

# DIVERSITY MATTERS

Students from the Diversity in Higher Education seminar share their research

by Sophie Cowen, Sydney Avitia-Jacques  
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Orient Contributors

When we applied to Bowdoin, we checked boxes on the Common App designating our “official” identities, which suggest to Admissions how we might add to “diversity” on campus. But what happened next, after arriving on campus? Once we began taking classes and found friends, how did we come to understand our identities here, if at all? How did we reckon with difference?

Last October, a group of seniors and juniors in Diversity in Higher Education, a sociology seminar taught by Professor Ingrid Nelson, interviewed 57 Bowdoin seniors in search of answers as part of our research project, Understanding Diversity. In interviews that lasted from one to three hours, respondents shared their stories from childhood through high school, brought us through each year of their Bowdoin experience, reflected on social class, race, gender, and sexuality, and explained their understandings of campus diversity, controversies surrounding racial bias and incidents of gender violence.

Unsurprisingly, diversity matters for all of us at this school—but with this comes the challenge of defining what we mean by “diversity.” We have brought together analyses of 48 student interviews to explore the state of diversity at Bowdoin and to start answering important questions. This week’s piece will focus on housing and self-segregation. Over the coming three weeks, we will share data on academics, campus climate and student conceptions of diversity. We will direct attention to campus structures, explore how student actions and inactions shape this community,

and raise questions about what “diversity” really looks like on this campus, beyond admissions numbers.

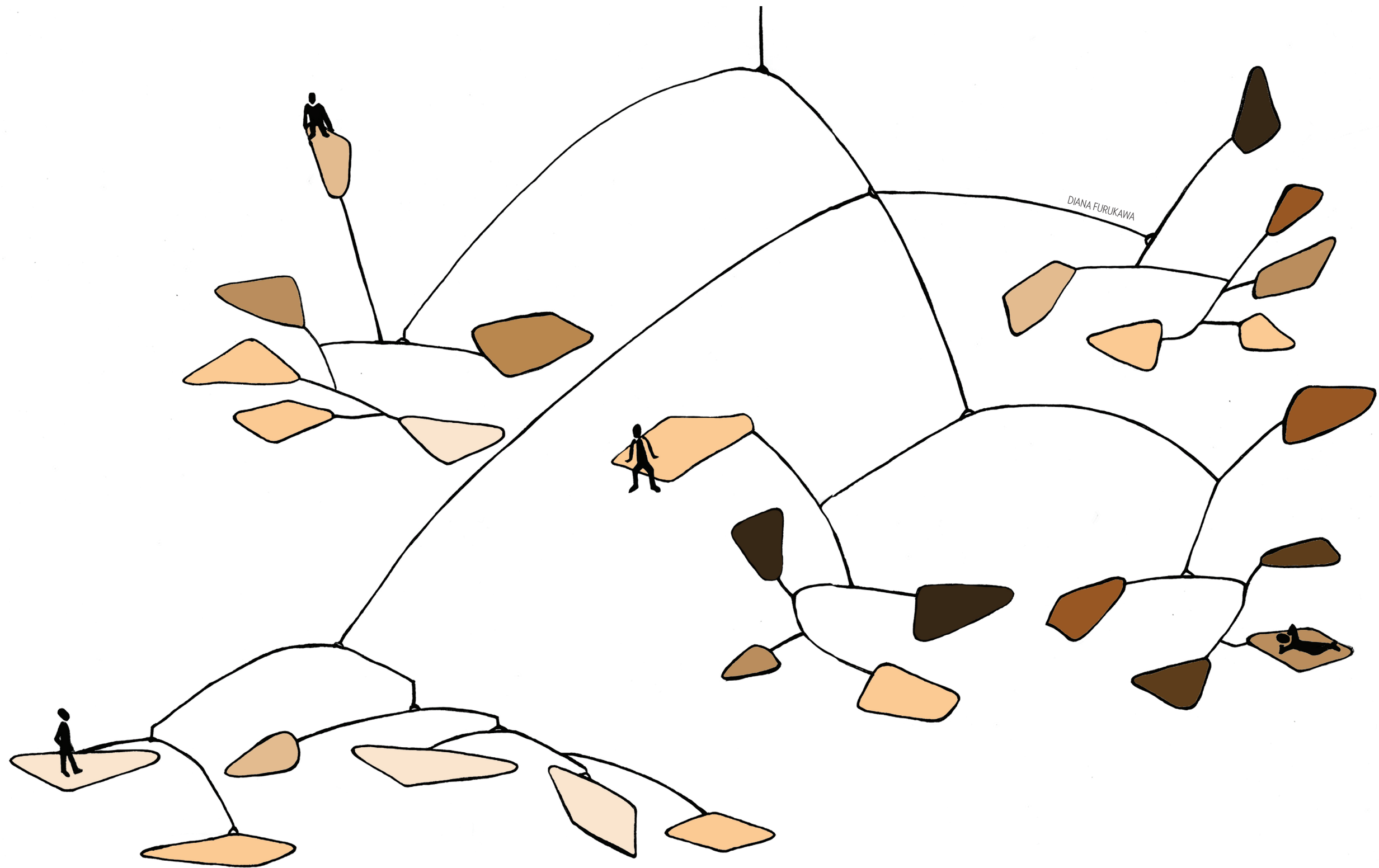
We share these snapshots of our research findings, based on the real and personal experiences of our peers, in hopes of starting meaningful conversations about difference at Bowdoin without burdening the students constantly facing inquiry.

We gave considerable thought to the demographics of our respondents, intentionally over-representing students of color to gain insight into the experiences of the huge multitude of identities within that category, and because we were interested in their experiences at this predominantly white institution. We sent email solicitations to 111 randomly-selected seniors, with a response rate of 51 percent. Women of color had the highest response rate (78 percent) and white men had the lowest response rate (41 percent). The sample is about 50 percent men, 50 percent women, and includes one person who identifies as non-binary. This is representative of the senior class. The sample is about 50 percent white students and 50 percent students of color, compared to the senior class which is 69 percent white students and 31 percent students of color. Although the latter is using an oversimplified category, we will refrain from more specificity to protect confidentiality. While 57 interviews were conducted, due to time constraints, 48 total respondents are included in this analysis. Throughout the interview and analysis processes, student identities and data have been kept confidential. As we will discuss later

in more detail, higher response rates among women and people of color point to a general disparity in who takes on the work of discussing issues of diversity and inclusion.

Our interviews confirmed current sociological literature: the burden of this work is largely carried by the students who actively feel the effects of elite higher education’s white, upper-class history. Bowdoin has become more racially diverse since its beginnings as an institution for white men of elite backgrounds—campus is now 15 percent less white than in the 2001–2002 academic year—but it still remains a predominantly white institution in the whitest state in the United States. More importantly, the effects of that history remain prominent for students in their academic, extracurricular, and social lives; our interviews show a disparity in the ways students define and experience diversity at Bowdoin. Many students of color, first-generation students, low-income students and people of other historically marginalized identities tend to think about diversity more frequently and more personally than do most white students of wealthy backgrounds.

As we assess the situation facing us at this moment, we encourage you to challenge what has become habitual and what feels ordinary at Bowdoin. We ask that you consider where you fit in this conversation, where you stand and what brings you to feel that way. More importantly, we implore you to act on those thoughts; paired with your action, our data can facilitate the shift from conversations and thoughts to concrete change that contributes to the greater task of dismantling racism.



## Dorm(ant) divergence: unequal understandings of housing, self-segregation and inequity

In February, Dean of Student Affairs Tim Foster emailed students, urging them to take advantage of the diversity on campus when picking housing for next year. Dean Foster’s plea to “Mix it up!” points to a reality at Bowdoin: call it cliquy, exclusive, or segregated, students tend to share social spaces with people “like them.”

To seniors—several years out from being placed on intentionally diverse floors—Dean Foster’s recognition that students spend more time with peers like them than different from them is no shock. More than 70 percent of the seniors we interviewed felt that students self-segregate by race.

How do student groups separate? Why? And, why does it matter?

Many students make their first friends at Bowdoin in shared spaces—roommates or floormates. Housing arrangements are the primary structure shaping friendship circles during respondents’ first year. While first-year floors are not proportionally representative of our racial breakdown on campus because more students of color elect to live in chem-free housing (in our data, 31 percent of students of color elected chem-free floors versus 13 percent of white students), first-year floors foster relationships among students that are more racially diverse.

With time, however, extracurricular activities become more salient. Athletics, for example, are a dominant force in the social scene and, due to the whiteness of athletic teams, often solidify friendships solely among white students. Of the respondents who said students self-segregate, 35 percent mentioned athletic teams and 29 percent mentioned specific non-white racial and affinity groups. Some students of color discussed how they interacted more with white peers their first year, then began to develop friendships with other students of color. One student of color said, “There came a point where I didn’t hang out with my [first-

year] floor as much ‘cause I felt like I was forcing it.” She continued, “race became a bigger factor in my social relationships [after my first year].” While mandating housing situations after the first year seems restrictive, our autonomy to select roommates leaves no mechanism in place to combat self-segregation by race in housing.

Most students in our sample expressed a keen awareness of racial segregation on campus. The reasons students provided for this, however, varied.

Over half (53 percent) of the students who felt that students self-segregate discussed it as “natural.” Of these students, two-thirds were white. Explaining this thought, students said things like, “[people] are gonna flock together over time” and “[students] tend to gravitate towards people that look like themselves” and just “happen to be of your race.” One student interpreted this behavior as “natural humanistic instinct.” Reflecting on his housing situation, one white student said “It just happened that almost all the guys I live with are white.” Students who described self-segregation as natural did not address bigger structural factors that explain the homogeneity of social groups. These students feel like they “just happen.” However, as over one third of students explained, racial separation is informed by Bowdoin’s structures and social culture.

Thirty-eight percent adopted a view of segregation on campus that linked it to Bowdoin’s enduring legacy as a historically white and wealthy institution. Most of these respondents (69 percent) were students of color. To these students (all 38 percent), self-segregation was an important strategy for navigating the predominantly white campus. One student suggested the campus, generally, is not welcoming to students of color: “I think a lot of it is on the community to make everyone feel comfortable. And I don’t know if that’s necessarily what’s happening.” Students cited needs for support

and understanding as factors that drive students to divide by race. At Bowdoin, students reflected, these needs often remain unmet.

Students mentioned how specific campus spaces are unwelcoming to students of color. One student of color said, “there are so many areas of Bowdoin that are just like practically completely white.” This

student viewed such white spaces as the least inclusive. Another student implicitly acknowledged the predominantly white demographics of extracurricular groups, claiming athletic teams, similar to the Outing Club, contribute to a campus divided by race. Additionally, two students of color suggested that, by virtue of sticking together, students of color

can both avoid their white peers’ racisms and inhabit spaces of solidarity.

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Bowdoin and its student culture do little to address the social segregation by race on campus. The Office of Residential Life’s hands-off approach in housing beyond the first year and the persistent racial homogeneity of extracurricular groups, among other forces, indicate that students’ social segregation by race is neither interrupted nor prevented by the College or its social culture.

The structures of this predominantly and historically white campus shape patterns in students’ choices, particularly, as our research shows, of friends and housing. Still, we all have agency to pick where we live, who we spend our time with, and what we do. Understanding diversity in housing matters to individuals and the Bowdoin community.

The most dangerous, common misconception among students about social segregation by race is that this division is harmless, unchangeable, and “natural.” The illusion of equity combined with the reality of racial segregation suggests the dangerous idea of inherent, “natural” difference between races. Naturalizing division is not too different from naturalizing inequity. Acknowledging social segregation by race without considering the “how” and the “why,” reinforces this colorblind view of race. While color-blindness is often deemed benevolent, it fuels the inexcusable inequities that generate separation in the first place. White students made up the majority of the students who naturalized racial divides and did not consider the oppressive forces pulling some students in and pushing others out of social spaces.

On our majority-white campus, students separate by race. This separation facilitates (mostly) white students’ ignorance about race and perpet-

uates inequity—with little consequence to the students who are (color)blind to it.

The question, therefore, is not, “Why do students self-segregate?” but rather, “What are the structural obstacles to true integration?” In reality, and as students shared, friendships at Bowdoin are often built on the need for racial acceptance on a campus that does not provide enough of it.

Social segregation is a matter of group patterns sustained by larger forces, and the power dynamics at this institution, historically and presently, favor whiteness. What would make an historically-white college campus more conducive to racial integration?

Many students described racial integration as a laudable goal, but one that’s difficult to reach. Some raised concerns that given Bowdoin’s majority white student body, integration means putting the onus on students of color to join white spaces. As one student of color stated: “If we had more [diversity], we wouldn’t have the problem of so many students who feel like they didn’t fit in or can’t find their place on campus, or hesitating joining groups that aren’t diverse.”

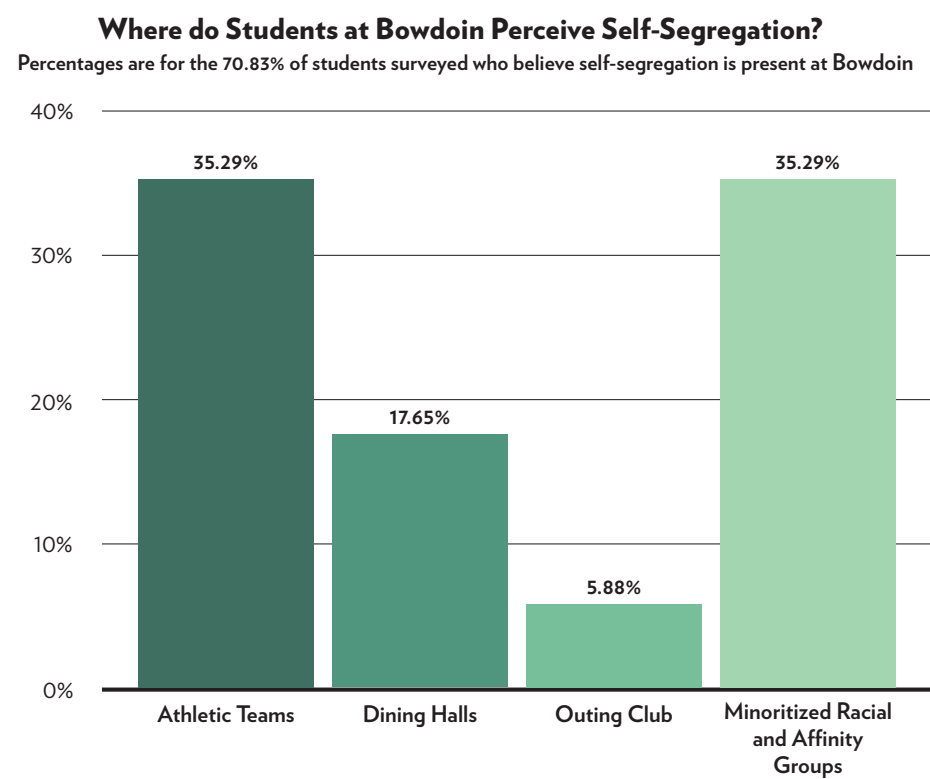
If students of color are asked to sacrifice their comfort for integration’s sake, the benefactors seem to be primarily white students. As one student of color expressed, “I feel like diversity is for the institution and it’s for white people.” She was not alone: often in our interviews, students of color expressed frustration and feeling pressure to be a source of learning for white students in a minimally racially-diverse community. Students’ divergence in racial awareness means the students with the most institutionally-backed power to change our racial inequalities are less aware of their power, and therefore less likely to use it to further equity. If we want to pursue integration, we need to address the fact that the majority of students do not have the tools

to understand race. While the College’s structure fails to seriously challenge its whiteness, integration is no perfect solution.

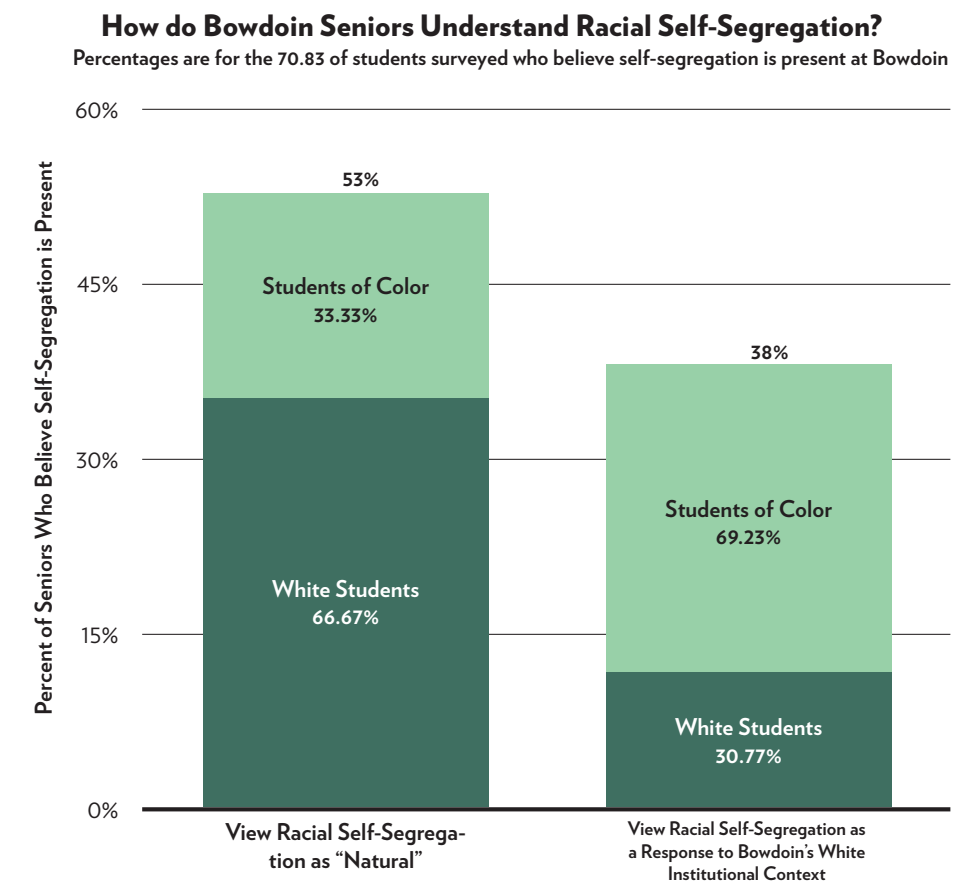
Next week, we will exit dorm rooms and enter classrooms in an investigation of academics. Our

work will explore the failures and promises of distribution requirements to provide students with tools to understand race.

*This article also draws from analyses by Sophie Sadovnikoff and Parker Lemal-Brown.*



Seventy percent of students surveyed perceived self-segregation at Bowdoin. These students noted a variety of spaces in which self-segregation occurs, including, athletic teams, dining halls, The Outing Club and minoritized racial affinity groups.



Of the 70.83 percent of the class’ research participants that believed racial self-segregation is present at Bowdoin, 53 percent view it as “natural” and 38 percent view it as a response to Bowdoin’s institutional context.

# DIVERSITY MATTERS

## Untested complicity, A+ potential: Curricular reform can relieve students of color from burden of teaching race

by Sydney Avitia-Jacques,  
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*This article is the second installment in the Diversity Matters series where students in the Diversity in Higher Education seminar present research based on interviews with 58 seniors.*

Students can easily go through Bowdoin with color-blind understandings of race unchallenged and undisrupted. People who have this color-blind view tend to believe that the best way to solve racial inequity is by ignoring racial differences. Ironically, not “seeing” race exacerbates racial inequity by overlooking the structures and institutions that have been built to benefit white people at the expense of people of color. Similarly, the College does little to rise above multiculturalism that encourages learning from others with different racial backgrounds without acknowledging the power imbalance between “multicultural” students and the white students who learn from them.

As course selection approaches, we turn to investigate how classes have helped students understand difference, how most coursework falls short of addressing inequity and what curricular changes Bowdoin needs.

Our research finds that:

1. Bowdoin has next-to-no required instruction or programming about race and its existing programing is limited in effect.

2. Courses (which are the most positively-viewed sites for conversations about race) largely and often fail to address inequity—racial or otherwise. The Exploring Social Differences (ESD) distribution requirement does not currently appear to fulfill its purpose, but has potential to establish students’ baseline comprehension of inequity.

3. The lack of race-related programming and the failings of most academic spaces to generate meaningful discussions about race burdens students of color to teach their white peers.

Apart from the recently-developed “More than Meets the Eye” first-year Orientation programming, Bowdoin requires no race-related education for its students. Furthermore, our data suggest that the impacts of programs like Inter-group Dialogue and community discussions—designed to critically delve into broadly defined issues of race—are limited and participation is self-selecting. As one student of color reflected: “If there is ... a talk about diversity, it’s always attended by the same exact people and never by the people that actually need to hear it the most—white people.” Additionally, of the students who discussed partaking in these conversations at Bowdoin, 83 percent mentioned instances when negative experiences with or perceptions of these campus programs led them to feel discouraged from entering future structured conversations. Students confused by racial issues felt these programs were not good platforms to ask honest questions and gain a better understanding of race, and ultimately increased racial divides because of their self-selecting nature.

The College fails at educating all students about race despite an overwhelming need for this education. This is a need that has been acknowledged at the institutional level with the creation of the Senior Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion and a need that is not particular to white students. As one student of color unfamiliar with the concept of

cultural appropriation said, they sensed their peers’ expectation to be experts on race: “My friend who is white [...] kind of made me feel dumb that I didn’t understand what was going on.” Another expressed feeling “outed as being a person of color,” and therefore presumed to be able to talk about race intelligently. The expectation of students of color to be actively-participating experts on campus racial issues allows white students to either ignore the fact of race or defer to their peers of color instead of being pushed to address the issues themselves.

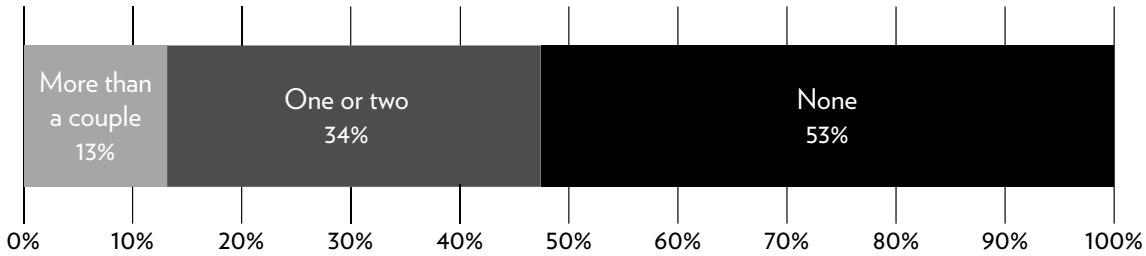
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Studying diversity and racial inequity is a qualitatively and numerically limited part of the Bowdoin academic experience; furthermore when taken, classes that address these issues often do so insufficiently. For one, not all professors address current events and concerns in their classrooms. One student described struggling as some professors “just kept going on with their day” in the midst of racially-charged controversies on campus. Also, few majors require classes that investigate inequity: within the top eight majors for students in the classes of 2017 and 2018, there are only five ESD classes listed for this academic year. This distribution suggests that the majority of Bowdoin students opt into coursework that rarely confronts social difference.

However, classrooms have the power to draw all students into critical thinking about inequity by providing spaces for students to partake in professor-facilitated discussions. Of the students who mentioned positive experiences with race-related conversation, 36 percent had experiences that occurred in a classroom setting. Classes, particularly those in the humanities and social sciences, were the only form of involvement in campus racial issues that students interviewed unanimously said improved their understanding of race. Our research found that class discussions can encourage students to critically examine their own racial identity and provide a positive space for students to process campus controversies. One student said their involvement in the Africana Studies Program “has been really integral to my interactions with diversity on this campus,” describing how learning hard facts and deepening their understanding of racism’s “historical context” have made it easier for them to discuss diversity. Another student expressed gratitude for an anthropology professor who, after a campus controversy during their sophomore year, led a class discussion without “assum[ing] that everyone knows about cultural appropriation.” The professor helped clarify the situation for students who were confused about cultural appropriation and “didn’t know where the line was.” These few mentions of class as a meaningful space for discussions on race and difference demonstrate the utility of classrooms for racial education, but also suggest that its reach must be expanded.

Every student is required to take an ESD that purportedly fulfills the goal of “develop[ing] awareness and critical understanding of differences.” However, more than half of interviewees asked about diversity and academic experience said that none of their classes had shaped their thinking about diversity. While some of this may be explained by the durability of color-blind understandings of race among students, it also points to the fact that many classes—including some meeting the ESD requirement—

### How many classes shaped students’ thinking about diversity? For most subjects, courses did not shape their thinking about diversity



COMPILED BY DREW MACDONALD. SOURCE: “UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY.”

are completely bereft of meaningful discourse on inequity at all.

This educational void creates serious consequences, specifically, charging students with marginalized identities with the unpaid labor of sharing personal experiences and explaining basic concepts to their peers. One student of color felt this sort of sharing in the classroom was actually “a way for white people to hear ... more sides ... for their benefit.” While white students sometimes described being in class with students of color as personally enriching, “really helpful” and “valuable” as sources of information to “enhance ... academic thinking,” many students of color struggled with the weighty obligation of representation. Some students of color expressed feeling like they need to speak on behalf of a whole group of people of their demographic. One expressed feeling tokenized: “There’s always a moment in which you notice that, like, ‘Oh my God, I’m the only black person in this class’ ... and you just feel like you have to represent the black people.”

The students who take on this burden, in addition to all of their other academic and extracurricular responsibilities on campus, are not only taxed by the emotional labor of educating their peers, but also discouraged by the limited successes of their earnest efforts. This stress is only compounded by the discomfort and pressure women and students of color especially already report feeling in the classroom. One man of color, for example, said, “people here think that I’m breaking the stereotype of being a Latino male for being here on campus” because “people think that Latino males are not as successful academically.” As a result, he said, “it just puts me on an unlivable standard.”

Without an institutionally supported emphasis on engaging with racial politics and other issues of difference and inequity, Bowdoin places the responsibility of educating students about these important topics on the shoulders of marginalized students. Unlike professors and trained staff, students of color are uncompensated for teaching other students. No school should expect its students to educate their peers in such a grossly imbalanced manner, which permits students graduate with uninterrupted color-blind ideas of race, underprepared for the changing world and geared to reproduce social inequities.

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Since most courses at Bowdoin do not explicitly tackle inequity, the ESD distribution requirement shoulders a heavy task and fails. In the next few years, the Curriculum Implementation Committee and the Curriculum and Educational Policy Committee will re-evaluate the ESD and IP distribution requirements and potential changes. We see this as an opportunity to rethink how Bowdoin educates students about inequity—racial and otherwise. Changes to the curriculum could take on various shapes, for example, students could all

take the same foundational ESD course providing them with a shared structural understanding of race (not to mention class, gender, etc.) that helps their racial discussions be more productive. ESD course could also be tailored within specific majors, so that students in all disciplines would be familiar with how race affects their specific area of focus.

We believe it is the duty of faculty committees to parse out the specific implementation of this new requirement and the institution’s responsibility to implement these changes, as it is essential that students graduate with a robust understanding of inequity.

It is beyond the scope of this research to design a new curriculum about race and inequity; however, based on research into other colleges’ curriculums and building on recommendations proposed by sociologists Camille Charles and Rory Kramer in their study of inequity at Bowdoin, we propose the principles essential to a new ESD requirement. Most importantly, the ESD coursework must be: centered on language of power and inequity, made relevant to the contemporary period, personal, representative, intersectional and prerequisite. This will ensure students have the tools to

apply their understanding of inequity to their academic pursuits, as well as their personal and political lives.

These proposed changes to the ESD requirement were presented to the Curriculum Implementation Committee and the Curriculum and Educational Policy Committee in late February. They were received well and we hope to see the committee include the campus in further discussion about future changes as their work progresses. By expanding effective education on inequity for the entire student body, Bowdoin strengthens its long-term commitment to social justice and its core value of the Common Good. It helps students develop habits of critical thinking and encourages involvement in issues of inequity which influences individuals’ political and social practices for the rest of their lives.

Next week, we will turn to an analysis of the racially-charged controversies that consumed campus between fall 2014 and spring 2016. Our work will address the differences in response among students and by the College, as well as the variation in the way students remember these moments.

*This article also draws from analyses by Julia Conley and Diana Furukawa.*

### Suggestions for strengthening the ESD requirement

The suggestions below build upon Camille Z. Charles and Rory Kramer’s proposed changes in their “Report on Diversity and Inclusion” and are supported by our findings. Most importantly, the ESD coursework must be:

- 1. Centered on language of power and inequity.** Acknowledgement of societal inequities must undergird the coursework and readings of the course, such that students address the structural roots and repercussions of oppression. The course must be taught, in other words, with a power-analysis frame. Pomona College’s “Analyzing Difference” requirement may serve as an example.
- 2. Contemporary.** While a historical basis is important, students need to make connections between past and present, gaining the tools to engage with contemporary controversies on campus and beyond.
- 3. Personal.** The course must prompt meaningful student reflection and challenge them to consider where they fit into modern structures of power. The course must, as described in Williams College’s “Exploring Diversity Initiative Requirement,” be “self-conscious.”
- 4. Representative.** The course must go beyond topical accuracy; it also matters which voices are telling the story, historically and presently. While the College slowly chips away at its faculty diversity goals, it is important that in the meantime students are engaging with traditionally marginalized perspectives in the classroom. Professors must be intentional about featuring a body of readings from non-white, male authors who have historically dominated most academic fields.
- 5. Intersectional.** Class, race, ability, gender and sexuality do not operate in isolation in our society. Coursework should reflect the complex intersections of privileges and oppressions, rather than focus on a unidimensional narrative.
- 6. Prerequisite.** Issues of inequity are foundational and transferable to all areas of study. For this reason, students must take their ESD course sometime during in their first three semesters at Bowdoin, before declaring their major. This way, students who (by virtue of their major) typically take just one ESD course during their Bowdoin career will have the tools to apply their understanding of inequity to their academic pursuits, as well as their personal and political lives.



# DIVERSITY MATTERS

## Long division: polarizing parties, formulaic discussions and their confusing remainders

by Sydney Avitia-Jacques, Sophie Cowen, Hannah Berman & Kayli Weiss  
Orient Contributors

This article is the third installment in the Diversity Matters series, in which students from the Diversity in Higher Education seminar present research based on interviews with 48 seniors.

Our analyses of self-segregation and insufficient race education at Bowdoin suggest that many students do not understand the impact of racial inequity in their own lives. What happens when this manifests in controversy?

At the beginning of the Class of 2018's college careers, three racially charged controversies occurred on campus over the course of 15 months. In their first semester at Bowdoin, just before Thanksgiving, the men's lacrosse team hosted their "Cracksgiving" party, an annual event at the time where teammates and their guests dressed up as Pilgrims and Native Americans. The following October, members of the sailing team dressed up in baggy clothing, one member wearing cornrows, for their "gangster" party. Four months later, a group of students threw a tequila-themed birthday party in an upperclassmen dorm in which some students wore mini sombreros. While less than half (40 percent) of our interviewees mentioned "Cracksgiving," almost everyone (92 percent) mentioned one or both of the sophomore year controversies.

The unique, rapid succession of racially-charged controversies—especially during the 2015-2016 academic year—engaged students across campus in issues of diversity, including many who had before not done so before.

These events catalyzed discourse on race, cultural appropriation and campus structures, and the campus climate grew turbulent and divided as the College responded to these issues. For many current seniors, this tone defined their second year at Bowdoin and has had lasting effects.

Our research shows that individuals' responses to these racially-charged controversies cannot fit into simple categories—they cannot be understood, as one student said, as "an us-versus-them binary." We found that some students report learning from the aftermath of these parties and many report feeling discouraged by this series of events. Students felt pressured to talk about the parties and were often unsatisfied by their peers' and administrators' reactions. We explore how students have tried to reconcile their lingering frustrations and find common ground with those whom they perceive to be on "the other side."

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In this climate, many of our interviewees expressed a desire to resolve their confusion. More than half (58 percent) mentioned encouraging learning experiences that helped them understand the controversies. They often noted the value of being able to ask questions openly and form new conclusions and ideas they could apply to other

areas of their lives. To many students, classrooms were crucial sites of these conversations. To others, talking informally with friends and peers who were more engaged in the issues helped alleviate confusion and illuminate others' perspectives. For example, one student explained not knowing what cultural appropriation was—apart from being "bad"—until an upperclassman heavily involved in the discourse explained it.

Even students implicated in these controversies described experiences that encouraged them to opt into discussions about race. One student described their team's conversations with an affinity group as "the most productive conversation we had" because the group was understanding and did not assume bad intentions. However, encouraging learning experiences were not universal.

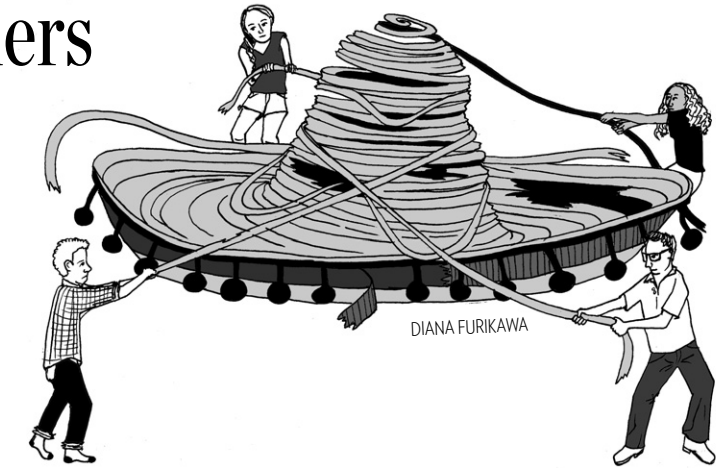
A central pattern among students who mentioned feeling discouraged (63 percent) was the lack of platforms to ask questions without feeling punished by their peers. Twenty-three percent of discouraged interviewees expressed unresolved confusion. Students of color in particular commonly felt they were expected to know, care and teach more about cultural appropriation than their white peers—yet did not always feel prepared to do so. One student explained "I still don't feel like I can do the best job explaining to someone why [cultural appropriation is] not a good thing." Another student said, "I remember that year really realizing that I could say that I fit in, in terms of being a person of color, but, culturally, I'm very white," indicating that they still felt ignorant about cultural appropriation.

Following the "tequila" party, the campus felt polarized, much as it does to some students today. Fifty-seven percent of discouraged students mentioned polarization and felt divisiveness. One student said, "I realized how divided our campus could be in so many ways, but [after the 'tequila' party], I really felt it." Another student explained how the controversy made Bowdoin feel divided and felt forced to choose a side. "It was really hard because I could totally see both sides, so it was almost impossible—I felt so divided," they said. Similarly, one recalled walking into an open Bowdoin Student Government (BSG) meeting following the "tequila" party: "I'll never forget this: literally all the minorities were on one side of the room and it was all white people on the other side of the room," they said. "I feel like everyone was waiting for me to choose a side."

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Why do students still feel confused and divided, despite their desire to find a resolution? After the "tequila" party, a number of community forums were held on campus by BSG and other official groups, in an attempt to help students process the controversy. Despite the purpose of prompting open conversations and learning, these reactive discussions felt to some students like "echo chambers" where the same strong opinions were validated and others silenced.

Students who felt constrained in structured conversations felt obligated to maintain "political correctness." For example, one student involved in one of



DIANA FURIKAWA

the controversies said, "It felt like there were targets on all our backs and everyone was watching out to see what we did next ... Nobody wanted to say the wrong thing." Similarly, another student mentioned fearing their inquiry would infuriate their peers: "We were all too scared to ask people why they were upset about it, because all we had seen was angry Facebook posts and yelling at the [BSG] meeting." One student of color, who was in disagreement with members of their affinity group, said, "I felt like I couldn't speak my piece without being attacked."

Confusion about the racially-charged events was common, but questions were rarely asked—much less answered—in these structured conversations. Interviewees felt restricted to specific ways of talking about the controversies at public discussions and few felt comfortable expressing their opinions or acting upon their confusion. Together, polarization and confusion hindered efforts to learn.

Each party was quickly "universally condemned" in BSG resolutions that defined cultural appropriation and asserted that it was "unacceptable." Disciplinary sanctions by the administration after the "tequila" party described the behavior as "unbecoming of a Bowdoin student" and specified punishments for implicated students. In this way, Bowdoin officially presented a unified front maintaining that the incidents were unacceptable—but as many seniors recall, students' interpretations remained divided. The administration expected students to understand where to draw the line with respect to cultural appropriation and ethnic stereotyping but students did not feel that they knew where this line was.

This formal denouncement of cultural appropriation on a campus where students generally lack racial education generated resentment. Attempts by the College to respond appropriately to the controversies were often met with bitterness. First, students in general were confused about the nature of and reasoning for the punishments. Second, some students felt they were disciplined without enough explanation of the line they crossed, nor sufficient opportunity to talk with the group on the other "side" of the conflict. Some complained of a lack of transparency and a focus on assigning blame. As one student said, "The way it was handled seemed like really kind of inflammatory, and [the administration was] not helping settle disputes or create meaningful apologies." One student described the punishments as arbitrary. Students talked about punishments, polarization and conflict that led to resentment, which ultimately discouraged them from engaging in and learning from racial discussions after the events.

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If divisiveness is the one thing students agree on, how can they come to a solution that brings understanding

and healing to all parties? The frustration evident in our interviewees' stories more than two years after the "tequila" party is a testament to the controversies' enduring sting. What does it mean for so many seniors to graduate with the memories of division still intact? As the class of 2018 prepares to leave Bowdoin, so too may the memories of these racially charged controversies. Pamela Zabala '17 explored this issue in her honors thesis, which we encourage you to read. Her research revealed incidents of racial bias have occurred on average every 3.5 years since 1964—just about every time the student body is regenerated. It should not take another "gangster" or "tequila" party for future Bowdoin students to care and learn about racial justice.

How, then, can students learn—as many said they wanted to—from these moments?

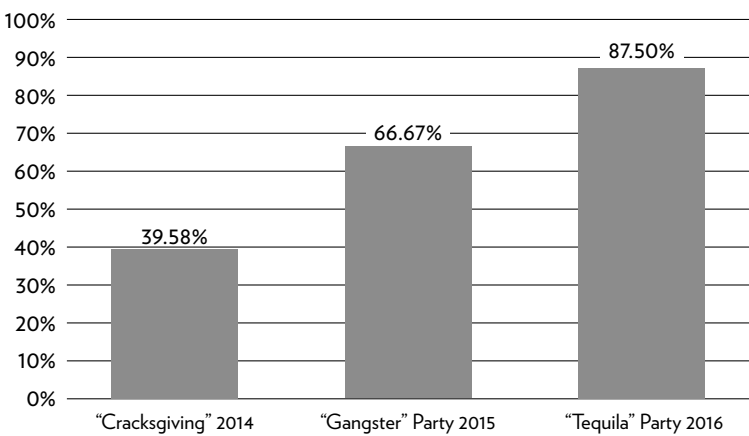
Some of this work starts with the teams implicated in the controversies. As one sailing team captain shared, post-"gangster" party, they met with sociology professors and participated in a facilitated Inter-Group Dialogue (IGD) with members of the African American Society. This year, they held an IGD program in addition to a team conversation about the "gangster" party to give underclassmen the context that prompted the team's conversations about race. A member of the team said these events "try and emphasize that the conversations about race extend beyond the 'gangster' party." In contrast, a member of the men's lacrosse team said that he participated in "very productive" discussions after "Cracksgiving," but the team has not participated in any formally organized discussion about the event since. These students were drawn into discussions about racial justice because they had to be. Their learning matters, but the rest of campus must work, too.

Classes of 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022, recognize your power and duty to learn during your time here. Our research shows that coursework and class discussion on racial inequity can effectively teach students about race without burdening students of color. There is no reason a Bowdoin student should graduate without a grasp of institutionalized racism. Consider this as you register for fall classes. Professors, make teaching these controversies part of the education you provide your students.

Seniors, ignorance is no acceptable excuse. Carry the lessons from these controversies with you—if you have lingering unresolved confusion, ask yourself why, and if there is anything you can do to learn. Listen to what your peers have to say, and consider discussing over brunch and beyond.

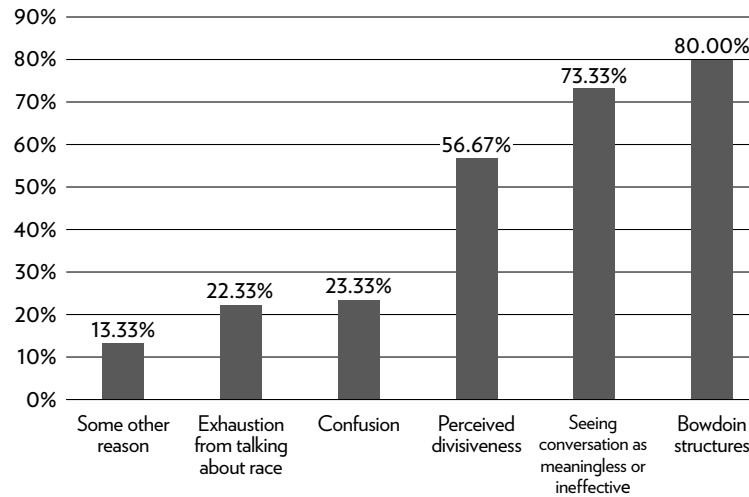
Next time, we will close our series by looking at what seniors think about diversity. We will consider the personal meaning of diversity for students and seek to answer why diversity matters at Bowdoin.

### Which racially-charged controversies stood out to students?



### What factors made students opt out of conversations about race?

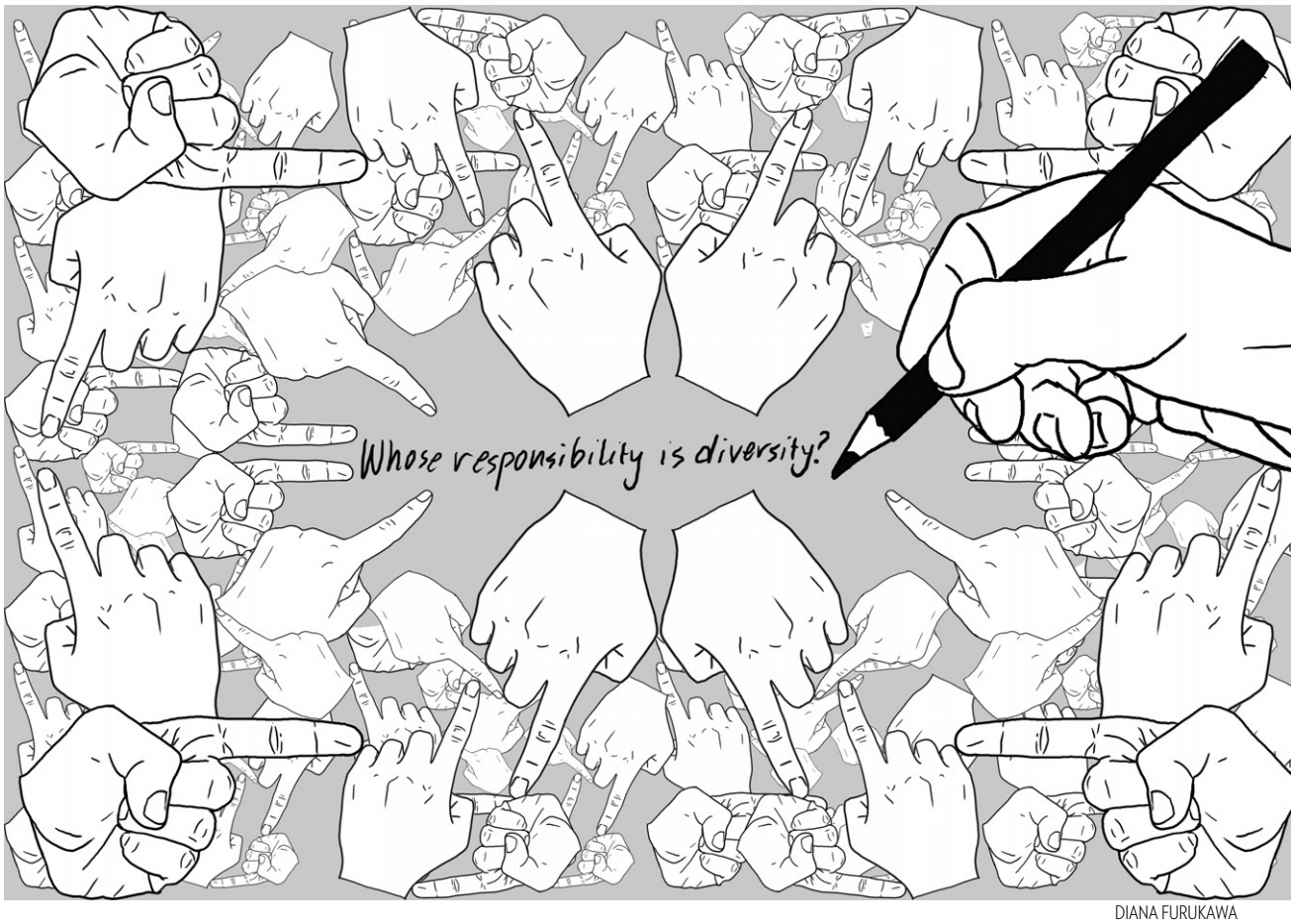
Almost all students answered with multiple factors



COMPILED BY HANNAH DONAVAN AND DREW MACDONALD. SOURCE: "UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY".

(BOTTOM): Percentages add up to more than 100 percent because some students mentioned more than one factor. "Bowdoin Structures" refers to things such as administrative actions and policies; organized events such as BSG forums, among others.

# DIVERSITY MATTERS



DIANA FURUKAWA

## Discourses on diversity: between buzzword and reality

by Sydney Avitia-Jacques, Hannah Berman, Sophie Cowen, Zach Hebert and Joyce Kim  
Orient Contributors

*This article is the fourth and final installment in the Diversity Matters series, in which students from the Diversity in Higher Education seminar present research based on interviews with 48 seniors.*

The word “diversity” is tossed around on college campuses: its facts, figures and photographic representations are plastered across Bowdoin Admissions brochures and also invoked during First Year Orientation. These moments and materials share a message: students of many backgrounds are now admitted to and attend Bowdoin. This was not always the case. Since its founding, Bowdoin has catered primarily to a white, wealthy class of elite men.

In the 2016-2017 academic year, 64 percent of Bowdoin students identified as white. While this does reflect Bowdoin’s changing admissions policies, it is still not representative of the national racial demographics of our age group. Furthermore, 20 percent of Bowdoin students come from the top one percent, meaning their families earn \$630,000 or more each year. But even if the numbers were representative, they would not tell the full story. Our interviews reveal complex campus experiences with diversity that cannot be quantified.

In this final installment of our series, we will consider how students see diversity. Our research will look at what students think about diversity at Bowdoin and will seek to understand what makes so many unsatisfied with how this community regards difference. We will consider which measures may effectively build a more inclusive community.

When we asked our interviewees about what the word “diversity” means to them, they discussed an array of identities, feelings and actions. To many students, diversity implies a collection of different characteristics or identities. Interviewees mentioned geographic origin, sexuality, style, religion, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender and political ideology as areas of diversity. More than half (51 percent) of our interviewees did not explicitly mention either class or race when describing diversity. At a school with a historically and presently white

and wealthy student body, what does this mean for how students experience Bowdoin’s diversity?

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Of the students who answered the interview question, “What do you think about diversity at Bowdoin?” 27 percent suggested they were satisfied with the College’s efforts towards diversity. This group of students, split evenly between white students and students of color, ranged in their answers but tended to be forgiving of the College and its attempts to strive for a more diverse campus. One emergent theme in this group of students was an acknowledgement of effort. As one student said, “I feel like the College is trying ... and I feel like I have seen things change ... that point to that being true.” Students also credited Bowdoin administrators for “doing their best to make it a diverse place,” either in a general sense or through recruitment processes intended to bring “different types of people to Bowdoin.” Included in this group were students who judged the campus to be diverse in race, class and gender, but not in “thought.”

The majority (66 percent) of our interviewees expressed that they do not believe the College is doing enough to foster a diverse and inclusive campus environment for all students. These students showed dissatisfaction with the College’s work promoting campus diversity and inclusion, believing such efforts were insufficient or unsuccessful, while seven percent offered inconclusive or confused answers. Nine percent of our interviewees (all of whom were students of color) expressed feeling unsatisfied and explicitly described diversity at Bowdoin as “lacking” across various categories, not only in race but also in “sexual diversity” and “a lack of diversity in general.” These unsatisfied interviewees were more critical of diversity and its role on campus, mentioning segregation or a lack of inclusivity within various groups on campus that negated the potential

benefits of having a diverse population. This points to the crucial difference between diversity and inclusion: diversity is a range of people existing on campus, while inclusion requires facilitating integration and equity in their experiences here. For some of our interviewees, Bowdoin falls short in both regards.

Some students considered the challenges of diversity on this predominantly white campus. One student said that “people who are considered diverse” do not always feel welcome, and another described diversity on campus as “objectify[ing] people’s cultures and experiences,” which leads “to those individuals feeling a greater sense of otherness and just not being valued as a human being.” Moreover, in contrast to the students in the “satisfied” group who said “Bowdoin has gotten more diverse since I’ve been here,” some unsatisfied students felt otherwise. For example, one student said, “Initially, I thought that Bowdoin was very di-

ceived Bowdoin’s diversity as either insufficient or ineffectively supported on campus.

Seventeen percent of our respondents considered political ideology, or “the competition of ideas,” as part of diversity, but did not mention diversity of background or experience (such as race and class). This points to a larger issue at Bowdoin: students are neither required nor adequately taught to critically analyze and address diversity with roots in marginalization. If these students, like those who felt they have benefitted educationally from racial diversity, do not consider why diversity matters beyond its contributions to their own intellectual growth, the College ultimately fails at its stated mission of preparing Bowdoin students to be “a complete individual for a world in flux.”

Almost across the board, students recognized that some kind of diversity is important. And yet, many do not seem to critically understand why diversity matters. Diversity matters

variation in Bowdoin students’ experiences. The stories we have shared implore students, faculty, administrators and staff, as actors on this campus and in the broader world, to reject assumptions about our peers and colleagues, to push beyond the simplistic categorizations to which we subject ourselves and each other.

In writing these pieces, it was clear to us not just how divergent our peers’ interactions with diversity at Bowdoin have been, but also how relatable their stories feel. We, like you, see ourselves in the words of the 48 students we interviewed. Like you, we were also frustrated and concerned at times.

The purpose of this project was not, however, to point fingers. For those of you hoping for incriminating evidence that gives energy to the stereotype of “problematic” suspects—the wealthy, white, conservative athlete majoring in economics—our data have failed you. Similarly, our data refute the notion of a homogenous experience among students of color. While there were trends in our data among some students of certain backgrounds, our research directs greater attention to the vast differences among students who, on paper, seemed “the same.” In giving students space and time to share, we uncovered a multitude of painful moments, exciting prospects, lingering concerns and deep reflections. The beauty of qualitative data is that they illuminate the nuances of lived experiences. We hope that the stories we have shared remind Bowdoin of the multitude of meanings of diversity; our data show that there are consequences to forgetting these stories. Still, no research is perfect: we could never say it all. There are endless resources available on the topic we have covered in our series. We encourage everyone to start by reading the honors thesis by Pamela Zabala ’17.

We hope that our research prompts you to think more critically about difference—in the Bowdoin community and in our society. We urge each of you to challenge the status quo of social segregation, insufficient racial education and incomplete collective memory.

In matters of diversity, we all matter. *This article draws from additional analyses by Julia Conley ’18 and Diana Furukawa ’18.*

**Of the students who answered the interview question, “What do you think about diversity at Bowdoin?” 27 percent suggested they were satisfied with the College’s efforts towards diversity.**

verse ... and I think the longer I’ve been here, the more I’ve realized that ... there are more people from different areas, et cetera ... [but] they’re not as integrated as I would expect them to be.”

Within this group of unsatisfied respondents, some interviewees displayed a sense of apathy or conceded to their own role in creating some of the divisions they described seeing on campus. For example, one student said, “It doesn’t really feel that diverse. Even looking at the groups that I spend a lot of time with, ... there is a little bit of diversity on campus, but people tend to stay within their own groups.” This supports an earlier finding that more than 70 percent of the seniors we interviewed felt that students self-segregate by race. As these various responses show, most of our interviewees per-

because behind most types of diversity students discussed—of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability—lurks a history of exclusion, and, as one student said, schools like Bowdoin are still, at their core, “designed for [the same] people who they were originally designed for.”

While the College strives to increase diversity and promote inclusivity on campus beyond admissions, our interviewees show these efforts are currently not enough. Students’ understandings of diversity, racially-charged controversies campus and living with and learning about difference by and large fail to acknowledge inequity. Acknowledging inequity is essential to making this school a place every Bowdoin student can call home.

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Our research shows the unending