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May 26, 2020

Dr. Isabel K. Roche
Interim President
Bennington College
One College Drive
Bennington, VT 05201

Dear President Roche:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on April 23, 2020, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Bennington College:

that Bennington College be continued in accreditation;

that the Fall 2020 evaluation to assess implementation of the College's Prison Education Initiative at the Great Meadow Correctional Facility be confirmed;

that the institution submit an Annual Report on Finance and Enrollment (ARFE) by December 1, 2020, for consideration in Spring 2021;

that, in addition to the information included in all ARFE reports, the December 2020 ARFE give emphasis to the College's success in:

- 1) meeting its goals for enrollment, retention, graduation, and net tuition revenue;
- 2) eliminating operating deficits and achieving its goals for fundraising;
- 3) strengthening the overall financial health of the College and its ability to meet the obligations of its increased debt load;

that a focused evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2022 and the report prepared in advance of the evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

- 1) continuing to enhance its financial stability;
- 2) adopting a mission statement that describes the unique education experience that Bennington offers;
- 3) developing structures that enhance and facilitate a true shared governance structure for greater faculty engagement in planning and decision-making;
- 4) implementing consistent measurement of student learning in relation to institutional learning goals (e.g., the Capacities) at every level of the curriculum;
- 5) transitioning to a permanent president;

that the College submit an interim (fifth-year) report for consideration in Fall 2024;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the College give emphasis to its continued success in addressing the matters specified for attention in the Fall 2022 focused evaluation;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2029.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

Bennington College is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be substantially in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission commends Bennington College for its participatory self-study process that enabled the comprehensive evaluation to be a “fruitful time of reflection, assessment, and recalibration” for the institution. We join the visiting team in acknowledging Bennington’s key strengths: the uniqueness of its mission; the commitment and engagement of faculty, staff, and students; the distinctive individualized and experiential learning opportunities it provides; and the “agency and freedoms of all participants in College life and work.” The College has a well-deserved reputation for excellence in self-directed, student-centered education that attracts students who are “intellectually curious, engaged, independent doers.” The College has been successful in addressing major facilities needs, including renovations to the Commons and the science building, and we note with favor the 2016 redesign of the College’s website that has enhanced transparency and ensures visitors to the site can easily find information. The Commission appreciates that there has been “significant reassignment of roles” among senior leadership at the College, and we commend the interim president for her commitment to open and effective communication with all campus constituencies. We share the judgment of the visiting team that Bennington College is well positioned to “derive yet greater benefit from the vision, commitment, creativity, and vitality of the individuals in its community.”

The Commission confirms the evaluation of the College’s Prison Education Initiative at the Great Meadow Correctional Facility scheduled for Fall 2020. We refer you to our letter of October 24, 2019 which specifies matters to receive attention in the report prepared for the visit.

The College is asked to submit an Annual Report on Finance and Enrollment by December 1, 2020, so that the Commission may monitor the institution’s financial situation. The purpose of

the ARFE report is to help the Commission determine whether the College continues to meet our standard on *Institutional Resources*. The audited financial statement, with the management letter, is requested as a verification of the institution's financial position. The institution's response to the management letter is requested so that the Commission may understand how the institution is addressing any issue(s) raised in the management letter. In addition, we ask that the narrative of the ARFE report give emphasis to three matters related to our standards on *Students* and *Institutional Resources*.

As acknowledged in both the self-study and team report, Bennington College has not been successful in achieving its enrollment goals, even with an increase in the discount rate to 62% for FY2018. The Commission is also concerned about the College's four- and six-year graduation rates, most recently at 56% and 76%, respectively; and while retention rates improved to 83% last year after a five-year decline, we share the observation of the visiting team that "identifying students who will fit at Bennington has not been clearly articulated" and may contribute to student attrition. We understand that the College anticipates lower enrollment in Fall 2020 – total enrollment of 580 students with 150 new students – and is discussing how to attract transfer, adult, and SCND (Some College No Degree) students to the institution. We also appreciate that Bennington is implementing "several new strategies to improve [its] outcomes" with respect to net tuition revenue, discount rate, and yield rate, currently at 22%. The December 2020 ARFE report will afford the College an opportunity to update the Commission on its progress in these matters, in keeping with our standards on *Students* and *Institutional Resources*:

Consistent with its mission, the institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll students who are broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve (*Students*, Statement of the Standard).

The institution demonstrates its ability to admit students who can be successful in the institution's academic program, including specifically recruited populations. The institution's goals for retention and graduation reflect institutional purposes, and the results are used to inform recruitment and the review of programs and services (5.6).

The institution's multi-year financial planning is realistic and reflects the capacity of the institution to depend on identified sources of revenue and ensure the advancement of educational quality and services for students (7.6).

The institution and its governing board regularly and systematically review the effectiveness of the institution's financial aid policy and practices in advancing the institution's mission and helping to ensure that the institution enrolls and supports the student body it seeks to serve (7.10).

The Commission also shares the concern of the visiting team about the institution's "core operating deficits," which, between FY2014 and FY2019, ranged between \$7.4 million and \$10.9 million. We understand that Bennington's plans to address these deficits has been through private gift revenue, and we note that the institution has set a goal to raise \$18.8 million – 40% of operating revenues – from that source in FY2020. We are pleased to learn that the institution has made good progress toward that goal, including \$100,000 in new pledges since February 2020. The College is also reducing expenses by instituting a hiring freeze and 20% salary reductions for senior leadership and making other reductions to the budget. We anticipate being apprised, through the December 2020 ARFE report, of the College's success in eliminating its operating deficit and achieving its goals for fundraising. Our standard on *Institutional Resources* (cited above and below) is relevant here:

The institution's financial planning, including contingency planning, is integrated with overall planning and evaluation processes. The institution demonstrates its ability to analyze its financial condition and understand the opportunities and constraints that will influence its financial condition and acts accordingly. It reallocates resources as necessary to achieve its purposes and objectives. The institution implements a realistic plan for addressing issues raised by the existence of any operating deficit (7.14).

The Commission appreciates the careful planning underway at Bennington College with respect to achievement of one of the pillars of its strategic plan: "ensure Bennington's financial stability." We note with favor the involvement of the Board of Trustees in the planning process, beginning with an August 2019 retreat, and we appreciate that the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced heightened levels of uncertainty and urgency to the planning process. In addition to the enrollment, retention, and fundraising initiatives noted above, the College is also exploring new revenue sources, including, when circumstances permit, use of its campus by Middlebury College and other outside groups. The Commission further notes that the College has recently increased its debt load – from \$25.0 million to \$51.3 million – and has included monthly debt service payments of nearly \$211,000 in its FY2020 budget. We look forward, in December 2020, to receiving further information about the College's progress in implementing its plans to enhance financial stability and meeting the obligations of its increased debt load. Our standard on *Institutional Resources* (cited above and below) provides this guidance:

The institution preserves and enhances available financial resources sufficient to support its mission. It manages its financial resources and allocates them in a way that reflects its mission and purposes. It demonstrates the ability to respond to financial emergencies and unforeseen circumstances (7.4).

The institution is financially stable. Ostensible financial stability is not achieved at the expense of educational quality. Its stability and viability are not unduly dependent upon vulnerable financial resources or an historically narrow base of support (7.5).

Opportunities identified for new sources of revenue are reviewed by the administration and board to ensure the integrity of the institution and the quality of the academic program are maintained and enhanced (7.15).

The Commission asks that the College undergo a focused evaluation in Fall 2022 so that we may continue to monitor the institution's progress; a copy of the procedures for the evaluation are enclosed for your information and use. In the report prepared for the Fall 2022 evaluation, the institution is asked to give emphasis to five matters related to our standards on *Institutional Resources, Mission and Purposes, Organization and Governance, Educational Effectiveness, and Planning and Evaluation*.

The College is asked, in the report prepared for the Fall 2022 focused evaluation, to provide an update on its continued success in enhancing its financial health. The Commission recognizes that this matter does not lend itself to rapid resolution and will require the College's sustained attention over time; hence, we ask that further information be provided in Fall 2022.

The Commission concurs with the visiting team that Bennington College would benefit from the development of a mission statement that provides "a new and contemporary expression of [the College's] distinctive experience, for a changing student body." We are, therefore, pleased to learn that the College took the team's view "seriously" and will begin work on a mission statement. We look forward, in Fall 2022, to learning of the College's progress in ensuring that its mission "defines its distinctive character, addresses the needs of society, identifies the students the institution seeks to serve, and reflects both the institution's traditions and its vision for the

future” (1.1) and that its mission statement is “formally adopted by the governing board and appears in appropriate printed and digital institutional publications” (1.2).

We are gratified to learn that, at its March 6, 2020 meeting, the College’s Board of Trustees convened a shared governance task force that will begin its work “when COVID allows.” We also appreciate that the College Steering Committee has been involved in discussions aimed at “developing strategies to meaningfully engage faculty in shared governance,” and we understand that the relationship between the efforts of these two groups is still being determined. As we share the team’s judgment that Bennington would be well-served by the development of “more robust vehicles for shared governance and participatory decision-making,” we welcome an update on the College’s success in this regard as part of the Fall 2022 focused evaluation. We remind you of our standard on *Organization and Governance*:

In accordance with established institutional mechanisms and procedures, the chief executive officer and senior administrators consult with faculty, students, other administrators, and staff, and are appropriately responsive to their concerns, needs, and initiatives. The institution’s internal governance provides for the appropriate participation of its constituencies, promotes communications, and effectively advances the quality of the institution (3.13).

Faculty have a substantive voice in matters of educational programs, faculty personnel, and other aspects of institutional policy that relate to their areas of responsibility and expertise (3.15).

The Commission appreciates the institution’s candid acknowledgment that its progress on the assessment of student learning has been “halting as of late.” We are pleased to learn that the report of the visiting team has “reinvigorated” the institution’s work in this area and that the Bennington community is “eager to fully implement” its institution-level learning outcomes, the Capacities. We understand that the faculty-led Academic Policies and Curriculum Planning Committees will take the lead in these efforts, which will be supplemented by faculty-wide professional development opportunities. We anticipate being apprised, in Fall 2022, of Bennington’s success in implementing an approach to the assessment of student learning that “focuses on the course, competency, program, and institutional level ... [and] has the support of the institution’s academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty and appropriate staff” (8.3). Our standard on *Educational Effectiveness* provides this additional guidance:

The institution provides clear public statements about what students are expected to gain from their education, academically and, as appropriate to the institution’s mission, along other dimensions (e.g., civic engagement, religious formation, global awareness). Goals for students’ education reflect the institution’s mission, the level and range of degrees and certificates offered, and the general expectations of the larger academic community (8.2).

The institution uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods and direct and indirect measures to understand the experiences and learning outcomes of its students, employing external perspectives including, as appropriate, benchmarks and peer comparisons (8.5).

The institution defines measures of student success and levels of achievement appropriate to its mission, modalities and locations of instruction, and student body, including any specifically recruited populations. These measures include rates of progression, retention, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment (8.6).

The institution uses additional quantitative measures of success, such as further education, civic participation, religious formation, and others, as appropriate to its mission, to understand the success of its recent graduates. Information from students and former students is regularly considered (8.7).

The results of assessment and quantitative measures of student success are a demonstrable factor in the institution's efforts to improve the learning opportunities and results for students (8.8).

Finally, the Commission understands the Bennington College Board of Trustees has begun a national search for the College's next president. The Fall 2022 focused evaluation will afford the institution a chance to update the Commission on the results of the search and the College's transition to a permanent president, as evidence of its "demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.5).

Commission policy requires an interim (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. In addition to the information included in all interim reports the College is asked, in Fall 2024, to give emphasis to its continued success in addressing the matters specified for attention in the Fall 2022 focused evaluation, as these matters will require the institution's ongoing attention.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2029 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years.

You will note that the Commission has specified no length or term of accreditation. Accreditation is a continuing relationship that is reconsidered when necessary. Thus, while the Commission has indicated the timing of the next comprehensive evaluation, the schedule should not be unduly emphasized because it is subject to change.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the self-study prepared by Bennington College and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Duncan Dobbelman, Chief Communications Officer, and Brian Murphy, Vice President for Finance and Administration, as well as Sonya Stephens, team chair, during its deliberations.

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. Nicholas A. Stephens. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

The Commission hopes that the evaluation process 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.

Dr. Isabel K. Roche
May 26, 2020
Page 7

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

Sincerely,



David Quigley

DQ/jm

cc: Mr. Nicholas A. Stephens
Visiting Team

Enclosures:

Procedures for Focused Evaluation Visit
Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions