political thought, in the history department there are no courses devoted to American political, military, diplomatic, or intellectual history except those that deal with some group aspect of America.⁹

By limiting their scope to the history department itself, this critique inches *closer* to a true statement. But this amendment betrays the authors' intent. Surely, it does not matter which academic department offers courses on American society. Nevertheless, the report focuses on a fierce critique of the history department, without providing proper credit to the government department. The report does briefly note that the government department provides “ample opportunity” to explore “classical liberal ideas,” and even notes that “more Bowdoin students enroll in government than in any other department.” However, a proper examination of these critical facts, which surely complicates the narrative of the report, is sacrificed to promote an

⁶Powerline Blog - “A good talk spoiled” (April 22, 2011)

<http://www.powerlineblog.com/archives/2011/04/028878.php>

⁷User comment on “NAS to release *The Bowdoin Project* next Wednesday” (March 29, 2013)

<http://bowdoinorient.com/article/8132>.

⁸Portland Press Herald - “M.D. Harmon: There's more than one kind of diversity -- but not at Bowdoin”

<http://www.pressherald.com/opinion/theres-more-than-one-kind-of-diversity-but-not-at-bowdoin_2013-03-29.html>. The National Review Online - “Tom Klingenstein's 'A Golf

Story”<<http://www.nationalreview.com/phi-beta-cons/264710/tom-klingensteins-golf-story-roger-clegg>>. Commentary Magazine - “Bowdoin's Idea of Diversity”

<<http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/04/15/bowdoins-idea-of-diversity/>>. Powerline Blog - “A good

talk spoiled” <<http://www.powerlineblog.com/archives/2011/04/028878.php>>. The Other Side of Town - “Nothing to see here; just Bowdoin being Bowdoin.”

<<http://othersideofbrunswick.blogspot.com/2011/04/nothing-to-see-here-just-bowdoin-being.html>>.

⁹“What Does Bowdoin Teach” (April 3, 2013) p. 25 http://www.nas.org/projects/the_bowdoin_project

ideological viewpoint.

Even by their own strict standards, the authors still miss History 288 (“The Cold War”) and History 230 (“Evolution in America”, which qualifies as intellectual history). The report also makes no mention of Economics 208 (“American Economic History”). The report explicitly excludes any history course that satisfies the “Exploring Social Difference” distribution requirement as having anything to do with the political history of America. Had the authors read past the course titles in the catalog, they would have seen that these excluded courses examine important topics in “traditional” American history such as:

- *“The struggle to determine the scope of the Constitution and the political shape of the new republic”* (HIST 233)
- *“The establishment of slavery in colonial America, [and] the emergence of plantation society”* (HIST 236)
- *“The sectional crisis and breakdown of the party system [during the Civil War era], the practice of Civil War warfare, and social ramifications of the conflict.”* (HIST 139)
- *“The expansion and growth of the federal government into the West; the exploitation of natural resources; the creation of borders and national identities”* (HIST 232).

Section II. Scare Tactics

The second barrier to substantive debate is the fervent patriotism, manufactured nostalgia, and alarmist warnings that are peppered throughout the report. One good example is the claim that the history department offers “not one” course in *true* American history – which was so rhetorically powerful that basic facts were bent and obscured to maintain it. Bowdoin's betrayal of America is, in fact, one of the strong, underlying narratives of the NAS report. It is especially strong in the preface:

- “But it is very likely that Bowdoin’s more recent graduates are well-versed in racial grievance, anticapitalism, social justice, and multiculturalism... These programs undermine the idea of America.” (pg. 10)
- “Today, Bowdoin places little emphasis on the nation’s claims to distinction: its founding focus on human equality and freedom; its history of economic opportunity, invention, and free enterprise; and its willingness to sacrifice to secure the freedom of others.” (pg. 25)
- “Students too often learn to concentrate their critical doubts on what they come to see as America’s false promises...” (pg. 25)
- “[In Mill's public response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks,] there is no word about what

America stands for; indeed, no word about America at all.” (pg. 27)

The rhetorical trick here, and throughout the report, is to evoke strong feelings on the part of conservative readers, and prompt them to fill in the logical gaps of the NAS narrative. By painting Bowdoin's culture as anti-American, conservative readers are eager to accept that Bowdoin betrays “critical thinking,” “virtue,” “hard-work,” and “intellectual modesty.”

For example, the preface states that “the lack of attention to America and the West... impairs critical thinking” - without any justification.¹⁰ While conservatives might draw from their own ideology to make this connection, I see no reason why studying Chinese history (HIST 273 & 275), Japanese history (HIST 283 & 284), European history (HIST 110 & 127), African history (HIST 213), or Latin and South American history (HIST 254 & 356), is any less stimulating than American history.

An additional unfounded claim is that “identity studies” (courses that focus on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation) necessarily “undermine the idea of America” and lead students to “critically doubt” American ideals. Again, some conservatives may be happy to take this logical leap without further evidence. To me, the history of racial, ethnic, and sexual discrimination in this country contains an impressive record of moral progress that we should work to continue. It is that narrative of American history that I am most proud of. Ironically, I am least proud of America's political, diplomatic and military history, which has not seen the same progress over the last century.¹¹

To be clear, the conservative perspective and tone of the report is forgivable. The issue is that conservative rhetoric is used to obfuscate the superficial research practices and logical gaps. There is no in depth examination of course syllabi, no basic reporting on the classroom environment itself, and no direct interviews with students, faculty, or administrators. Instead, the researchers seem to have cherry-picked pieces of Bowdoin's public record that displeased them, and pasted them in the report with a tone of moral outrage, haughty disdain, or subtle mockery. They pick courses on “Racism,” “Sexual Life of Colonialism,” and “Ghosts.” They pick student projects that study the biology of lobster hearts and sea urchins,¹² and history projects that recount “Argentina’s welcoming of Nazi Fugitives” and “German National Character After the

¹⁰“What Does Bowdoin Teach?”, pg. 26

¹¹See Chomsky, Noam. “If the Nuremberg Laws were Applied...” Available at <<http://www.chomsky.info/talks/1990----.htm>>.

¹² “What Does Bowdoin Teach?” p. 71. Both lobsters and sea urchins are important biological model systems. Lobsters (as well as crabs) were one of the first animals in which nervous tissue was electrically recorded, and the sea urchin was the first animal to be genetically cloned.

Holocaust.”¹³ They pick a student protest, in the aftermath of a racially charged bias incident on campus; students responded by celebrating racial, sexual, and religious diversity: “I am a Muslim woman, and I am Bowdoin.” “I’m Black, I’m from the South, and I wear do-rags, and I am Bowdoin.” “I’m a Christian, and I am Bowdoin.”

The authors evoke strange logic to denounce these pieces of Bowdoin’s identity. What’s wrong with a history student studying post-World War II Germany? What’s wrong with an English class that examines “Ghosts” in 19th and 20th century literature and cinema? The authors discredit the contemporary Africana Studies department because it was first created under political pressure during the late Civil Rights era; even if this critique made any sense, what’s wrong with having a class on “Racism”? None of these questions are addressed; it is assumed that the reader will come to the right conclusions as long as they have a love for America, a nostalgia for the past, and “intellectual modesty.”

Finally, what is wrong with the “I am Bowdoin” demonstration? According to the NAS, it is that nobody declared: “I am a mathematician and I am Bowdoin” or “I treat people as subjects, not objects, and I am Bowdoin.” I struggle to see how anyone, besides a handful of ultra-conservative anthropologists, can follow this train of logic. The cause of the demonstration was an incredibly offensive message (“F*g N***er”) left on the door of a bi-racial female student. The white, male authors of the NAS report display a sociopathic capability of removing this event from its immediate context, and generalizing it to Bowdoin’s entire culture. To them, the event demonstrates that:

The identities that matter are the ones the college has made salient by its emphasis on a larger narrative of the marginalization of social groups based on stigmatized identity.¹⁴

The event was organized and heavily attended by minority students, many of whom felt personally attacked by the hate incident. Some had suffered through similar experiences before, and many already felt slightly out of place at an elite college far from home. The purpose of the demonstration was to reassure them of their acceptance and place within the Bowdoin community. The “identities that mattered” for this demonstration were precisely the ones targeted by hateful speech, as these were the identities that gave people comfort and assurance. Who, in their right mind, would go into such an exercise and say something so stupid as “I treat people as subjects, not objects, and I am Bowdoin.” Personally, had I attended a similar event in a different context, I would have said “I am a scientist, and I am Bowdoin” – I am sure no one would have

¹³ “What Does Bowdoin Teach?” p. 72

¹⁴ “What Does Bowdoin Teach?” p. 143

blinked an eye.

Section III. Lack of Mutual Respect

On February 7th, the NAS published “One Hundred Great Ideas for Higher Education” on their website. The article is a collage of ideas, submitted by professors, administrators and writers. One of these “great ideas” is to poison the student body:

The greatest cause of today’s undergraduates not learning much is their preoccupation with tempting—one might even say seductive—alternatives. In a word, they’re having way too much fun. The most alluring of those alternatives could be kept within bounds via two simple additions to all food served to students in university dining rooms (and food courts, etc.): disulfiram and the modern equivalent of saltpeter. The former medication “causes unpleasant effects when even small amounts of alcohol are consumed.” The latter—well, you already know what it is supposed to do. Less booze. Less sex. More studying. Problem eased if not solved.¹⁵

Let’s put aside the fact that each of these “additions” would cause serious side effects in a portion of the student population, especially when taken regularly over four years. This proposal, which was hopefully made tongue-in-cheek, seriously disrespects the student body’s capacity for self-control and judgment. Of course, some students will make poor choices over the course of their college career, but I would find it personally insulting to attend an institution that laces its food to assert its control over student behavior.

NAS publications, including the report on Bowdoin College, often rely on a fallacious appeal to personal authority: the opinion of the NAS is superior over student voices because the students are mere children, and the NAS view is superior over faculty perspectives because the faculty are “out-of-touch.” The suggestion that we poison lunch is an extreme example of this “father knows best” attitude, but it is easy to find other examples within the Bowdoin report. The “Before we Report: Origins of the Study” document on the NAS website, recalls an exchange between a Bowdoin student and NAS president Peter Wood:

According to this student’s view, he and his classmates begin their studies at Bowdoin having already achieved a grounding in core knowledge sufficient to allow them to explore a curriculum rich in more specialized offerings. *Wood responded that Bowdoin*

¹⁵ Contributed by Chester Finn, “One Hundred Great Ideas for Higher Education.”
http://www.nas.org/articles/one_hundred_great_ideas_for_higher_education

students, in the midst of their studies, are not in a good position to judge what they might be missing.[emphasis added]

A similar point is made in the preface of the main report (also written by Wood):

[A Bowdoin] student ran up to Klingenstein after the meeting and pressed his views at some length. He had the raw ingredients of a good student: passion, brains, and a thirst for knowledge. What he lacked was the humility needed to comprehend the limits of his knowledge. This student might have acquired that humility had he taken a college-level survey course on American political (or military, diplomatic, or intellectual) history. Such a course would have drawn attention to large gaps in his understanding.¹⁶

On what basis does Mr. Klingenstein know this student has “large gaps” in his understanding of history? What are these gaps? Why are they essential to a college education? The report does not provide an answer. Instead, we are asked to presume the student is ignorant because of his age, and his “lack of humility.”

Wood reiterated a similar viewpoint last year in an article submitted to *Innovations* (a blog run by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*):

I have no statistics on this, but I doubt that one student in a hundred, and perhaps far fewer than that, has ever read a serious secular argument against same-sex marriage, and most would be at a dead loss even to imagine what such an argument would say.¹⁷

I also have no hard statistics to offer on this point, other than the fact that I am well aware of the major secular arguments against same-sex marriage. To convince myself of this, I dug up Mr. Wood's online writings on same-sex marriage; Mr. Wood's arguments do not differ significantly from Antonin Scalia's,¹⁸ which I have previously read and comprehended. Thus, I am either a

¹⁶ “What Does Bowdoin Teach?” pg. 34

¹⁷ <<http://chronicle.com/blogs/innovations/gay-marriage-climate-change-and-academic-freedom/32500>>

¹⁸ Mr. Wood's opposition to same-sex marriage draws from work in evolutionary psychology and anthropology. He concludes, “It looks to me that we are turning away from something basic in the way human societies organize themselves. In the hope of achieving a greater equality we may put at risk the means by which the rough kind of equality and cooperation became possible in the first place.” (see “Debating Same-Sex Marriage” *The Chronicle of Higher Education: Innovations* <<http://chronicle.com/blogs/innovations/debating-same-sex-marriage/28878>>). Though Mr. Wood goes into greater detail about anthropological data, his conclusions are similar to Justice Scalia's remarks during the *Hollingsworth v. Perry* oral arguments “If you redefine marriage to include same-sex couples, you must permit adoption by same-sex couples, and there's considerable disagreement among sociologists as to what the consequences of raising a child in a single-sex family, whether that is harmful to the child or not.”

one-in-a-hundred student when it comes to the topic of same-sex marriage, or Mr. Wood's estimate is far too low to apply to the Bowdoin community. I strongly suspect the latter to be the case, based on my conversations with other Bowdoin students.

One final way the Bowdoin students are silenced is by a direct attack on their college education:

What does Bowdoin not teach? Intellectual modesty. Self-restraint. Hard work. Virtue. Self-criticism. Moderation. A broad framework of intellectual history. Survey courses. English composition. A course on Edmund Spenser. A course primarily on the American Founders. A course on the American Revolution. The history of Western civilization from classical times to the present. A course on the Christian philosophical tradition. Public speaking. Tolerance towards dissenting views. The predicates of critical thinking. A coherent body of knowledge. How to distinguish importance from triviality. Wisdom. Culture.

As a recent graduate of Bowdoin College (class of 2012), what does this say about me? Can you really trust anything that I'm saying? After all, the NAS report directly insinuates that I am an immodest, virtue-less, culture-less, sex-crazed, lazy and intolerant simpleton, who knows nothing about Edmund Spenser! In fairness, the fact that I am writing this long response does suggest that I cannot "distinguish importance from triviality."

While students are viewed as naïve and ignorant, NAS publications discredit faculty members by belittling their research interests. Another NAS report "Recasting History" quotes Brooklyn College professor KC Johnson's opinion of Bowdoin's history department:

Two of the department's five Americanists specialize in U.S. environmental history. (Both have published one book, each on an aspect of the Pacific coast: *Shaping the Shoreline: Fisheries and Tourism on the Monterey Coast*; and *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle*.) The department's specialist in colonial and revolutionary America hasn't published a scholarly monograph at all; her highest-profile journal article, on the changing composition of diet in rural New England, is almost a caricature of social-history narrowness. The department's 19th century U.S. historian has published several books; his focus is on black politics and the pre-Civil War North. And the department's only non-environmental 20th century U.S. historian has a Ph.D. in the history of science.¹⁹

¹⁹This quote was originally stated in: KC Johnson, "Bowdoin's History." *Minding the Campus* (Sept 2011) http://www.mindingthecampus.com/forum/2011/09/bowdoins_history.html

Leaving aside the omission of relevant facts in the above quotation,²⁰ the statement unfairly insults the capability and intelligence of Bowdoin's faculty. Does having a PhD in the history of science disqualify one from understanding other aspects of American history, or developing a balanced and effective course plan? Speaking as a former student of the professor in question, the answer is a resounding no. Below I present a short list of material that was covered in class (HIST 288c - The Cold War):

- Winston Churchill's "Sinews of Peace" address at Westminster College (also known as "the Iron Curtain Speech").
- George Kennan's "Long Telegraph", which appeared in *Foreign Affairs* under the title "The Sources of Soviet Conflict." Kennan was the first to articulate the strategy of containment, which became influential in U.S. foreign policy throughout the Cold War era.
- Arthur Schlesinger's book *The Vital Center* (1949), which defended the American ideal of liberal democracy against communism and fascism.
- Robert F. Kennedy's primary account of the Cuban Missile Crisis (published posthumously: *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*).
- *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*. A documentary that interviews John F. Kennedy's and Lyndon Johnson's Secretary of Defense.
- Ronald Reagan's farewell address.

The above list (which, again, is only a small sample of the full syllabus) covers political, military, diplomatic, and intellectual aspects of U.S. history, all of which were discussed with great skill over the course of the semester. To write off intelligent, hard-working, and caring faculty as overly specialized, out-of-touch, left-wing propagandists is shameful. While I cannot defend the entire History Department through first-hand experiences, my presumption is that tenured Bowdoin faculty are well-qualified until proven otherwise.

²⁰Johnson does not divulge that professors in the Education, Economics, and Government Departments also teach courses on American history and civics. Additionally, the research focus of each faculty member is stated simplistically. One of the environmental historians also has a stated interest in the history of the American West [Charles Dorn & Connie Chiang "National Unity and National Discord: The Western Homefront during World War II," Theme Issue on Teaching the American West, *Journal of the West*, 49, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 41-60]. The Civil War historian served as project director of the "Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain Project" (an archive of primary sources that detail the American hero's life <<http://learn.bowdoin.edu/joshua-lawrence-chamberlain/>>), and has published several resources on teaching historical writing [Patrick Rael, "What Happened and Why? Helping Students Read and Write Like Historians," *History Teacher* 39, no. 1 (November 2005), 23-32; "Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students" <<http://academic.bowdoin.edu/WritingGuides/>>].

Conclusions

On some level, it may be hypocritical of me to denounce the NAS study as adversarial, only to reply with a long tirade against its composition. But that's the rub – you cannot write a dissenting view of the report without being adversarial. To disagree with the report you must first explain how patriotism and nationalism are not ends in themselves, that other cultures are just as rich and worthy of our studies, and that you don't need to memorize the Gettysburg address word-for-word to understand the history of this country; this will be construed as an inflammatory attack on America. The factual errors and intentional omission of contextualizing data in the report create further problems: rather than spending time examining important concepts and issues, you must patiently sift through the data and present corrections. Of course, your corrections will not be taken at face value, you will have to argue for each and every one of them. Finally, when all else fails, you will be told that you are too young to “judge what you might be missing” in your education. It would do you good to learn some “intellectual modesty.”

The real issue with the NAS report is that it is an inherently destructive force. It picks courses, rules, activities, and initiatives that it dislikes and argues for their eradication. Its argument is not about what students fail to learn at Bowdoin (after all, the Government Department does provide “ample” opportunities for students to study America). Its argument is that contemporary the Liberal Arts environment introduces students to ideas that contradict their values. How do we improve Bowdoin? If you asked the NAS, it would be to take the axe to many departments (e.g. Africana Studies), student activity groups (e.g. the Korean American Student Association), courses (e.g. “Ghosts”), student resources (e.g. efforts to educate students about safe sex) and our commitment to environmental conservatism. How does taking away so much improve students' college experience?

So what is the constructive course of action for the Bowdoin community? My friend, Toby Zitsman (class of '13), remarked in the Bowdoin Orient that “if this report sparks a healthy discussion on education as a whole then it is a gift to our school.”²¹ While I have been harsh on the NAS, I do believe the report raises some issues of critical importance for the College. These are:

1. An examination of the student advising system
2. A greater effort to prepare first-year students for their academic experiences
3. An examination of the course offerings of the College

²¹ “The Bowdoin Project: the good, the bad and the misleading” (April 4, 2013) .
<http://bowdoinorient.com/article/8148>

4. Standardizing practices and conventions across departments
5. Re-assessing distribution requirements

Each of these is a non-political issue that can be discussed in a civil manner. The discussion should be fueled by student input, rather than a polemic penned by an external conservative advocacy group. What courses do Bowdoin students like? What courses do they dislike? What courses do they wish existed? As an alumni, my personal preferences on these matters do not matter much. They should primarily be left to the current student population. They have the requisite intelligence and maturity to guide this conversation.