

INSTITUTIONAL NEWS

Working Together for Bennington (Winter 2016)

DECEMBER 14, 2016

Bennington is the home of individualized education, but it is also a shared endeavor. We are a community of creative thinkers who are constantly generating new ideas and ways of working—together—on campus and out in the wider world. Every single day, we make the decisions, clear the spaces, and extend the invitations that allow us to build the College, collectively and collaboratively, according to our most deeply-felt principles, ideals, and aspirations.

The fall term started and closed with conversations about this common aim. In their first days back on campus, and then again in the wake of an election that exposed, and amplified, the deep divides in this country, students, faculty, and staff gathered to talk about how we can, with purpose and clear eyes, learn to be together. How can we build communities, both at the College and beyond its gates, where the lives and experiences of everyone are recognized, accounted for, and valued?

We might joke about the “Bennington bubble”—our idealistic, “pocket Utopia” as Jonathan Lethem ’86 once put it—but the reality is that our students have always been, and in fact are required to be, active participants in their communities. This has been, from our founding, a cornerstone of a Bennington education.

Bursting the Bubble

The ways that our students are shaping their communities take many forms: undertaking a **feasibility study** on using local dams and

waterways for hydroelectric generation for the Village of North Bennington's board of trustees, **bringing back the knowledge** gleaned from work at the Center for Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina to share with student activists on campus, weatherizing local homes, working with refugees in the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan. Their work is local (as with **students in Yoko Inoue's ceramics class**, who are learning about food insecurity in the region while finding the forms and the means to address the issue), national (as a group of students who organized a **protest against police brutality** in New York City along with peers at NYU and Drew University), and international (as with the students who join faculty and staff in a design exhibition titled "**Secret Garden**" organized by the Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art and the Peninsula Beijing).

How We Teach

An education that doesn't just allow but requires students to engage across chasms of experience, of ideologies, and of difference—to burst the bubble, so to speak—requires a commitment to pedagogical innovation. Bennington's pop-up courses on urgent and timely topics—short-term, flexible additions to the curriculum that take into account that the world does not move on an academic schedule—have been **gaining national attention** as a model for others to emulate.

A Place Where Students Thrive

Part of what makes Bennington's educational approach effective is the integration of student experience with pedagogical design. The innovation that happens in our classrooms is reinforced by what happens in co-curricular

spaces, so that learning happens everywhere and all the time in ways that are sometimes curated, often self-directed, deeply collaborative, and interdependent.

To this end, we have done much work this fall to further our goals of creating an **intentional campus community** at Bennington where students are able to thrive, take intellectual risks, make good choices, advocate for themselves, and learn to be together both in moments of communion and in those of disagreement. This includes welcoming our new director of student health promotion, Ali Tartaglia, who will join her colleagues in Student Life in ensuring that our students are supported in multiple ways while they're here.

It also includes putting all of our intellectual and imaginative resources and all of our networks to work to sustain and extend our commitment to a culture of inclusion—a culture that is essential to a Bennington education. This includes supporting **undocumented and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status students** to the fullest extent possible under the law, and a pledge to create a welcoming environment for all, regardless of immigration status, national origin, or religion.

Building on a Solid Foundation

The fact that our students and alumni have had such an outsized impact on the world is in no small part thanks to their teachers, who have guided them and modeled expansive ways of being. One of these teachers is Sven Birkerts, who has served as director of the **Bennington Writing Seminars** for 10 years, and has been an esteemed member of the core faculty since its founding in 1994. Sven will step down from the director's position in June, but we are delighted

that after a well-deserved sabbatical he will return in 2018 to teach nonfiction in the program. I know you will join me in thanking him for his dedication and many contributions. A search for his replacement will launch in early 2017.

Ensuring Bennington's Future

None of this exceptional work would be possible without the partnership of those who have experienced the power of Bennington first-hand. It is with deep appreciation that I announce trustee Nick Stephens' '77 generous pledge of \$5 million to Bennington, \$4 million of which will establish an endowed fund in support of new faculty lines, research, and professional development and \$1 million will support the renovation of Commons. The chair of our board, Alan Kornberg '74, has committed to establishing a \$2-million endowed fund in addition to his ongoing leadership support of the annual fund and other campus priorities. This remarkable news comes on the heels of a \$10-million pledge made by an anonymous alumna donor in March 2016, also for the endowment—specifically for scholarships, which are key to providing access to a Bennington education for every student who can take best advantage of it.

These three gifts, totaling \$16 million, will almost double our current endowment of \$18 million, bringing it to approximately \$33 million—an extraordinary leap.

There are many ways that our alumni, families, and friends make Bennington possible—by devoting their time and energy to mentoring students, by offering Field Work Term placements, and by building and

strengthening the Bennington network. Many of you have taken part in this year's **House Challenge** and have provided valuable input and resources for the reinvention of Commons. These places—the places where Bennington students gather, day and night—are essential facets of life at the College and of the communities we create here. We are fortunate to have alumni who are passionately supportive of our mission and eager to invest in our ideals.

I am enormously grateful to everyone who has come together as part of this noble experiment to create and ensure the conditions for progress—on our campus and in all the communities we shape beyond.

Best Wishes,
Mariko Silver