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October 26, 2011

Dr. Elizabeth Coleman
President
Bennington College
One College Drive
Bennington, VT 05201

Dear President Coleman:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on September 22, 2011, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the report submitted by Bennington College and took the following action:

that the report submitted by Bennington College be accepted;

that the College submit a report for consideration in Spring 2013 that gives emphasis to the institution's continued success in:

- 1) implementing a comprehensive approach to institutional effectiveness and assessment, including the use of data to inform planning and decision-making;
- 2) implementing its strategic planning;

that the fifth-year interim report scheduled for consideration in Fall 2014 be confirmed;

that, as noted in our letter of April 14, 2010, in addition to the information included in all fifth-year reports, the College provide evidence of its continued success in addressing the four matters included in the current report;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2019 be confirmed.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

The report submitted by Bennington College was accepted because it was generally responsive to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letter of April 14, 2010. We are gratified to learn that total enrollment at the College has increased from 704.5 FTE in FY2008 to 798 FTE in FY2011

and that the College's first-to-second-year retention rate improved from 76% to 81% over this same time period. In addition, even while the College's total tuition discount rate grew from 40% in FY2008 to 46% in FY2011, net tuition revenue increased from \$18.8 million to \$22.5 million. The Commission notes with favor that the College has invested \$7.8 million over the past three years to address deferred maintenance needs thus reducing the backlog, and that the current fiscal year budget includes projected outlays that "continue at this accelerated pace." We applaud the launching of a Campus Renewal campaign that has already raised \$2 million of the \$3 million goal, intended to further speed up the completion rate of deferred maintenance projects.

From the report submitted, we also understand that the College has revised its quinquennial program review process to require "a clear articulation and reflection on the student learning outcomes" as part of each discipline's written document and that these reports provide "useful evidence for evaluating the program's curriculum." Finally, the Commission appreciates the College's use of its Strategic Planning Framework to engage the community in achieving its long-range goals, including having Board members meet with faculty representatives and student leaders to discuss institutional objectives.

The items the institution is asked to report on in Spring 2013 are related to our Standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *The Academic Program*.

We note from the Fall 2011 report that some initial steps have been taken to assess student achievement in writing courses and that the College is conducting a pilot study to examine the use of e-portfolios to enhance the institution's signature "plan process." The Spring 2013 report will afford the institution an opportunity to update the Commission on further progress it has made to develop a comprehensive approach to assess institutional effectiveness and student learning, with an emphasis on how it uses data to inform planning and decision-making. This section of the report should be informed by our Standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *The Academic Program*:

Institutional research is sufficient to support planning and evaluation. The institution systematically collects and uses data necessary to support its planning efforts and to enhance institutional effectiveness (2.2).

The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the achievement of its mission and purposes, giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its system of evaluation is designed to provide relevant and trustworthy information to support institutional improvement, with an emphasis on the academic program. The institution's evaluation efforts are effective for addressing its unique circumstances. These efforts use both quantitative and qualitative methods (2.5).

Based on verifiable information, the institution understands what its students have gained as a result of their education and has useful evidence about the success of its recent graduates. This information is used for planning and resource allocation and to inform the public about the institution (2.7).

The institution implements and provides support for systematic and broad-based assessment of what and how students are learning through their academic program and experiences outside the classroom. Assessment is based on clear statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. Assessment provides useful information that helps the institution to improve the experiences provided for students, as well as to assure that the level of student achievement is appropriate for the degree awarded (4.48).

The institution's approach to understanding student learning focuses on the course, program, and institutional level. Evidence is considered at the appropriate level of focus, with the results

being a demonstrable factor in improving the learning opportunities and results for students (4.49).

As noted above, the Fall 2011 report provided information about how the College is successfully using its Strategic Planning Framework to foster broader participation in planning. We are pleased to learn that the College has found the Framework “an especially effective tool in engaging key constituencies” and has established regular meetings between the Academic Policy Committee and senior leadership and annual meetings with the Board and student leaders. In the Spring 2013 report, we look forward to learning of the College’s continued success in implementing a participatory and inclusive process of “strategic planning that involves realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints” and to receiving evidence that the College “plans for and responds to financial and other contingencies, establishes feasible priorities, and develops a realistic course of action to achieve identified objectives” (2.3).

Commission policy requires a fifth-year report of all institutions on a decennial evaluation cycle. Its purpose is to provide the Commission an opportunity to appraise the institution’s current status in keeping with the policy on Periodic Review. As noted in our letter of April 14, 2010, in addition to the information included in all fifth-year reports, the College has been asked, in the Fall 2014 report, to provide evidence that additional progress has been made on each of the four areas specified for attention in the Fall 2011 report: ensuring financial stability; reducing deferred maintenance; implementing a comprehensive approach to institutional effectiveness and assessment, including the use of data to inform planning and improvement; and implementing the Strategic Planning Framework. The Commission realizes that these matters do not lend themselves to rapid resolution and will require the institution’s continued attention over time; hence we request additional information in the interim report.

Finally, the scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2019, is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Bennington College and hopes that its preparation has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation with the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education in New England.

You are encouraged to share this letter with all of the institution’s constituencies. It is Commission policy to inform the chairperson of the institution’s governing board of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Alan Kornberg. The institution is free to release information about the report and the Commission’s action to others, in accordance with Commission policy.

If you have any questions about the Commission’s action, please contact Barbara Brittingham, Director of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Mary Jo Maydew

MJM/dmc

Enclosures

cc: Mr. Alan Kornberg