

Bennington College

Bennington, Vermont

**Report for Consideration to the
Commission on Institutions of Higher Learning**

of the

New England Association of Schools and Colleges

January 15, 2013

Subject of the report:

*Implementation of a comprehensive approach to institutional effectiveness and
assessment; and implementation of strategic planning*

Introduction

The following report was drafted by a core team of senior administrative staff members in consultation with the President. As directed by the Commission, the narrative focuses on two areas: (1) implementing a comprehensive approach to institutional effectiveness and assessment; and (2) implementing strategic planning.

Institutional Overview

Founded in 1932, Bennington College is a four-year liberal arts college offering programs of study leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree in disciplines within the humanities, sciences, social sciences, and visual and performing arts. In addition, the College offers Master of Fine Arts degrees in dance, drama, music, and Writing; a Master of Art in Teaching a Second Language; and a post-baccalaureate certificate in premedical and allied health sciences. Bennington's campus covers 440 rolling acres at the foot of the Green Mountains in southwestern Vermont.

The principles of active engagement on the part of students no less than faculty; an emphasis on developing internal sources of discipline and order; and a pedagogy that treats knowing in ways that are multiple, complex, and changing underlie a Bennington education. These tenets were first outlined in a 1929 prospectus, were echoed in the 1994 Symposium Report (a two-year process established by the Board of Trustees to determine the conditions for renewal and change), and are reaffirmed with each graduating class in the following traditional commencement statement:

Bennington regards education as a sensual and ethical, no less than an intellectual, process. It seeks to liberate and nurture the individuality, the creative intelligence, and the ethical and aesthetic sensibility of its students, to the end that their richly varied natural endowments will be directed toward selffulfillment and constructive social purposes. We believe that these educational goals are best served by demanding of our students active participation in the planning of their own programs, and in the regulation of their own lives on campus. Student freedom is not the absence of restraint, however; it is rather the fullest possible substitution of habits of self-restraint for restraint imposed by others. The exercise of student freedom is the very condition of a meaningful education, and an essential aspect of the nurture of free citizens, dedicated to civilized values and capable of creative and constructive membership in modern society.

It is this vision that animates a Bennington education, and our academic policies, administrative structures, and community life are designed in keeping with that vision to the end that students learn what it means to discover and pursue an intellectual identity and to develop a lifelong habit of learning.

Areas of Focus

1) Implementing a comprehensive approach to institutional effectiveness and assessment

The Plan process

Although the Plan process and its development was addressed in our previous report, we would like to return to the subject to highlight the Plan as a fundamental form of assessment--and to underscore the community engagement with the discussion of that assessment. The Bennington Plan process is the central qualitative assessment mechanism relied upon by faculty and students at the College. The Plan is more encompassing than the individualized assessment students receive by way of grades and narrative evaluations; it describes the progression of students' inquiries and outlines the trajectories that students have composed in discussion with their faculty. The Plan gives shape and meaning to the Bennington education; but the Plan also--by way of a series of essays and formal conversations that exist wholly outside the traditional framework of grades and credits--provides a way for students and faculty meaningfully to assess what has been accomplished. Without the Plan, grades and credits at Bennington would represent little more than hints and gestures at what students have learned--and hope to learn. The Plan process itself has evolved considerably since its informal beginnings, and it is to its most recent evolution that we must turn here.

The faculty, together with several members of the administration, spent several years revising the Plan process so that it would better reflect its original intention, which is to enable students to compose and develop their own courses of inquiry. This resulted in a first ever description of the Plan process term by term, as well as an addendum called "The Expectations of a Bennington Education" (see appended documents). This last is of particular note as it lists five general expectations (i.e. outcomes) that each student must meet in order to receive a liberal arts degree from Bennington. The student must show that he or she can: formulate an inquiry; identify, analyze, and use resources; create and revise work; present and explain work; and connect work to broader contexts. These expectations have provided a framework for students and faculty to discuss the breadth and depth demanded by a liberal arts education. The revised Plan process with accompanying "expectations" went into effect with the cohort of students entering in the fall of 2009 (when the team from NEASC visited). Following on the multiple faculty discussions held during the process of revision, two faculty meetings were devoted to understanding the nuances of the revised Plan during 2010. The revised Plan (with examples) was presented to the board of trustees by students, faculty, and administration over the course of two meetings; open faculty meetings about the Plan, led by the Academic Policies Committee (APC), have taken place every term; and we have initiated regular presentations about the Plan for students, led in some cases by the Student Educational Policies Committee and in some cases by faculty. It is fair to say that much of the Bennington community has been thinking deeply about the Plan over the past two years.

Over the course of the academic year 2011-2012, the Academic Policies Committee spent considerable time and energy revising and re-conceptualizing what are known as the Plan meeting minutes forms: these are documents, to be completed after each Plan meeting with a student, that allow the faculty committees to assess the Plan in a detailed way. They indicate whether a student has a viable inquiry to pursue, how that inquiry is developing, and what needs to be done to advance the inquiry; the minutes forms in effect constitute learning contracts generated by faculty and students. The value of discussing these forms and what they entail with faculty and students has been enormous as it has allowed us to re-affirm our shared understanding of what a Bennington education entails--and it has allowed us to focus on what is (or is not) *learned*.

Writing assessment

Among the changes to the Plan meeting forms are two prompts aimed at assessing student writing (these are meant to be complementary to the writing assessment that takes place in courses): "Assess the Plan essay" and "Has the student demonstrated adequate writing skills." These prompts are in part a response to the ongoing investigation (referred to in a prior report) of the importance and quality of student writing in a Bennington education. This began with a working group on student writing led by the dean of the College and has continued as a prominent agenda item in the APC. In the spring of 2012 we conducted a survey of faculty that asked them to indicate both whether writing was a significant component in their courses and what kinds of difficulties with writing (if any) students presented in courses so identified. The dean, the associate dean, and two faculty members were invited to bring the preliminary data from this survey to a two-day Teagle "Data-into-Action" Institute the following June so that we could understand, analyze, and develop a plan for effectively utilizing the data.

At the time of the Teagle institute, we were just concluding a search for a director of academic planning, a newly devised position that explicitly integrates the work of the registrar's office with curriculum management and institutional research; these three areas are critically intertwined at Bennington due in large part to the Plan process, our open curriculum, and the consequent need to develop appropriate assessment mechanisms. The new director of academic planning went to work immediately on the data from the writing survey, and his analyses and recommendations were discussed in a meeting of the APC as well as at an open meeting of the faculty. We now have several concrete ways forward to support student writing and the continuing assessment of student writing. One of these continuing assessments is in the form of our participation (together with institutions such as Bard, Hampshire, Wellesley, Smith, Colorado College, and New College of Florida) in a separate Teagle grant that has sought to analyze senior theses over a period of several years in an effort to spur program-wide change that would result in the improvement of student writing. Bennington will conduct its final thesis reading in the spring of 2013.

Institutional research

The director of academic planning has also been critical in the process of determining curricular needs and priorities, which the institution has historically found difficult to evaluate without the use of reliable data. We have now (as of fall 2012) surveyed faculty and students on the subject, and have begun the process of analyzing course-enrollment data. Feedback from students (collected in coordination with the Student Educational Policies Committee) and faculty has already resulted in changes to the registration process and curriculum generation and design. With the help of the director, we are taking a fresh look at the analysis of enrollment and retention data (critical to carrying out the “enrollment management” portion of our strategic plan), and we have been in conversation with a number of vendors to help us discover a suitable new student information system to replace our antiquated one (which seriously hampers data collection and analysis on all fronts).

We have also been working on connecting the student data collected by the admissions office to the data we have (or hope to capture) about enrolled students to the data we have (or hope to capture) about alumni. This has been a long-standing desire that we now feel equipped to satisfy. In a sense, the director of academic planning is to create a node through which the admissions office, the dean’s office, the business office, and the office of external relations can communicate effectively on the same subject and using the same terms--namely, students and data. While each office has its traditional area of focus--recruitment, enrollment, retention, revenue, and development--the work of each is seriously hindered if we are not measuring the same things using the same metrics. Particularly at an institution of our size, it is essential that we all participate in the same conversation without having to resort to second and third order translations to understand each other. The director of academic planning is meant to facilitate that conversation by helping to determine what and how to measure. Many things can be learned from the careful arrangement and analysis of such data; the goal, in the end, is to understand why students come to Bennington, what they learn here, and how they fare after Bennington. It is, in a sense, part of the institutional Plan process.

The credit hour

In a similar vein, we are in the preliminary stages of investigating whether the idea of the credit hour (and the resulting measurements that determine such things as course scheduling and faculty workload) is really the most effective way to measure student learning here at Bennington. It is interesting to note, for example, that the entire Plan process--which demands a great deal from students and faculty and is the core of a Bennington education--exists wholly outside of the credit system. Successfully completing the Plan process is required in order to graduate from Bennington--but it is measured in terms of outcomes (as sketched above), not in terms of credits. The same is true for the Field Work Term, another essential component of the education provided here. So why is it that only our courses adhere to the conventional credit system? Might it be that we could significantly un-encumber students and faculty if we create alternative ways to measure learning? Perhaps the online portfolios of student work (still in the pilot stage) can provide a common (and public) venue for such measurements? Recent

developments in the discussions of student learning at the federal level would appear to allow these sorts of considerations. At a minimum we will be exploring the use of the credit system in ways that more adequately reflect the academic demands and expectations of the plan process and FWT.

Program reviews

As mentioned in our previous report, the dean of the College has implemented a revised process for discipline group and program reviews. The process involves an extensive self-study by the group that includes data analysis and a description of learning outcomes; it also involves extensive feedback from students and a visit from a team of external reviewers who provide written reports. The first of these revised program reviews--of the science, math, and computing discipline group--was completed in the spring of 2012 and resulted in a number of important insights, only two of which we need to address here. The first was that we are in critical need of another mathematician (a search is now nearing completion); the second was that the building in which the discipline group is housed needs significant renovation--to enhance the work of the students and faculty and to enable continuing growth in the area. These renovations, discussed extensively with the faculty, are already underway (and have been incorporated into "institutional infrastructure" portion of our strategic plan). The impact of the review was such that science, math, and computing faculty and students presented their findings to the board of trustees. In fall of 2012 we began the review of the social sciences discipline group.

2) Implementing strategic planning

The College's work in the four key areas identified in 2008 (*mission and market position; institutional infrastructure; revenue enhancement; enrollment management*) continues to advance. Indeed, as we move into the last year of the five-year planning framework (2008-2014), many of the objectives have been reached and some have been exceeded. As importantly, work in these areas, overseen by the president and members of the College's senior staff, has engaged key College constituencies as appropriate. Here follow illustrations of how the implementation of priorities in two areas has occurred; these illustrations demonstrate our continued attention to bringing faculty, staff, and students into the strategic planning process.

Institutional infrastructure

Institutional infrastructure has received focused attention during the past 18 months, with significant improvements made or initiated in areas such as institutional technology systems and the Dickinson science building renovation (discussed above).

The College has also begun planning for a major renovation of the Commons building. Commons, as its name implies, was intended to be the center of much if not most interaction (curricular as well as co-curricular) from the very founding of the College. As the College has

expanded over the years the curricular functions have inevitably diminished and Commons has lost some of its integrity of purpose. Large amounts of space within the building are either poorly utilized or un-utilized.

Given its historic and symbolic importance the Commons Project has become a site of engagement and conversation for the campus community. The vice president for planning and administration has led several conversations with the board of trustees and with the faculty; he has also arranged four open meetings with the architects to discuss hopes, dreams, and realities. These meetings, which took place in front of a long-unused stage on which Martha Graham had once danced, were well attended and all groups were well represented; the discussions that resulted were stimulating and revealed just how deeply so many care about the College. Discussions of this sort will follow as plans for the funding, design, and construction of Commons take more concrete shape. We intend to continue to enact what Commons represents.

Mission and market position

In the area of mission and market position, great strides have been made in faculty support, with continued attention to and success in bringing faculty salaries and benefits more in line with peer institutions and to enhancing the faculty experience more broadly with the expansion of faculty development opportunities--most notably, through the creation of a new competitively awarded leave for faculty and the shortening of the regular sabbatical cycle from six to five years. We have also added, upon recommendation from the Academic Policies Committee, several new faculty positions with an eye both to developing new areas of the curriculum (neurosciences, media studies, percussion, public policy) and to relieving pressure on oversubscribed ones (anthropology, mathematics).

As mentioned in our August 15, 2011 report, the Center for the Advancement of Public Action (CAPA) opened last fall. While curricular and programmatic planning for this new initiative has been going on for several years, the past year has been a time of particular crystallization. CAPA has enacted an organizing concept of "fulcrum" or focus issues through which its direction and ambitions can be defined--currently, the extension of human rights to women and girls, cities, and the democracy deficit. In the spring of 2012, we formed a faculty steering committee to build on the efforts of faculty who had participated formally and informally in earlier phases of CAPA development. This group is charged with assuring the integration of CAPA into the life of the College, increasing faculty participation opportunities, and developing curriculum, and will be reconstituted year to year so as to bring more and more faculty into CAPA thinking and planning. We also named Susan Sgorbati, a long-time dance and mediation faculty member, the CAPA faculty program group and curriculum coordinator. Susan will ensure, among other things, opportunities for faculty to develop new program areas in CAPA based on their own emerging and joint teaching interests.

Like the Plan process, the seven-week Field Work Term (an annual requirement for students) is

one of the College's signature programs: it allows students to extend their learning into the world at large, and to bring their experiences back to Bennington; it creates a feedback loop between "worlds" that are often put into false opposition. The president has grown a network of resources that has added new dimensions to what Field Work Term makes possible.

Bennington students have begun to take on dynamic roles within organizations such as the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics (Boston), Student Achievement Partners (New York), the Children's Hospital of Wisconsin (Milwaukee), and Royal DSM (Global). In several cases the relationships with these organizations have been initiated by CAPA fellows, who have come to campus to meet with (and sometimes teach) students, faculty, and staff both informally and by way of working groups and workshops. In the case of Royal DSM--a global leader in health, nutrition, and materials--a contact developed by the president led to an extended campus visit by the president of DSM North America, who spoke with students, faculty, and staff. In all cases students have responded to the opportunities with excitement and initiative. These Field Work Term opportunities have not only expanded our curricular offerings in the sense that they enliven the growth of students' Plans in the area of public action, they are changing the sense of what Bennington makes possible--for every student.

The president and the College's senior staff will begin to develop the next phase of our strategic plan during the spring 2013 term--engaging in discussion with the Board of Trustees, faculty, students, and staff. This next iteration will build on the foundation of our successes as well as reassess strategies related to goals that have proven more difficult to move (such as, for example, increasing the applicant pool). In addition, the strategic planning framework--both the current one and the next iteration in development--will be of particular use during the current presidential transition moment.

Appendix