

## DISPUTATION CLXIII

March 30, 2017

Dearest Peucinians,

Welcome back! I hope everyone had enjoyable, restful, and productive breaks. We have been adjourned for several weeks now, and we only have a few disputations left for the year. Such is the nature the Spring semester — time moves quickly, and there never seems to be enough of it. At our last disputation, we considered the various benefits and drawbacks of choosing to live in the city and the country, and voted that we need not liberate ourselves from the city. This week, we ask if and how our education should mold our characters...

### **RESOLVED: THE COLLEGE OUGHT TO ENFORCE A STRICT SOCIAL CODE**

**Affirmative: Ian Ward '20**

**Negative: Samuel Halpert '20**

What is the purpose of a liberal education? Colleges like Bowdoin are clearly organized around the belief that specialized knowledge in a single area, while valuable, is not sufficient to prepare us for a life of varied experiences and endeavors. The hope is that the liberal arts can provide us with tools that promote success in areas ranging from the professional and civic arenas to those more private relationships, such as friendship and romance. The ability to navigate the ordeal of existence gracefully and with an interdisciplinary approach to problem-solving — this is what is meant by the "well-rounded person," the ideal product of a liberal education. Undoubtedly there are ample opportunities for professors to shape the character of their students in the classroom, but does it follow that liberal institutions should limit themselves to this?

Absolutely not, one might argue. There is a moral aspect to a liberal arts education, and this necessarily extends beyond the classroom. At best, professors can try to teach us how to think critically and introduce us to moral concepts, but these concepts are toothless as mere thought experiments. The development of good character necessitates living a certain way, not just thinking or believing. The college is well-positioned to encourage good habits and enforce standards of conduct that befit a liberal arts student, a democratic citizen, and decent human being.

The privilege of an elite education does not come without responsibilities. If the college seeks to produce the next generation of leaders, isn't it reasonable to demand that we live up to certain standards of excellence? Most of our formative experiences take place outside of the classroom: in our dorms, on the quad, in the dining halls. Bowdoin should not miss an opportunity to extend its educational mission to our day to day social interactions, or even our moments of solitude.

But can't freedom serve a pedagogical function as well? For many of us, this is the first time that we are living on our own and answer only to ourselves. This gives us an opportunity to use our free time pursuing our own ends and discovering things about ourselves that we did not know before. We are likely to make regrettable choices along the way, but this is also an inescapable part of the human experience and one that we must grow accustomed to. The most important skill we can learn is to cope with our mistakes and learn from them, and this can only happen in the absence of paternalistic forces. Doesn't the exercise of freedom in a safe environment serve as the best transition into the real world?

Is there something insidious about enforcing a particular conception of good character in a world with rapidly shifting notions of what is good? Is there something unique about the socializing function of liberal arts

colleges that cannot be replicated elsewhere? Who gets to decide what makes a good citizen or a good human being?

*Thursday March 30th, 8:15 PM  
3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall  
Semi-Formal Attire*

Yours,  
μὲνω - Meno

*Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus*