

REACCREDITATION REPORT ON THE SOCIAL SCIENCE DIVISION

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Bennington College

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INTRODUCTION

The Social Science Division at Bennington College is multi-disciplinary. It provides students with the opportunity to examine people and their societies from a variety of perspectives. Faculty share a commitment to an intellectually disciplined approach to the problems and issues represented within their various fields. All courses, from introductory to advanced, are designed to teach students to read, write and think critically and independently.

In common with other divisions in the college, the Social Science Division must fulfill a range of educational responsibilities. Students new to the college need an introduction into ways of thinking about how people have constructed and understood their societies. Students who plan to do major work in Social Science need to have an opportunity to build a coherent program which allows them to work in depth in their chosen fields. Students majoring in other divisions need courses beyond the introductory level to widen their experience in ways of knowing and investigating the world that are characteristic of the fields within Social Science.

The faculty meet this challenge, not by offering traditional courses which survey a given field, but by engaging students in significant inquiry within their disciplines. Students are exposed to the nature of a given discipline by confronting the questions and methods central to the particular field. In most classes papers rather than examinations predominate as the test of the student's understanding.

Faculty within each discipline are recruited by members of the division as whole. This process provides an ongoing education for division members in their colleagues' disciplines. It also demonstrates the nature of the division to potential faculty. Students are active participants in this process with an elected member to each recruiting committee and with voting privileges for the two student representatives to the division. In recruitment decisions division members have consistently reaffirmed the principle of hiring the best available practitioners of a discipline who are also interested in making connections with other disciplines.

Fifteen faculty members are distributed among seven areas. Eight of them hold the PhD degree. Three others are completing PhD requirements. The configuration of disciplines has remained fairly constant over the past ten years. There are three psychologists, three historians, two philosophers, two political scientists, two economists, two anthropologists and one person in Early Childhood Studies. A position designated as Visiting Faculty enables the division to invite faculty from other institutions for a semester or a year. To date the position has been filled by academics from the fields of anthropology, history, philosophy, politics and sociology.

Members of the division usually meet once a week to discuss administrative and educational matters as well as to make decisions about the plans of social science majors. The divisional secretary serves a two year term. The procedures and policies of the division are outlined in the division handbook (Appendix D) which is given to each faculty member and to each major within the division.

DISCIPLINES

In 1979 a committee, formed to investigate the issue of introductory courses, interviewed all of the divisional faculty in interdisciplinary groups of three. In 1982 the division secretary interviewed the faculty by discipline, asking a series of questions about the goals faculty had for students and how they saw their discipline's relationship to the division. As a result of these interviews, faculty within each discipline prepared or edited a statement about their discipline.

Anthropology

The anthropologists attempt to give their students a general orientation to a range of anthropological perspectives so that they will know how anthropologists approach the world and what kinds of questions they ask. A grasp of some significant segment of the anthropological literature is also seen as important.

Anthropology makes contact with all the other social sciences as does no other discipline because it is cross cultural and comparative and because it deals with all aspects of the human experience in its biological, social and cultural contexts. It challenges the ethnocentric and eurocentric biases of the social sciences. More directly, the work of the division's anthropologists connects with social psychology, psychology, early childhood studies, history, politics and economics. The issue of socialization is one it shares with psychology and early childhood studies. The relationship of industrialized countries to the Third and Fourth World is an issue shared with politics and economics. It shares with history the issue of continuity and change. Anthropology also has provided an abroad course in India, drawing on students from other disciplines.

The problems involved in teaching anthropology at Bennington include a lack of serious commitment to the subject on the part of students who may be looking for "exotica and erotica". The other involves students' preparation for intermediate and advanced courses. In advanced courses the faculty expect students to have had previous work in anthropology while in intermediate classes work in other social sciences often suffices. The anthropologists have discussed the possibility of a year long rather than a one semester course on the introductory level to provide a fuller experience for all of the students.

Many students are reluctant to take advanced work in anthropology because they are concerned about the lack of future jobs in the field. The academic prospects in anthropology are discouraging, but there are possibilities in related fields, such as public health, communication and education.

Early Childhood Studies

Early Childhood Studies addresses questions of how individuals change over time, how the biological nature of the human species and particular environments interact in affecting individual development, and how ideas about children affect practices of dealing with children. The problems of education are studied as are the problems of individual development. In terms of subject matter the focus is on the study of children, ideas about children and institutions serving children.

More emphasis is placed on the evaluation of research in terms of methodology and generalizability than on the interpretation of texts. Students learn from investigations of their own about children as well as through reading the basic literature within the field. Observation of children in natural settings is the preferred, but not the only, method of gathering information.

Students also learn by doing through their work at the Early Childhood Center (Appendix H). Besides skills of writing and thinking, students develop the skills needed in social communication and cooperation. The difficulties of translating psychological perspectives into educational practices are studied both directly and through the examination of various educational models. It is not only the knowledge generated by theoretical constructs which is of concern, but the actions which result from such constructions.

Students who have early childhood studies as part of their major in social science have combined it with every other field within the division. The Non Resident Term enriches the academic experience of the students since it gives them an opportunity to work in different child care settings and with different educational or psychological models.

Economics

Economics qua discipline is dominated by one particular perspective/paradigm (derived from the neoclassical and Keynesian traditions). To teach economics means to acquaint undergraduates with (and train graduate students in) the conceptual framework and analytical apparatus that characterizes that perspective/paradigm. Indeed, it is this that constitutes "economic literacy" in the minds of most.

Economics courses at Bennington tend to be oriented toward the study of institutions, processes, and policy problems that bear on the allocation, control, and disposition of resources. On balance, we teach about the economy more than we teach economics qua discipline. We do this partly of choice, and partly of necessity. We respect the prevailing orthodoxy as a considerable intellectual achievement while simultaneously rejecting its claims to superior knowledge about the economy. In our effort to impart a similar attitude to our students, we generally take the economy rather than economics as our object of study. With this as our point of departure, we introduce contending theoretical perspectives/paradigms in a manner that encourages students to assess their relative merits critically and thoughtfully. At the same time, the limited mathematical background of many of our students makes this orientation something more than a choice. In many colleges high school algebra, geometry, and sometimes even calculus are prerequisites for the study of economics qua discipline; few of our students bring that kind of background to our courses.

The orientation of our courses naturally imparts a strong interdisciplinary tendency to them. We are very interested in seeing that tendency become more explicit by developing more formal curricular links with other members of the social science division. It is noteworthy that many students in economics have developed a spontaneous interest in political science, and vice versa. We intend to encourage this and similar developments.

History

We view the study of history as an appropriate element in the study of society, but we value it as much for the differences between it and other disciplines in the social sciences as for the philosophical and methodological assumptions that link it to them. So, too, we recognize that historians can gain much from the social sciences as they are usually defined, provided that they do not surrender their own distinctive pre-occupation with change over time understood as a complex process rather than as a function of narrowly conceived or easily isolated factors. In sum, we see ourselves as asking somewhat different questions and arriving at somewhat different answers than those our colleagues would entertain, yet sharing a commitment to scrupulous empirical analysis of the patterns of social behavior.

The work in history is predicated on the idea that the best way to teach the discipline is to involve students in the sophisticated analysis of particular periods or events. We do not stress the accumulation of facts for their own sake, nor do we attempt to "cover" a large number of topics in the fashion of many history departments. Rather, we believe that students should approach historical inquiry as a craft, developing their abilities to make both critical and synthetic use of a variety of sources by immersing themselves in a joint effort to establish the causes, configurations, and consequences of the events chosen for study. Much of the time we make extensive use of primary sources, but more fundamentally we seek to convey a lively sense of the questions that may or may not be answered by different means. Like other members of the divisional faculty, we do not educate "majors" so much as invite all interested students to learn how to use their minds as members of our profession do.

Philosophy

Bennington's social science division includes two teachers of philosophy as part of its normal staff complement. Philosophy is perhaps more typically housed in humanities than in social science in most colleges and universities, but the latter arrangement is not uncommon and is appropriate at Bennington College. One major aspect of our job could and should be carried out whatever our location; the teaching of the western philosophical tradition. The orientation of the teaching staff is to teach this tradition with great attention to the social and historical context in which these ideas developed and in a critical spirit, rather than with excessive piety for the achievement of the tradition or as dollops of culture or a patina of learned familiarity appropriate to liberally educated men and women. We have two other major tasks. We augment and deepen the social science curriculum by making the study of social and political theory and of methodological issues available to our students. In addition to our work oriented to social science, we give our students access to at least some main currents in contemporary philosophy; those in which our teaching staff has competence and research interests. These areas are necessarily limited because of the size of our staff, but includes important and central areas such as aesthetics, philosophy of language, analytic philosophy, contemporary continental philosophy, marxism, ethics and feminist philosophy. Our division encourages an interdisciplinary approach. Both teachers and students are interested in finding fruitful connections between philosophy and other intellectual fields. Our students are adept at locating such connections and inducing the teaching staff to assist them in projects they have initiated which call upon and make creative use of the expertise and latent useful knowledge of the teaching staff.

Politics

The politics program is designed to develop the capacity to do original research on public issues. Course work at the introductory level encourages a close reading of both political science literature and current political materials. Students are urged to write frequently and to think critically about evidence and argument. There are no "core" concepts or readings the student is expected to master, but rather concern for appreciation of political institutions and process in a comparative context. Students in introductory courses are required to develop research proposals and, where appropriate, to pursue interests through work in other disciplines. Economics and History have been strong second disciplines for past politics students.

Advanced work considers competing approaches to the study of politics as a discipline. Students read extensively in current professional literature and attend research seminars with political scientists outside of Bennington on work in progress. Politics students have also helped organize and participate in seminars on topics of public interest. Students are expected to use classes as an opportunity to advance research hypotheses, to share research experience, and to defend the results of their work. The thesis is an important research requirement but not, as it is becoming in other undergraduate institutions, the only research requirement. We expect students to develop a lively interest in political questions and the skills to effectively research and present their own conclusions. Recent pre-thesis research has included a study of urban development in North Adams, a study of gentrification in Harlem, and case studies concerning industrialization.

Psychology

The faculty in Psychology at Bennington College represent a diverse set of approaches that exist in the discipline though its overall orientation tends to be that of the humanist rather than the behaviorist. This means that the human being in his individuality tends to be the focus of our enterprise. Since persons live in a social and cultural context the study of social psychology is well represented as are the scientific and research orientations that prevail in psychology in the United States. Because of this, courses dealing with the structure of theory, methodology and statistics are taught in addition to such courses as Social Psychology, Symbol and Psyche, Psychoanalytic Theories of Personality, Socialization, Abnormal Psychology, Systems and Theories, and Language and Psychotherapy. While the latter courses are offered regularly these are supplemented by courses given less frequently and by subject matter tutorials which arise out of the interest of one or of a small group of students and their teacher.

The study of psychology, here, differs markedly from that in other institutions, however, in that we do not offer a 'psychology major' in isolation. Rather there is the demand that each student who wishes to focus his work in psychology become immersed in a second course of study either in the social sciences where particularly Early Childhood Studies and Anthropology are likely choices, though Political Science, Economics, as well as History have been chosen in the past. Because of the kinship of psychology with literature on one end of the spectrum and with biology at the other, these studies, though outside the social sciences, are frequently chosen as accompanying fields. At the same time, the choice of Dance or Drama, Music, and the Visual Arts as a second area of interest is not rare. Our commitment that education should extend beyond purely academic study and involve experiencing and application is made manifest by the institution of our Non-Resident Term during which students are expected to find work related to their academic interest. This allows them to test and expand the skills they have acquired in the classroom in hospital, clinic, school, personnel office and university research settings.

Finally, there is the requirement that all students in psychology engage in a year long senior project which not only allows students to investigate in depth a topic of their particular interest, but also to demonstrate that they are competent to do relatively independent and sustained work in the field. The project, resulting as it does in a major senior thesis, is of signal value in preparing students who wish to continue their studies at the graduate level, and, together with the work experience gained during the non-resident term, allows them to become competent professionals in agencies that demand investigation and reporting, as well as applications of academic study from their staff members.

STUDENT PLANS

Bennington provides students with a unique opportunity to design their own education without sacrificing the quality of their intellectual involvement. Through the plans system students must justify the choices they make and show how the courses they have studied build a meaningful liberal arts education.

The diversity of fields within the division makes it possible for students majoring in social science to construct programs that make educational sense to them. Students can work in two fields within the division. These fields may be contrasting or complementary, reflecting interests pursued separately but in depth such as philosophy and early childhood studies or closely related and mutually reinforcing as in politics and economics.

Students may also have one of their major fields outside of the division; history and literature or anthropology and drama are examples of fields that have been meaningfully combined. A faculty member within the division is expected to be responsible for overseeing the work outside the division. For students whose focus is on an issue or a problem which would draw on many of the disciplines, a thematic major is another possibility.

After consulting with faculty, including the student's counselor as well as the signers of the plan, the students submit a Tentative Plan which includes a written statement of purpose as well as an outline of courses taken and projected. The Plans Committee reviews the student's academic folder and makes a recommendation to the division. Discussion of the plan within the division includes a review of the student's work and the merit of the plan as an educational undertaking.

The Non Resident Term is an important part of the student's educational experience and often provides the impetus for further study or enhances the quality of the on-campus learning. During January and February students find opportunities that are often not available during the summers. Social science students have had internships in banks and government agencies; have worked in clinical and educational settings, tested their career interests in law offices and research institutes. An independent study makes it possible for students to pursue their work in major libraries or to do field work related to their course work.

In the junior year, at the time of the confirmation of plan, students are expected to indicate the nature of their senior thesis. The senior thesis is a substantial and significant investigation by the student of a topic growing out of past work in the division. From a psychological look at American monster movies to an analysis of problems associated with the international court of justice, students have learned about scholarship by active involvement in the process. Using the methodology appropriate to the field and the particular problem, students approach their research as would any practitioner in the field. Each student within the division produces such a culminating work with the guidance of a tutor. A reader of the thesis is appointed by the division secretary. At the end of the first semester of thesis tutorial, tutor, reader and student meet to assess the student's progress on the project. Suggestions from the reader are utilized by the student in the further development of the work. Both the tutor and the reader must approve the final draft of the thesis. Besides reviewing the written work, the tutor and reader meet with the student to discuss the completed thesis. This meeting provides an opportunity for an informal, but considered sharing of questions and observations about the thesis and its relationship to the student's Bennington education.

SPEAKERS COMMITTEE

The division has had a speakers' program since 1975. This program has served to broaden students' acquaintance with practitioners of the social sciences outside of the Bennington College community. It has also served as a forum for a discussion of issues important in the development of an informed and thoughtful citizenry. Monday night has become the Social Science Division's evening to provide an intellectual event for the college community. A wine and cheese reception often follows the talk, film or panel allowing students and faculty time to exchange ideas about the issues raised.

Each year a Speakers' Committee plans and implements a series of events which includes speakers and films. The organizing principles of the committee have varied from year to year, reflecting the ideas of the committee members as well as suggestions from the division. One year a series of films about American labor complemented both the speakers and work in courses within the division. In 1980 a one day conference on "Knowledge and Power: The New Intellectual Class" provided an opportunity to hear a variety of perspectives on one issue. The conference attracted students and faculty from other institutions and created an excitement on campus. In 1982-1983 the speakers combined a Monday night lecture with a talk to a particular class who had been prepared for the speaker by specifically assigned readings. Such a format enriched the students' appreciation of the issues the speaker had to discuss and coordinated their intellectual contribution with the ongoing work within the division.

The reading of senior theses by students has become an annual part of the Speakers' series. Students are nominated by the faculty to read a section from their thesis. Questions and discussion follow each reading. Students and faculty have the opportunity to share their work with those in fields other than their own. This evening besides being pleasant also conveys to the students another indication of the seriousness with which the faculty view the enterprise of the senior thesis.

In addition to sponsoring the reading of student work the Speakers' Committee has also invited faculty to present Monday evening talks, giving the college community as well as social science students an opportunity to hear about the research of concern to division members. Faculty have also presented papers to be read and discussed in faculty seminars.

The Speakers Program is of service to the college as well as to the division. Besides supplementing the work which occurs in courses, the Speakers' Program presents fresh ideas through the medium of the various speakers and activities. Some events have been co-sponsored by the division and other divisions, or the Student Services Office.

CHANGES IN THE DIVISION

Over the past few years, the social science division has responded to the need to change and to become more cohesive in its functioning on behalf of students' education. The introductory course committee in 1979 addressed a variety of issues with divisional faculty from class size to registration procedures. Although some of the recommendations which were suggested have been modified, the process of evaluation and discussion was a healthy one for the division. Some of the following changes have had more impact than others on the way in which the division functions, but all seem to have been beneficial.

1) The division replace ad hoc plan committees which evaluated student petitions for advanced work through Tentative and Confirmation of Plans with a standing division-wide Plans Committee. In the past the ad hoc committees had tended to be comprised of the disciplinary practitioners of the student's major interest. This fostered more of a disciplinary focus in student plans than was felt to be desirable in light of our academic resources and philosophy. The standing committee views student programs in a divisional framework and provides greater consistency in evaluation guidelines and procedures than was possible with ad hoc committees. Revisions in the plan forms made it easier for faculty signing the plan to indicate their view of the plan before it came to the division as a whole.

2) Aware of the difficulties students face in program planning as a consequence of permitting faculty to teach their interests, the division created a standing Curriculum Committee. It was charged with the responsibility of scrutinizing the curriculum more rigorously than formerly to assess the impact of offerings on student programs. In consultation with faculty members, the committee can facilitate the building of coherent divisional plans by making suggestions across disciplines about the sequence

of course offerings. Undertaking the task of proposing class schedules, the committee can facilitate the opportunities for students to take a variety of courses within the division during a semester. The Divisional handbook (Appendix D) is revised each year by the Curriculum Committee to keep faculty and students informed about divisional matters.

3) Course syllabi are filed each semester in the Social Science Division Office so that the faculty can be better informed about their colleagues' offerings and can more effectively counsel their students in regard to them.

4) Faculty members from different disciplines in the division have been encouraged to offer interdisciplinary courses which demonstrate the value of such work to students as well as provide stimulating challenges to the faculty involved. In 1982-1984 Perspectives on the Family, a year-long course was taught by faculty in anthropology, early childhood studies and history. Authority and Participation in Organizations was taught by faculty in economics and psychology. Faculty members have also begun to confer about the ways in which their courses can complement each other across disciplines.

5) The issue of courses introductory to the division has been of divisional concern for many years. In 1959 the division adopted From Hobbes to Marx as such a course. This course is devoted to the analysis of seminal texts. It is a year-long course, but students may take it for only one semester and may enter it in the second semester.

In 1981 the division voted to develop another divisional introductory course. After regular weekly meetings during the spring of 1982 in which most of the members of the division discussed the purpose and content of the course, the six faculty members who had committed themselves to teach the course in the 1982-1983 year met more frequently to plan the shared syllabus

and bibliography. The course was called Reading Social Science. It was agreed that the particular subject matter of the course might vary from year to year. The particular topic for the 1982-1983 year was Work in Society. Faculty teaching the course met bi-weekly throughout the first semester to monitor the progress of the course and to support each other's teaching of it. As a part of the development of the course, division members had decided that the course would be evaluated at the end of each year with a full review at the end of three years.

Both From Hobbes to Marx and Work in Society can be seen as an introduction to work within the division since they deal with concepts and concerns shared by the various fields. From Hobbes to Marx offers the students the classic texts from which the social sciences emerge. Work in Society introduces students to developments in the social sciences within the 20th century as well as demonstrates how the different disciplines approach common problems. The faculty directly involved in teaching or planning to teach Work in Society are from the fields of anthropology, early childhood studies, economics, history, philosophy and politics. Faculty who have taught From Hobbes to Marx include those from history, philosophy, politics and economics.

When adopting Work in Society the division members also voted to require it for majors in Social Science to take within their first two years. It was thought that such a requirement would provide a common ground for students and give them some sense of the approaches of disciplines within the division other than the two upon which they were focussing their studies.

A divisional requirement represents a major change in the practice and philosophy of the division. Recently, the division decided that students would be required to take either From Hobbes to Marx or Work in Society. After two years, the division members will evaluate the impact of this requirement. The discussion of the issue of requirements continued the

trend within the division of seeking common ground, while respecting the real differences which exist in educational views as well as in disciplinary perspectives.

CONCLUSION

In the past five years the Social Science division has attempted to deal with the problems of limited resources of faculty within each discipline, a diversity of perspectives resulting from disciplinary training and commitment by faculty to their fields, and different methodological approaches. Unity which respects diversity has been the divisional goal.

Restructuring the division along interdisciplinary lines has been one suggested solution. Another idea has been to focus on social issues and to encourage more direct investigation by students of these issues. Others feel that the best course is to take advantage of the plurality of views. Whatever alternative they support, faculty have been thinking more in divisional terms. The students, on the other hand, tend to identify themselves more as disciplinary rather than divisional majors. One of the changes which was not successful was the listing of courses by level rather than by discipline.

Divisional discussion of shared problems has been a healthy sign. The identity problem of the division within the college has not been as great as it has in the past. It is generally acknowledged by students that faculty within the division care about their teaching and are available to students. Although division members might articulate their version of the "Bennington Idea" differently, they share a commitment to a deeply involving, intellectually challenging, broadly based liberal arts education for students.

Sally M. Sugarman
Secretary

Appendix A	Senior Theses
B	Divisional Percentage of Divisional Quarters
C	Social Science Graduates
D	Social Science Division Handbook
E	Visiting Faculty
F	Social Science Division Speakers
G	Work in Society Syllabus and Bibliography
H	Early Childhood Center Handbook
I	Curriculum 1983-1984
J	Class Schedule 1983-1984