

Report from Bennington College

to the

Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
New England Association of Schools and Colleges

November 25, 1991

Introduction

The fall of 1991 finds Bennington College at a crossroads in its quest for long-term financial stability. Most signs are extremely promising: the Capital campaign is on target; the quality of the undergraduate students Bennington attracts continues to improve; efforts to achieve a modest expansion in graduate programs have met with success; and new ventures, the most exciting of which is the College's impending association with Jacob's Pillow, are on the horizon. Not surprisingly, the one discordant note is undergraduate enrollment. Yet, even on this score, there is reason to believe the College is rebounding.

Capital Campaign

The Capital Campaign was announced, as scheduled, at the January 1991 meeting of the Board of Trustees, with \$10 million of the \$30 million target raised in gifts and pledges. As of this writing the total for gifts and pledges stands at \$13.6 million, (see Appendix B) putting the College well on schedule towards the Campaign's next milestone, \$15 million by June 30, 1992. Gifts and pledges include two endowed academic chairs -- the first in the College's history -- of \$1 million or more, both given in the last twelve months. Another welcome recent addition to the Campaign is a \$234,000 grant from the Davis Educational Foundation of Massachusetts, providing funds for scientific equipment and computer-assisted instruction.

Early payments on Capital Campaign pledges have increased Bennington's endowment funds to just over \$5 million, with another \$1.4 million to be added this year. By the conclusion of the Campaign, Bennington's endowment should stand in excess of \$20 million.

Academic Quality

An improvement in the academic quality of the student body was one of the first matters that Elizabeth Coleman addressed shortly after becoming President in 1987. In 1986, the average SAT scores for new students were 510 Verbal and 490 Math. While Bennington has always taken factors other than test scores into account in evaluating candidates for admission, in our view the academic preparedness of students entering in the mid-80s did not match the demands of Bennington's curriculum and educational process.

Moreover, we thought that past admissions policy, while appealing in the short run as a response to financial pressure, was coming perilously close to pushing Bennington out of the orbit of its natural constituency. We were painfully aware that to become more selective about

admissions would be fiscally costly in the short term, but we thought it was nonetheless critical to do so to assure the academic quality and integrity of the College. We were also confident that in the long run such a policy would increase the number as well as the quality of applicants to the College.

Having made the decision to become more selective, we are pleased to say that in every one of the last four years there has been an improvement in the quality of the entering class, to the point where this year's new students averaged 550 Verbal and 528 Math on the SAT. That put their verbal ability into the top ten percent of all college-bound students in their age group. The caliber of entering male students (who make up 40% of the student body) has been particularly outstanding. We have also continued to attract able minority students, who compose about 10% of total enrollment. While the job is by no means over, our efforts to bring to Bennington the students best qualified to be here are succeeding.

Graduate Programs

Beginning last year Bennington began a multi-year effort to increase its graduate enrollment. In addition, the fee structure was changed from one in which virtually all students received a full tuition assistantship to one which produces revenue by limiting the number and amount of the assistantships. The response has been encouraging with enrollment this fall at 11, compared with just 3 last year. Aided by the distribution this fall of new promotional materials, we think it reasonable to expect future growth. In addition plans are underway to launch an Institute for Graduate Studies that would build on the strengths of the College and cater to the needs of those interested in interdisciplinary graduate study in the arts and sciences, elementary and secondary school teachers seeking an advanced degree, and those interested in entering the field of teaching.

At the same time the College's post-baccalaureate program in the sciences grew to 10 students this fall (vs. 8 last fall). We look to some further expansion in this program as it broadens its scope to include studies in environmental science.

New Ventures

The Graduate Institute and post-baccalaureate expansion are not the only new educational ventures at Bennington. Our just-announced association with Jacob's Pillow will undoubtedly strengthen and expand educational programs in dance, especially in the summer. Our study abroad programs

are also in a take-off phase, starting with a much strengthened London program in drama. We are continuing to develop the Paris Program which includes intensive language development and cultural and program activities in Paris. We are also at the beginning stages of developing a potential Amsterdam program in dance, a German language program in Germany, and a Portugal program in ceramics. The College is also venturing into a very exciting London Program in Design that will offer students a unique opportunity to study costume, lighting, and set design.

Undergraduate Enrollment

All these positive developments leave us, nonetheless, with a major concern: the number of enrolled undergraduates. An extremely large graduating class last June (127 vs. an average of 85 in previous years), coupled with a decline in the number of new students over the past three years, has resulted in an undergraduate enrollment of only 520 students this fall. This number is clearly not sustainable over the long term as the College is currently configured.

Our response to this situation has been, and continues to be, governed by what we feel is desirable, both educationally and fiscally, and what is possible. On both these scores we look to rebuilding undergraduate enrollment, certainly to a level of 580 FTE, but ultimately beyond that number, as the most rational goal. There is no question that a larger College (of say 600 students) is able to offer a broader and more comprehensive liberal arts curriculum while it simultaneously realizes the economies of scale associated with increased enrollment. Consequently "downsizing" is a strategy only to be employed when it is undeniable that enrollment recovery is unattainable.

We believe that the increase in this fall's entering class (from 166 to 173), with continued improvement in the quality of the student body, is the first step in the rebuilding effort. We expect an intensification of our recruitment activity, an expansion of our search efforts and a sustained commitment to quality to pay off in successively larger entering classes which will, within three years, return Bennington to the enrollment levels of 1987/88 and 1988/89 (567 and 576 annualized FTE, respectively). (See Appendix C)

Current Financial Measures

Until those levels are reattained, Bennington has a tough financial road to traverse. There have been additional administrative cuts made since those mentioned in last year's

report to NEASC, resulting in annual savings of approximately \$325,000. We will continue to monitor administrative expenditures and expect to find some additional savings.

At the same time, we have begun the process of finding approximately \$300,000 in savings in the 1992/93 academic budgets. Much of these savings will be realized through what we hope will be a one year deferral on filling most teaching positions which become vacant. We expect this action to have a minimal impact on the College's academic program. We have pointedly decided that no salary freeze shall take place. The deans are leading what has been to date an encouragingly cooperative process with the teaching divisions and the Academic Council.

These savings, along with the success of the Capital Campaign, will enable us to bridge the gap created between revenues and expenditures by the drop in Bennington's enrollment, while every effort is made to eliminate this shortfall by an aggressive admissions effort. To lead that effort the College has just hired Karen Parker who brings with her 12 years of experience in admissions at Williams College and familiarity with Bennington.

Prognosis

The next two years will be decisive in determining to what extent and how rapidly Bennington can achieve an enrollment level adequate to its needs. The dramatic fund raising success and extremely conservative and disciplined administration of the College's resources has enabled us to weather the situation and gives us some time to pull out of it. Should we fall short of our goals we are prepared to make necessary additional cuts.

In many ways the College is stronger now than it has been in decades, both in its programs and in its management. We are reasonably persuaded by the events of the past years that the long-term trajectory of the College is expansive.

Appendices

Appendix A: CIHE Data Forms

Appendix B: Capital Campaign status

Appendix C: Enrollment table