



## NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS & COLLEGES, INC.

### COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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**Associate Director of the Commission**  
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January 26, 1990

**Dr. Elizabeth Coleman**  
President  
Bennington College  
Bennington, VT 05201

Dear President Coleman:

I write to acknowledge receipt of thirty copies of the final report concerning the evaluation of Bennington College which took place on October 1-3, 1989.

In keeping with the policies of the Commission, we request that you review the enclosed Evaluation Report prepared for Bennington College and make a formal written response to the document. Your response should include comments you wish the Commission to consider regarding the factual or interpretative accuracy of the report or other matters related to its content. This response, which will be shared with the team chair, becomes part of the written record of the evaluation.

We would appreciate receiving your response as soon as possible. The Commission will be considering the evaluation of Bennington College at its March meeting. Shortly thereafter, you will be informed of the Commission's action regarding your institution. In the meantime, you are asked to consider the team report as a privileged communication to be kept in confidence by the institution.

Thank you again for your assistance and cooperation with the work of the Commission and its representatives.

Sincerely,

Charles M. Cook

CMC/scf  
Enclosure

Report on a Focused Evaluation  
of  
Bennington College  
Bennington, VT

An Evaluation Committee representing the  
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education  
of the  
New England Association of Schools and Colleges  
prepared after study of the institution's  
focused report and a visit to  
the campus on October 1-3, 1989

The members of the committee:

Karl W. Broekhuizen, Vice President for Business Affairs and Treasurer,  
Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York

Virginia M. Vaughan, Associate Professor of English, Clark University,  
Worcester, Massachusetts

Kathryn A. McCarthy, Professor of Physics, Tufts University,  
Medford, Massachusetts, Chairman

This report represents the views of the evaluation committee as interpreted by the chairperson. Its content is based on the committee's evaluation of the institution with respect to the Commission's criteria for accreditation. The report is prepared both as an educational service to the institution and to assist the Commission in making a decision about the institution's status.

COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION  
NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

**PREFACE PAGE - BENNINGTON COLLEGE, Bennington, VT**

1. *HISTORY:* Year chartered or authorized 1932 Year first degrees awarded 1936

2. *TYPE OF CONTROL* (CHECK OR FILL-IN):

<u>PUBLIC</u>	<u>PRIVATE</u>
State _____	Nonprofit <u>X</u>
City _____	Religious group (name) _____
Other (specify) _____	Other (specify) _____

3. *DEGREE LEVEL* (CHECK ALL APPROPRIATE CATEGORIES):

Associate \_\_\_ Baccalaureate X Master's X Professional \_\_\_ Doctoral \_\_\_

4. *ENROLLMENT IN DEGREE PROGRAMS* (FOR FALL SEMESTER OF THE MOST CURRENT YEAR):

	<u>FULL-TIME</u>	<u>PART-TIME</u>	<u>FTE</u>
Associate	_____	_____	_____
Baccalaureate	<u>576</u>	_____	<u>576</u>
Graduate	<u>8</u>	_____	<u>8</u>

5. *CURRENT FACULTY:*

Full-time 58 Part-time 19 FTE 68.75

6. *CURRENT FUND DATA FOR MOST RECENTLY COMPLETED FISCAL YEAR*  
(SPECIFY YEAR) \_\_\_\_\_:

<u>EXPENDITURES</u>		<u>REVENUES</u>	
Instruction	<u>3,611,591</u>	Tuition	<u>9,467,985</u>
General	<u>8,916,365</u>	Gov't Appropriations	<u>--</u>
Auxiliary Enterprises	<u>1,625,815</u>	Gifts/Grants/Endowment	<u>2,149,213</u>
Other	<u>313,015</u>	Auxiliary Enterprises	<u>2,766,810</u>
		Other	<u>224,997</u>
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<u><u>14,466,786</u></u>		<u><u>14,609,005</u></u>

7. *OFF-CAMPUS LOCATIONS:*

Total 0 In-state \_\_\_\_\_ Out-of-state \_\_\_\_\_

8. *ACCREDITATION HISTORY:*

Candidacy: Initial Accreditation: 12/35 Last Comprehensive Eval: Fall, 1983  
Last Commission Action: Annual Report on Finances and Enrollment accepted.  
Last Action Taken on: 3/2/89

9. *OTHER CHARACTERISTICS:*

## Introduction

The task for the committee that visited Bennington College in early October, 1989 was to assess the College's ability to understand and find solutions for its fiscal problems and to determine the impact, if any, of these problems on the quality of its academic programs. The team was well aware from the academic grapevine, from several publications from the College, from the New York Times piece of 18 October 1988, and, of course, from the self-evaluation report prepared for the October visit, that much had happened since the visit of November 1986. However, I do not think that anyone of us was prepared for the intensity of the effort by all Benningtonites to guarantee a healthy future for the College as well as their dedication to preserving and enhancing the Bennington concept of liberal education.

### A View of Bennington as a Community

The enthusiasm which we witnessed came from many sources, but is truly the result of a re-commitment of administration, faculty, trustees, students and friends to assure Bennington's significant role in higher education.

The most visible and striking changes are in the Administration. The President's excitement and fervor about the future of Bennington are genuine and contagious. Since assuming the Presidency in July 1987, she has rapidly made key changes in the senior administrative team, combining some effective previous administrators with new blood from outside the College to form an effective and hard-working team. In particular, with regard to CIHE's concerns, the new Vice President for Business and Finance is just what the 1986 situation called for: the working budget is realistic; the newly developing management information systems are supportive and predictive of the constraints necessary to keep the budget in control on a day-to-day basis; future budget formation appears to be on a sounder base than in the past (or said differently, the present team knows where the problems are).

The quality of the work in public relations and in development deserves praise both for the style of presentation and for aggressiveness in the national market. (There will be additional comments on these areas in the comments on the Annual Fund and the Capital Campaign later in this report).

A new optimism is also found among many of the Faculty. In our meeting with the Academic Council, we learned of a broadly-based new interest in rethinking the curriculum and of two current proposals (which include the formation of ad hoc committees reporting in June 1990) to examine the freshman year and to review the teaching of languages in the Bennington system. Also, during the past three years, several new

programs have been developed, some with outside grant monies and others with support from inside. For example, an experimental program in Chinese language and literature was begun in 1988; the Bennington in New York program was initiated; the Sunday Night Seminar series brought faculty and others into the student residences for informal discussions. In general, one senses a new feeling of optimism (perhaps reluctantly by some) fostered by the end of the faculty salary freeze, the existence of matching funds from the College when outside grants are received, the possibility of one or two new faculty in the next years, monies for capital equipment, and similar actions which are encouraging to both faculty and students. The important role played by the Academic Council in faculty development and in the determination of institutional needs should be noted.

The committee also had the opportunity to meet with several students who are superb salespersons for their experiences at Bennington, and who also shared their enthusiasm about the College's future.

#### Financial Situation, both short-term and long-range

Within this section, several areas will be mentioned: the annual budget, the Annual Fund, the future role of endowment, the Capital Campaign, and the planning and implementation of a deferred-maintenance program.

The annual budgets of the last four years have been essentially in balance, with that for 1989-1990 expected to be in balance even while including realistic estimates for necessary academic and deferred-maintenance increments. We were impressed with the thoroughness and accuracy (based on excellent data preparation) of the present working budgets, and applaud the work of the Vice President and his staff in achieving a realistic basis for present and future budgets. The Fall 1989 admissions did show a modest shortfall, which was covered by existing reserves. However, as will be discussed in the section on admissions and enrollments, such a shortfall must be a one-time occurrence in light of the continuing fragility of Bennington finances.

The Annual Fund is an extremely important part of the annual operating budgets, and probably should be set with a goal of at least a seven percent increase rather than the present five percent increase. The increased percentage of alumnae(i) giving as well as the increased gift size is to be applauded, and support the likelihood that Bennington can launch a successful Capital Campaign Drive. The alumnae and non-alumnae participation on a voluntary basis has been and is being well-developed by the Director of Development and by the President.

The needs of the College have been carefully reviewed, and those needs which will be the foci of the Capital Campaign have been identified: faculty compensation, student scholarships and financial aid, new and enhanced academic programs, and improved facilities. The monies sought are wisely balanced on a two-to-one basis of endowment funds to expendable ones for the above purposes. The present financial management of the College seems capable of handling the sought endowment funds.

The Campaign is in its initial phase with private and foundation solicitations in full gear. The Trustees are playing a significant role in this phase, and are extremely supportive of the President's efforts, as they must be.

Deferred maintenance, an issue of concern in previous evaluations, is being addressed with each operating budget, including funds for repairs and also for engineering studies that will set the pattern for future overall plant improvements.

### Admissions and Enrollment

The budget's dependency on tuition and thus on enrollment is a dominant characteristic of most undercapitalized institutions. The Bennington administration is well aware of its predicament, and has developed a strong recruiting and admissions effort; increased attention has also been given to retention. The modest, but significant, shortfall in September of this year is thought by the Administration to be a one-time event and the result of delays in getting their new publications into the "marketplace" and of the appointment of a new admissions director. It should be noted that the College chose not to take less-qualified students from the waiting list to avoid the enrollment and budgetary shortfall. However, the national demographic situation with regard to college-age students suggests that the presently enhanced admissions effort at Bennington may need an even greater effort to maintain the present level of enrollment. On the other hand, if the new admissions effort is unusually successful, Bennington might well consider the advantages of a slightly larger enrollment.

### Conclusions

"The Bennington of 1989 is not related to the Bennington of 1984" is a quote from one senior faculty member we met. We felt a genuine community consensus that Bennington is "rising and improving", and is re-dedicated to "learning by doing." The Presidential leadership, the development of an effective administrative team, the determination for success of the faculty, student body and the staff are the bright and convincing signs of a good future. Nevertheless, the future continues to be fragile, and will need constant energy and vigilance from all members of the Bennington community, both in Vermont and elsewhere. The difficulty of maintaining momentum as the Capital Campaign moves into full gear combined with projected changes in student demographics during the next five years mean that, despite its exciting new initiatives, the Bennington community cannot afford to relax its efforts.

Bennington is more aware than any group from the outside of its frailty especially in a decade that is, in the minimum, wondering about the high cost and real value of liberal education. Bennington has an "interesting product" to sell, but it must be resourceful and convincing in the "marketplace." The concepts of "market" and "salesmanship" are not popular within most academic environs, but must be part of the path to the future enhancement and success of Bennington.

The committee was very pleased with the warmth and directness of all aspects of our visit, and are especially grateful to the Dean of Faculty for his careful coordination of the visit. We regret the lack of opportunity to thank everyone who was so helpful to us.

1/8/90