

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

MEMORANDUM

TO: Teresa Reed
FROM: Wendy Hirsch
DATE: September 2, 1994
RE: Factual issues in the draft NEASC report.

I am faxing to you now the response from the President's Office with regard to factual issues in question in the evaluation report for Bennington College.

For section VIII (Computing Technology), I am attaching a memo from Ruben Puentedura, Coordinator of Technology, which responds to the team's report.

cc: Dr. Charles Cook

September 2, 1994

Issues of Fact in Draft NEAS&C Report for Bennington College

pg. 3., 3rd paragraph. "However, the outcomes of these planning initiatives [The Deans' Study, the "study" of residential life; the Symposium] have not been taken back to the community for thoroughgoing review and negotiation." Taking these individually:

The Deans' Study recommendations were discussed in detail over the course of two semesters in meetings involving the faculty as a whole, and a range of faculty standing committees.

The work of the Residential Life Committee was considered of such importance that The Board of Trustees in its Symposium Report requested that it serve as the basis for campus-wide discussion. In the words of the Symposium Report: "During the Symposium, the community received an exceptionally thoughtful and thorough report from a campus committee making important recommendations in every area of the College's residential life. During the 1994-95 academic year, the board will formally ask students, faculty and staff to refocus on those recommendations, particularly with respect to student governance, student housing, recreational events and facilities, interactions with local communities, substance abuse, and the fusion of residential life and academic life."

The Board of Trustees explained in some detail why, in the case of the Symposium Report, returning its recommendations to the community for negotiation and consensus as the final phase of decision making was inappropriate and unrealistic given the purposes of that Report. The procedure for the Symposium and its rationale are outlined in the self study. (See also below, comments on pg 12. final paragraph.)

The 3rd paragraph continues: "In the case of divisional plans, there has been no coordination with the budget office to determine feasibility, nor in the current hiatus while Board decisions are made, has there been any confirmation of plans for the coming year."

The Faculty Budget Committee, which is a sub-committee of the Academic Council, has met continuously with The Dean of the Faculty and the Vice President for Finance and Administration throughout the Fall and the Spring semesters to assure that there would be no disruption of coordination. What was suspended during the Spring semester were routine requests for Divisional budgets in order to await the completion of the Board's deliberations.

pg. 7, 3rd paragraph. "The outcome and implementation of the restructuring of Bennington College over the summer may have a considerably disruptive impact on a large proportion of existing tentative and confirmed plans."

Anything may happen to be sure, but the issue of avoiding large scale disruptions in student plans during the coming academic year was of such importance that extensive arrangements were made to assure that such disruptions would not occur and they, in fact, have not occurred.

pg. 12, final paragraph. "This solicitation of opinion failed to be a genuine dialogue about the institution."

Hundreds of individuals, including large numbers of faculty, discussed with the Board, both in person and in detailed written documents, every aspect of the institution. In fact, rarely has a process engaged so many individuals at so many different levels of discussion. I am assuming genuine dialogue means people speaking to each other seriously and in good faith about matters of substance. I can only imagine that the team is referring to the fact that some individuals chose not to participate in the dialogue, but that is quite different from what is stated.

The final paragraph continues: "In this break with the processes of open communication and collaboration, it [the Board of Trustees] failed to model the kind of shared responsibility for academic direction that is its alleged goal."

The alleged goal of the Symposium process was a mandate for significant change driven by the very best ideas available; it was not "shared responsibility for academic direction." The Board was open and explicit from the outset about the fact that the ultimate decisions would be made by them, and that a consensual process in the final stages of the Symposium was inappropriate and unrealistic given that its alleged (and real) goal was an order of change that was likely to have profound personnel implications.

pg. 15, last paragraph concerning the Residential Life Committee report. "Nevertheless, the visiting committee feels that the process of implementation of the report's recommendations has been seriously flawed."

Whatever the facts may be about the feelings of the visiting team, the fact about the implementation of the Report's recommendations is that we are now beginning the process of implementation in order to assure that a full scale review, discussion and expansion of those recommendations takes place and that it takes place in the context of the redesign of the College. (See above, response to pg 3, 3rd paragraph.)

pg. 23, 2nd paragraph. "To date, the Campaign has been remarkably dependent on the college's Board of Trustees."

At the time of the visit the proportion of Trustee support of the Capital Campaign was 38%. Our projection is that at its completion that proportion will be 33-35%. These proportions are well within the range of giving by Boards of Trustees at comparable institutions.

pg. 24, 1st complete paragraph. "The ability to raise that amount of money in itself will be extraordinary and will be dependent on

the reliance that yet to be identified donors place in the long-term institutional viability of the yet-to-be announced restructuring."

The prospects for the next phase of the Campaign in support of the restructuring have, in fact, been carefully identified. Evidence of the actual degree of preparation, on contrast to what is indicated in the above passage, is that within two months of the announcement of the restructuring, \$1.6 million from private donors have been committed, and well over half a million dollars from foundations, both specifically in support of the restructuring. These commitments will be paid in full within a two-year time frame.

g. 24, 2nd complete paragraph. "However, reports on longer term processes seem to indicate that there may be a lack of representation by all of the campus constituencies in the setting of overall institutional priorities."

There are no reports that indicate that there will be a lack of representation of campus constituencies in setting overall institutional priorities.

pg. 24, last paragraph. Evaluation of competence in financial management.

While this evaluation of the competence of the leadership in financial matters--that it lacks a desirable sophistication and is careless about details--is strictly speaking a matter of opinion rather than of fact, those opinions are so out of line with the facts of Bennington's history since the change in financial management occurred 7 years ago, and so at odds with the reports to the Board of Trustees from our auditor this evaluation cannot go without comment. The fact that this document will be public makes it even more unconscionable to allow this judgment to stand without contesting it.

With respect to particular points: it is certainly stretching things to expect the financial office to have anticipated that after a steady pattern of gradually diminishing financial aid expenditures from the high 20's to under 25% of tuition revenue, that it would leap more than 10 points within two years. Moreover, the implication that such shifts in revenue are not then fully integrated into our financial planning is false. It is simply not the case that there is a failure to see the interrelationships of financial variables, or, in the language of the Report, that there is an absence of a "clear understanding of disaggregated financial data." The Board's decision to shift from a business as usual posture over two years ago would have been unthinkable in the absence of sophisticated and extensive financial projecting and planning.

If one takes into account the transformation of the condition of Bennington's financial management during the tenure of the current Vice President for Finance (at the time of his arrival, the College had accumulated a deficit of six million dollars in the current unrestricted fund budget during a period when enrollments averaged 600 and was continuing to operate with an annual shortfall of one million dollars despite an enrollment of 585 students, a salary freeze of five years duration, and non-stop deterioration of its physical plant) the judgment in this paragraph is even more troubling. The fact that the Report treats the oversight of a materially unimportant footnote in an audit report as serious evidence of levels of competence would be surprising under

any circumstances; given the enormity and complexity of the fiscal issues currently confronting the financial leadership of the College, such a choice of what to emphasize is, frankly, astonishing. Recognizing the limitations of my perspective, let me conclude by mentioning that the partner on the audit engagement, John Moriarty of KPMG, has consistently reported to the Board of Trustee Finance Committee that the Vice President for Finance is one of the two best financial officers he deals with in the group of 30 colleges for which he serves as auditor.

pg. 25, 4th paragraph. **"A media consultant has been retained, at the initiative of the Director of Communications."**

The decision to retain a media consultant was made at the initiative of the President and the Board of Trustees well before the appointment of the current Director of Communications.

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 1, 1994
FROM: Ruben R. Puentedura
TO: Wendy Hirsch
SUBJECT: Visiting Team Report

As you requested, I enclose comments about factual errors in the visiting team report.

Section VIII. Computing Technology

- i) "There has been no comprehensive planning effort, including detailed budget and staff requirements, to integrate computing fully into the academic, administrative and social life of the community..." This is a factually incorrect statement: detailed draft budgets and plans existed at the time of the team's visit, and have since been fully developed into a three-year plan. The statement is all the more surprising, given that the team failed to inquire about any such plans in the meetings I was present at; the only two questions asked on this topic requested to know total numbers of staff allocated to the project, and the total sum of money allocated to the project.
- ii) "...there is no detailed plan to network the campus or to connect to the Internet although a proposal for this purpose is about to be submitted to NSF..." Again, this statement is factually incorrect; the team was informed that Bennington was in the process of evaluating and deciding among several distinct networking strategies and timelines. The draft NSF proposal was never requested, so it is difficult to see how the team could have evaluated the adequacy of Internet planning.
- iii) "...the New Media Centers project and other elements described in the open letter...are entirely dependent on soft money. While several proposals have been submitted...no funds currently are available to realize these extremely far-reaching goals." This statement is a partial misrepresentation: it represents a need for foundation funds for a full realization of the project (true) as a lack of financial commitment by the college to the project in its entirety (not true).
- iv) "There has also been no discussion of the need for an integrated administrative software package that would enable the administration to capture and manipulate data needed for institutional research." Again, this is a partial misrepresentation: while it is true that work needs to be done in the

area of institutional research information services, much of the necessary groundwork in database design and implementation has already been carried out.

v) "The team suggests that some type of coordinating committee for computing services be established to develop a comprehensive computing plan for computing services." As was explained to the team, the changes to be implemented resulted in large part from the action of just such a committee; the statement incorrectly implies that no such committee existed. Furthermore, as in i) and ii) above, the team incorrectly surmises the absence of a plan that was never inquired about.

vi) "There are numerous policies and procedures that will need to be established...The college would do well to begin to consider these now." As pointed out above, such policies have been considered/designed/implemented; it is a shame that the team did not trouble itself to inquire about them.

Section VII: Library and Information Resources

A couple of points need to be addressed with regard to computing technologies:

i) "The team also is concerned about the failure of the College to offer training in computing to faculty or any assistance in technological applications to teaching and learning." A historical situation is commented upon here, with no mention of the plans to remedy this situation that are currently in progress. As was the case above, the team did not inquire about such plans.

ii) "Nor has there been any institution-wide discussion of the responsibility of the college to include computer literacy in a Bennington education." An error of fact, given the existence of the committee referred to in v) above.

While I appreciate the team's concern for the success of Bennington's computing project, I feel that the picture presented in the document is by and large inaccurate, and far more pessimistic than the balance of the information presented to the team warranted.