

***Final Report***

to the

Faculty, Students, Staff, Administration, and Trustees of

BENNINGTON COLLEGE

Bennington, VT

by

The Visiting Team for

New England Commission of Higher Education

December 4, 2019

Members of the Visiting Team:

Sonya Stephens, President, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA, *chair*

Amy Ansell, Dean of Liberal Arts, Emerson College, Boston, MA

Cathryn Mercier, Professor of English and Children's Literature, Simmons University, Boston, MA

Donna Ng, VP for Finance and Administration and Treasurer, Skidmore College, Saratoga Spring, NY

Sheilah Shaw Horton, Dean of Students, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA

Chris Rhoda, Vice President of Information Services and Strategic Initiatives and CIO, Thomas College, Waterville, ME

Michael E. Whitcomb, Director of Institutional Research, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT

Renée T. White, Provost, Wheaton College, Norton, MA

## Disclaimer

This report represents the views of the visiting team to Bennington College, based on its evaluation of the College with respect to NECHE criteria for accreditation. It is a confidential document and all comments are made in good faith. The report has been prepared both as an educational service to the College and as an administrative service to the Commission in its deliberations about accreditation.

**New England Commission of Higher Education  
Preface Page to the Team Report**

Please complete **during the team visit** and include with the report prepared by the visiting team

**Date form completed:** Sept 23, 2019

**Name of Institution:** Bennington College

**1. History:** Year chartered or authorized 1925 Year first degrees awarded 1936

**2. Type of control:**  State  City  Religious Group; specify: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Private, not-for-profit  Other; specify: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Proprietary

**3. Degree level:**  
 Associate  Baccalaureate  Masters  Professional  Doctorate

**4. Enrollment in Degree Programs:** (Use figures from fall semester of most recent year):

	Full-time	Part-time	FTE	Retention <sup>a</sup>	Graduation <sup>b</sup>	# Degrees <sup>c</sup>
<b>Associate</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Baccalaureate</b>	674	30	684	83%	76%	151
<b>Graduate</b>	97	0	97	91%	89%	34

(a) full-time 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> year (b) 3 or 6 year graduation rate (c) number of degrees awarded most recent year

**5. Student debt:**

	Most Recent Year	One Year Prior	Two Years Prior
<b>Three-year Cohort Default Rate</b>	2.9	2.8	3.0
<b>Three-year Loan Repayment Rate</b>	74	76	75

	Associate	Baccalaureate	Graduate
<b>Average % of graduates leaving with debt</b>	0	50	47
<b>Average amount of debt for graduates</b>	0	25200	28399

**6. Number of current faculty:** Full-time: 58 Part-time: 62 FTE: 78.67

**7. Current fund data for most recently completed fiscal year:** (Specify year: FY 2018)  
 (Double click in any cell to enter spreadsheet. Enter dollars in millions, e.g., \$1,456,200 = \$1.456)

Revenues		Expenditures	
Tuition (net)	15.480	Instruction	17.814
Gov't Appropriations	0.307	Research	0.000
Gifts/Grants/Endowment	5.645	General	21.384
Auxiliary Enterprises	10.850	Auxiliary Enterprises	3.447
Other	13.962	Other	_____
<b>Total</b>	<b>46.244</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>42.645</b>

**8. Number of off-campus locations:**

In-state None.                      Other U.S. None.                      International None.                      Total None.

**9. Number of degrees and certificates offered electronically:**

Programs offered entirely on-line None.                      Programs offered 50-99% on-line None.

**10. Is instruction offered through a contractual relationship?**

No     Yes    Specify program(s): \_\_\_\_\_

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Faculty, Students, Staff, Administration, and Trustees of  
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The New England Commission of Higher Education**

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## Introduction

Since 1932, Bennington College has upheld its commitment to offering a self-directed education to promising students. The depth of this commitment to a distinctive approach to the liberal arts, even in the face of a changing and sometimes challenging national landscape and persistent financial challenges at the College, was apparent to every member of the team who visited the campus in September 2019 as part of the College's comprehensive review for reaccreditation.

We would like to begin our report by expressing our sincere thanks to the Board of Trustees, to Interim President Isabel Roche, to Duncan Dobbelmann and Charlie Nadler, and members of the senior administration for their hospitality, and for ensuring that we were able to meet with so many members of the Bennington community. Beyond the Self-Study, we benefited greatly from the review of the many additional documents provided to us, and were grateful for the opportunity to speak directly with trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, and students, in order to learn from and about this highly motivated, generous and candid community, as well as gaining a fuller understanding of the creativity and uniqueness of the self-directed educational experience that Bennington offers. Everyone with whom we met had important things to say and contributed to our comprehension and appreciation of this remarkable College. The level of engagement with what it means to work, teach, and learn at Bennington, and the level of shared commitment to the College's distinctive model of education, were always and everywhere in evidence.

This report summarizes all that we came to understand about the state, operations, and opportunities of Bennington College today.

The ten years since the last reaccreditation of Bennington College have been marked by significant challenges and transformation in higher education and at the College, as well as by much interim reporting to the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, now the New England Commission on Higher Education. The College has weathered the departure of two presidents (in 2013 and 2019) and will soon engage in a presidential search. It has some new senior administrators, and has reshuffled and redistributed some administrative responsibilities in ways that are as yet untested. It has renewed, in the Capacities, its commitment to the model of learning that has long been its hallmark, and it has embraced the opportunity of a more racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, and internationally diverse student body. It has created a more detailed strategic plan, in the form of the Ten-Year Goals, and embarked upon a plan to fund the future in the Campaign and messaging that "The world needs more Bennington."

The report that follows offers our perspective on the areas of strength and opportunity in each of the nine Standards that we undertook to evaluate.

## **STANDARD ONE: Mission and Purposes**

As the Bennington College Self-Study makes evident, the Bennington community, especially that of faculty and staff, clearly understands the College's educational purposes, but has long resisted encapsulating these, as the 2014 Fifth-Year Interim Report acknowledges, in "any collection of words" that might serve to define (and so delimit) the Bennington experience.

The purposes of Bennington—to offer an education motivated by the pursuit of individual interests and constructive social engagement, and that is holistic, self-dependent and experiential—can be traced back to 1929 and to the College's progressive and experimental roots; to the first "Aims" published in 1932; to the Commencement Statement of 1966; and to a series of successive rearticulations drawn from these texts, reconceived in the 1993-94 Symposium, and addressed in reaccreditation self-studies and reports.

Indeed, the efforts in this most recent cycle of conversations on this topic are no more conclusive than those of the past, leading neither to a determination (yet) about whether Bennington will adopt a mission statement, nor to what such a statement might be, even as the community acknowledges that a shared understanding on campus may not translate to a clear and compelling case for Bennington for outside audiences. It is not clear, in fact, that this continual return to pre-existing statements is helpful for the kind of progressive self-renewal that this community embodies. Rather, drawing upon this rich tradition, a new and contemporary expression of this distinctive experience, described for a changing student body, might better serve the College and its communities.

There is no doubt that the purposes, both as described in the various statements and actualized by faculty and students in the educational program and specifically in The Plan, provide a deep and shared understanding at Bennington, direct investments in the campus and its programs and could, alongside the newly articulated Capacities, when fully embraced, be further leveraged for external audiences in ways that position the College and its unique strengths in the landscape of higher education and with prospective students, their families, foundations and employers. The team found that prevarications on this matter, and open-endedness in this, as in other arenas, serve only to distract the community from their shared understanding and commitments and create more uncertainty than appears to exist in the established practices and pursuits, indeed in the vitality, of a Bennington education.

## **STANDARD TWO: Planning and Evaluation**

Based on the focused report, and confirmed by meetings on campus and the exhibits provided, the team finds that the College has shown some progress in the strategic planning process. The strategic plan document, the Ten-Year Goals, includes general goals in the areas of enrollment, financial, academic and resource planning. While some detailed strategic plans were found, no evidence was found of multi-year financial plans. Debt restructuring has been sought and fundraising for operations has been increased to offset operating budget deficits. Contingency plans are based on the multi-year generosity of several large donors. A planned long-term positive financial position is based on increasing endowment to \$100 million dollars, increasing enrollment to 1,000 students and increased revenue from creatively conceived partnerships. One example of a new partnership designed to increase income by about \$700,000 per year, is the hosting of a number of the renowned Middlebury College language schools each summer.

In lieu of a mission (see Standard One), the strategic plan is influenced by the College's commencement statement including "[the College] 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 self-fulfillment and toward 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." The pursuit of "The Ten-Year Goals" are runs from FY2016 to FY2025. The three main goals include 1) fulfilling the promise of a progressive education, 2) building the Bennington network to extend reach and expand resources, and 3) ensuring Bennington's financial stability.

Planning activities have increased since the last ten-year visit, but are not yet comprehensive or systematic. Plans show deferred maintenance of \$6.2 million with a \$1 million allocation each year to address this; limited academic progress in standardizing learning goals across the curriculum; and a continued reliance on several large donors. Data first forms projected stable enrollment for FY20, but first-year and overall enrollment of matriculated students has dropped each year for the past two years. Goals for future years have not yet been revised in the light of these decreases. The strategic plan does not address detailed, long-term plans for HR or for the physical resources needed to support the projected 1,000 additional students. Strategic plans are reviewed annually, but not updated by the College leadership.

The College currently has an interim President, a search will soon get underway, and there are no expressed plans to update the strategic plan at this time. The Board, consultants, partners and other individuals have consistently contributed external viewpoints to the strategic plan. Faculty and staff, however, have an uneven awareness or understanding of the strategic plan. Data first forms that show future goals for the number of Master's Degree students (under Admissions, Standard 5) were blank and are also missing in some future years in the document detailing the Ten-Year Goals. The team found that while there has certainly been progress made in the area of planning and evaluation over the past ten years, it is not yet at a level or cadence that could be considered comprehensive and systematic.

## Planning

Institutional research activities are conducted by the Dean of Research, Planning and Assessment. Planning involving transfers, retention, graduation, average debt upon graduation, loan repayment, and student success is known. Student success is measured by employment (which, as described later, is not benchmarked according to nationally agreed standards), further studies, and community involvement. Most information requested during the visit was provided, but the College continues to face cultural challenges with creating typical systems and producing standard documentation. The College is nevertheless attempting to meet the increasing expectations for data analysis, as well as the reporting requirements for compliance, licensing, accreditation, and College decision making at various levels.

Additional strategic plans either do not exist, or have not been updated recently. Notwithstanding long-range enrollment models and forecasts used for internal planning, the strategic goals for enrollment, retention and graduation rates are based on data that is three years out of date, and which precedes the lower entering class sizes that the College has seen over the last two years. Evidence of analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints was not found. Based on the Self-Study report and confirmed by meetings on campus and the exhibits provided, the strategic plan does indeed direct the work of the College and has shaped its focus over the past three years.

The Ten-Year Goals articulates a plan to grow significantly new student enrollment, which appears to be optimistic given recent under-enrollment, while improvements in retention and graduation rates are aggressive. Evidence could not be found to support the projections. Financial reserves are almost non-existent, but operating gifts and endowment are increasing. Some gifts recently have been redirected from endowment to offset annual budget deficits. During on-campus interviews, the CFO and interim president stated that annual budgets will continue to be monitored on a regular basis, and are tied to the College's strategic plan. Expenses are prioritized by the CFO and president, and presented to the Board based on annual department requests. Recent additional cost-of-living salary increases, demanded by the faculty, were granted by the Board. While expenses have grown during the past few years in select areas, such as development, the overall budget is defined by College leadership as lean, since some vacant positions are not filled and professional development budgets generally are very limited. Budgeting appears to be realistic, but continues to be based on historical annual giving by major donors.

## Evaluation

The College has noted in the Self-Study that periodic and systematic review is an area of attention and desired progress. Bennington has used data and surveys in new ways to reflect and improve the educational mission and planning. Examples of this include the NSSE survey, graduated student surveys, surveys of students not enrolling and exiting, as well as those assessing faculty climate. Despite this enhanced evaluation landscape, several typical instruments, including student satisfaction surveys, are not administered college-wide regularly. There is a ten-year planning and annual budgeting process with prioritized plans.

Evidence of the evaluation of College-wide student satisfaction, student Plan consistency, intranet needs, and communications systems, as well as the effectiveness of faculty and student governance, were not found. The Self-Study also mentions continuing opportunities to formalize evaluation cycles, systematic planning, data collection, and the transparency of survey results, and information about the student experience (both curricular and co-curricular).

The College intends to focus on systematic approaches to assess the quality, integrity and effectiveness of its academic programs. Academic offerings, student learning, and the student experience are in the process of being connected to the framework for learning assessment, known on campus as the “Capacities,” but much work remains fully to integrate this in all disciplines, and then to document, and assess. The current assessment process in academic programs occurs every ten years (Standard Two data first form). Six-year graduation rates are reported and regular surveys of graduates are implemented. Four-year graduation rates are typically 10-15 points below the six-year graduation rates and are not reported on the public web site. The College is concerned about the differences between the salary reported on College surveys of graduates and the salary reported on the U.S. Department of Education College Scorecard.

The College has nevertheless increased its evaluation activities over the past several years, and has shown some success in using the results of its evaluation activities to inform planning, changes in programs and services, and resource allocation. There have been quick responses to disruptive changes and challenges over the past 6 months, and, with regular and systematic assessment to feed planning within the current organizational structure, data needs and staffing levels, the team is hopeful that the College will continue to enhance comprehensive planning and evaluation activities.

## **STANDARD THREE. Organization and Governance**

Bennington College continues to struggle with some aspects of organization and governance.

### Governing Board

The Bennington College Board of Trustees is made up of leaders and practitioners working in a wide array of fields, including education, finance, technology, entertainment, real estate, health, and business in the United States. The Board's bylaws allow for between 15 and 35 voting trustees. Currently, the Board counts 24 members, including two recent graduates who serve two-year terms. There is considerable continuity on the Board, with the recent chairs serving 11 and 7 years respectively. The outgoing chair remains on the Board, and is chairing the presidential search committee. Some members, including one of the vice chairs, have served for decades, while the new chair joined the Board in 2015.

The visiting team was able to meet informally with members of the Board on arrival, and to engage with six trustees, including the new chair and a vice chair, on substantive issues the following morning.

The Board meets four times a year, twice on campus, to address the work of standing and ad hoc committees. The By-Laws were revised in 2015 to expand effectiveness by adding a Facilities Committee and a standing Subcommittee on Investments. The president sits ex-officio on the Board and all of its committees, and the six standing committees of the Board are augmented as needed by ad hoc committees. The Committee structure of the Board was reevaluated at a retreat in 2015, and the Board now has seven standing committees, each following guidance from the AGB, with a specified charter, as well as clearly delineated responsibilities for the chairs. The renaming of a committee Nomination and Governance Committee signals a more intentional effort to address those activities, as well as to engage in more rigorous self-evaluation and assessment. A recent Board self-evaluation shows high levels of satisfaction in the College leadership, committee work, meeting format, and areas of focus, as well as strong agreement on strategic priorities. The trustees work with the president to establish institutional goals, and they conduct annual reviews of the president's effectiveness in meeting those goals.

A similar shift in focus from capital projects (with which the Board has recently been intimately involved) in the Campus Building and Renewal Committee to a Campus Planning Committee is also indicative of increased emphasis on College planning efforts. Such planning is relatively new for Bennington, and, while it is evident that the Board has taken up more regular oversight of the Ten-Year Goals, it is not clear how trustees or the leadership of the College is addressing in real ways (other than direct financial support) the shortfalls of that Plan in both projected enrollment and in the resulting and persistent budget deficits.

The current membership of the Board is well aware of the financial pressures on the institution, and is committed to supporting the College and its educational purposes. Minutes of recent meetings make clear that current trustees are highly engaged with the work of the College and discharge their duties with seriousness.

The membership of the Board is clearly articulated and publicly available on the College website. The Board uses its time together to engage in frank discussions of salient issues among its members and the senior administration, and meets with faculty and students on a regular basis.

The appointment of the president is among the most critical of Board responsibilities. In April 2019, when the prior president of the College, Mariko Silver, announced that she would be leaving Bennington for a new position, the trustees took the decision to appoint Isabel Roche, then provost, as interim president, while it engages in a national search. This decision seems to have broad support and Interim President Roche the confidence of the community.

## Internal Governance

Like the Board, Bennington College's senior administration has undergone some organizational development in recent years, as well as some reshuffling of responsibilities, in order to address specific institutional objectives, as well as to provide continuity during a presidential transition.

The senior leadership currently includes the president and five vice presidents (including a senior vice president), a chief communications officer, four deans, two directors, two associate vice presidents and two associate deans. They hold the customary portfolios reflecting academic, financial, communications, advancement, enrollment, and student life functions of the College, with more innovative expressions of leadership in both the portfolio of the Senior VP for Strategy, Philanthropy and Partnerships, and in roles that speak directly to the core tenets of the Bennington education, notably the associate dean of work-integrated learning, and the AVP for Institutional Initiatives.

Faculty and staff are clearly committed to Bennington and embrace its history and identity. They express this in terms of their relationship with students, and in how they interact with one another. As noted in the Self-Study, both constituencies have chosen to work at Bennington precisely because of its pedagogical approach and its close-knit community and culture. The fact of having weathered together a very difficult spring semester, defined by many different kinds of loss, was described as "showing the true spirit of this community and what it can do" (Self-Study, 20).

There has been some turnover, as well as significant reassignment of roles, at the more senior manager levels. The resignation of President Mariko Silver led to the appointment of Provost and Dean Isabel Roche as Interim President. Her former role has been split between two people, John Bullock, now acting provost as well as associate dean for faculty affairs, and Oceana Wilson, dean of the library, who is now also acting dean of the college. Other senior staff, such as Tony Cabasco, vice president for enrollment, and Delia Saenz, the inaugural vice president for institutional inclusion, equity and leadership development, are relatively new to the College. In 2017, three rotating associate dean positions were created that draw from the faculty: associate dean of faculty affairs, associate dean of advising, and the third announced position, associate dean for curriculum and pedagogy, which was filled in 2019. This scale of change can be disruptive, but also provides significant opportunity at the College because of the different strengths that each incumbent brings.

Some individuals who have been at Bennington for many decades raised the Symposium, a sweeping and radical vision for Bennington introduced by executive leadership and the Board of Trustees in 1994. This vision ushered in dramatic changes including the loss of faculty positions

in English and Languages, the redefinition of faculty status, and other structural reorganization of administrative offices. Some faculty described the outcome of the Symposium as having a lasting, and indeed continuing, impact on morale, leading to some lore that feeds mistrust of administrative leaders and processes generally. This seems to be felt most keenly now in relation to the faculty review process.

Despite the legacy of that time in the College's history, the faculty remains invested in the success of the College, well beyond ensuring the academic achievements of their students. They see the importance of representing faculty interests and advocating for each other in formal and informal ways. The modes of decision-making are described as collaborative, mission-driven, and based in conversation. The Self-Study accurately captures the ambivalence of faculty who embrace the more fluid, less structured, informal modes of interaction, but who also want some semblance of guidelines and predictability. They seek more opportunity to lead, but bristle at the notion of being led. One faculty member described this phenomenon as "climbing up the walls of freedom," while another called Bennington an "experiment in radical democracy," where each person is needed to contribute to the whole without sacrificing their individuality. The flexibility of a system without the rules and hierarchy faculty see at other institutions allows the College, in their view, to be nimble, responsive, and unhampered by protocol and administrative structures.

At the same time, faculty clearly express the desire to have a voice in the future of the college. What having a voice means is unclear. There are five elected faculty committees, and the purpose of each is outlined in the faculty handbook. Three of them concern general operations and practice: the Faculty Performance Review Committee (FPRC), Academic Policies Committee (APC), and the College Steering Committee (CSC). These committees are, respectively, concerned with reviewing faculty performance; curriculum development and oversight; and long-term policy and planning on a range of matters, including those related to finance, admissions and academics. The CSC was established in 2015 by then-Provost and Dean Roche with input from then-President Silver and members of the Academic Policies Committee. CSC representatives are elected at large and also include three representatives from other committees (six faculty members in total). Its members set and run the Bennington faculty meeting, and the Committee has a broad charge to participate in decision-making as it directs admissions, administrative policy, the financial position of the College, faculty affairs, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. The CSC also meets with Trustees. There is some overlap in the description of the roles of these committees, which makes it unclear which of them are charged with making recommendations, establishing policy, and officially representing faculty opinion. The visiting team was told that the CSC functions as a liaison between faculty and administrators. However, members were unclear whether their role was to represent faculty, assume a broad institutional perspective, or mediate between faculty and administrators. If this committee is to serve as an autonomous, representative body that can shape policy, that remit is not readily apparent to faculty.

The complicated role of the CSC was illustrated by a recent issue. Faculty reported to the visiting team that they had not received a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) since 2015. At the behest of the Faculty Forum (an unofficial faculty collective that meets often), they began to advocate with senior administrators for the restoration of COLA, and claim that this did not happen until they met with Trustees, leading to a positive outcome in 2019. What faculty concluded from this is that a representative faculty voice is important, consensus with academic administrators may not be

effective, and that regular access to Trustees is essential. While the increase was higher for nearly all faculty in 2019 (2.5%), the College shared a table indicating that there had been adjustments to faculty salaries in each year, with most faculty receiving an adjustment in all but 2018, when only one individual received an increase.

There are two other elected faculty committees in addition to the four detailed above. Both the Faculty Review Appeals Committee and the Faculty Committee on Grievance manage faculty-initiated complaints regarding faculty academic review and academic freedom violations. While welcome structures, some faculty expressed concern about the efficacy of these two committees.

One other committee that faculty mentioned with regularity was the Curriculum Planning Committee (CPC). This is comprised of the dean of research, planning and assessment, the associate dean for curriculum and pedagogy, as well as faculty representatives from each discipline group (interdisciplinary entities that exist in lieu of traditional departments or divisions), who are appointed by the provost and dean of the college. The CPC is the body responsible for curriculum planning as well as curriculum review and approval. In the absence of a departmental structure, representatives operate as *de facto* department chairs. They report engaging in administrivia, rather than being able to focus on the curriculum writ large. While it was reported that the lack of minutes for these meetings also seems to contribute to a sense of repetition, the visiting team was assured that minutes of the CPC meetings have been recorded and circulated since 2011.

Overall, what is clear is that faculty truly want to work alongside College administrators and trustees in the stewardship of the College. Since faculty committees are advisory, and some include administrators as members, there is concern about the opportunity to present a distinct and unified faculty voice; one that can have an impact on the College's future. Right now, Faculty Forum is perceived as the only venue that privileges that voice. The Faculty Handbook is broadly understood as an imperfect document, one that often captures and codifies existing practice rather than regulating and directing faculty governance. This might indicate that the Handbook has multiple purposes, serving both as historical record of existing policy, as well as a legislative guide that empowers faculty. Faculty are also in search of clear, transparent, and regular lines of communication regarding the state of the College. They consistently recognized the commitment of the interim president to establishing those lines of communication and fostering dialog, and praised her for her lucid and detailed accounting of the state of the College.

While being similarly dedicated to Bennington's mission, staff also express similar opinions. They find all-staff meetings an important and valuable venue where they learn about the College, from planning and budget to student outcomes. They also credit the interim president for providing a level of depth and detail about the College that leaves them feeling well-informed. They appreciate her interest in developing an open exchange of ideas; they wish to move beyond using a subset of trusted staff as a conduit for delivering information to senior staff. One possibility mentioned was establishing a formally recognized organization which would represent their viewpoints, perhaps by reconstituting the Staff Association. They appreciate that the college enables staff to share feedback anonymously: currently staff can provide feedback regarding college matters in writing via black boxes throughout campus or through an on-line platform. But beyond that, they wish to retain clear lines of communication with senior leaders and to continue to be privy to the financial status of the College. They cited a recent example of this transparency, where following a spate of

college closures in New England (including a number in Vermont), former President Silver emailed staff and faculty, inviting them to open meetings so they could discuss this news in more detail.

According to staff, Human Resources is a helpful and capable office. They articulated how, as budget cuts reduced the funds available for off-campus professional development, HR has stepped in to supplement training. While reporting that they have assumed more work as financial constraints remain, they also noted that the senior leadership has been responsive to staff, especially following the many challenges of the spring. For example, they noted with great appreciation how, instead of having only a few days off around the July 4 holiday, the College recognized the additional stress and burden of the preceding semester, and awarded additional vacation days.

Staff also expressed, however, the need for a more sustainable support system for their queer colleagues, and for colleagues of color. Because they are in a minority, it is felt that they assume outsized responsibility for the support of marginalized students (not dissimilar to the concerns raised about faculty in Standard Six). In addition, staff expressed a wish that the College be more mindful about the ways in which Bennington's rural location in Vermont leads to feeling of isolation among their co-workers, as well as among students.

Student self-governance has not been successful in many years, due to apparent lack of interest. The students report that the Student Educational Policies Committee (SEPC) provides access to academic decision-making and that house chairs provide access to residential decisions. Reflecting the more informal and individualized approaches at Bennington, there is no recent tradition of student government, and past attempts to institute such structures have foundered. House chairs provide important peer infrastructure and support, but the role is limited in scope.

While students are engaged, they recognize the lack of a more formal structure through which they could share their concerns. They did not have ideas for how to gain the structure, and they seemed to be in agreement that the formal student government approach is not fitting within the culture of Bennington.

In short, among both faculty and staff, as well as among the students with whom we met, there seems to be a desire, and a good faith commitment, to figuring out shared governance, and an understanding that they are victims of the success of the individualized, flat-hierarchy nature of the College, even as they desire a greater voice in its governance. And, while it is far from clear that there is a shared understanding of shared governance, there is now a shared willingness on the part of both faculty and staff to develop structures and guidelines that move Bennington toward a more recognizable model.

## **STANDARD FOUR: The Academic Program**

Bennington takes great pride in its student-centered education that seldom strays from placing the individual student at the heart of the academic program. There is tremendous buy-in and enthusiasm for Bennington’s distinctive brand of progressive education, variously described by trustees and faculty as “nimble”, “like a start-up”, and “off-road.” At Bennington, academic freedom is a core precept and a real strength. Academic freedom does not simply mean, however, the freedom to teach whatever the faculty member pleases. The faculty talk within and across their disciplines about the courses necessary to maintain an active and committed liberal arts curriculum, about which courses to offer in order to address student interests, and they have the freedom to propose new courses that are current in their disciplines and responsive to global issues, to recent events, and which participate compellingly in civic conversations.

Bennington offers a single undergraduate baccalaureate degree (BA), a post-graduate premedical program for college graduates, and three low-residency Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degrees in writing and literature, the performing arts, and public action. The Self-Study (and discussions on campus) stress the centrality of the BA degree, but the institution’s foundational commitment to the individuality of student-directed study is also evident in the graduate programs.

Measuring the consistency of the academic programs, in terms of how the institution’s mission and purpose is met, proves challenging at Bennington, not least because of the historical resistance to asserting a mission statement. “Why is this?” The Self-Study asks: “Bennington simply does not want to tie its educational philosophy – so heavily reliant on process – to language that would be fixed forever more” (2).

The most recent NECHE interim report (2016) forced the question, and led to discussions within the community that yielded two important touchstones for considering the academic program within a deliberate, intentional context. First, the College has embraced its “Commencement Statement” as a potential mission statement. As such, the following key concepts direct the academic program at Bennington:

- education as an ethical and intellectual process
- individuality
- creative intelligence
- aesthetic sensibility
- students’ “varied natural endowments”
- Self-fulfillment
- constructive social purposes; and, most especially,
- “active participation in the planning of their own programs and the regulation of their own lives on campus.” (Self-Study, 4).

## Assuring Academic Quality

The quality of the academic program is, in one sense, measured one student at a time. This is conducted with more than appropriate faculty oversight, given that any individual student will have at least one faculty adviser, and sometimes several, over the course of their undergraduate career, as well as a Plan Committee consisting of an additional two faculty members invested in the student's success. Student progress is charted through various Plan touchpoints, in semesters 3, 6, and 8; this is in addition to narrative evaluations by faculty in each of the student's courses. Review of sample Plan dossiers demonstrates clear evolution and maturity of intellectual engagement on the part of individual students. Administrative offices support the workings of the Plan at a more collective level, especially in the office of the dean of studies. If a Plan is unrealistically broad or insufficiently charted, there is a mechanism by which the Plan is deferred, and the Plan committee convenes a semester later in order to review the revised Plan.

Oversight of the academic program at the institutional level is conducted by senior Academic Affairs administrators in partnership with a number of committees that have hybrid administrative/faculty constitutions. These comprise the College Steering Committee, the Academic Policies Committee, and the Curriculum Planning Committee. Oversight of teaching excellence is conducted through regular faculty reviews and that work is directed by the Faculty Performance Review Committee, which offers its recommendations on contract renewals (but not contract length or compensation) to the President.

There are regular academic program reviews and a new round is set to begin. It will be important for each discipline to engage in the assessment of student learning according to its learning outcomes (some areas still need to develop these) in order to augment the learning outcomes that exist at the College level and the course level. External reviewers will help advise Bennington faculty on whether or how to group disciplinary areas with low numbers, including at least one with less than a full-time faculty member, and others with faculty resources but low student numbers. Assessment of program effectiveness should also include whether the scaffolding from 2000-level course to 4000-level courses is sufficient to provide foundational knowledge to those seeking upper-level coursework and whether or not the advanced coursework is sufficiently rigorous.

There is an established mechanism to test English proficiency for international students before they matriculate and, once at Bennington, they benefit from the support of a newly-hired ELL staff member within the writing area who also offers workshops to First Year Forum groupings.

The expectations for student achievement, independent learning, information literacy, skills in inquiry, and critical judgment are appropriate and, as judged by the syllabi provided to the visiting team, quite rigorous. Syllabi were quite uneven in the level of detail provided; some include only a short course description while others are fully fleshed-out with College-level student learning outcomes, course-specific learning outcomes, assignments and a weekly schedule. It would be beneficial to provide guidelines for expectations with regard to syllabi content and to assess these during faculty reviews, with appropriate feedback, in order to achieve more consistency at the higher level of detail.

A healthy 9:1 student ratio, the number of continuing faculty and the stability of the programs allay any concern that The College's uncertain finances are impacting the academic program.

## Undergraduate Degree Programs and General Education

Bennington has settled on the adoption of “college-wide learning outcomes – called the Capacities, [as an] embodiment of [its] mission...and points favorably to [their] ability to articulate the education [the College] provides in direct and concrete terms.” (Self-Study, 3). Thus, the Capacities compose the supports and mainstays of the academic programs. Namely, “a Bennington education will strengthen in each student the capacity to:

- **Inquire:** to construct a substantive and meaningful line of questioning that is informed by relevant work;
- **Research:** to develop their knowledge and familiarity with the ideas that are particularly relevant to their inquiry;
- **Create:** to create and revise work, in collaboration with others and individually;
- **Engage:** to develop an awareness of, and the skills to meaningfully participate in larger intellectual, artistic, and civic communities; and
- **Communicate:** to develop the skills to effectively share their work with the world and respectfully respond to critiques thereof” (Self-Study, 26-27).

Indeed, the 2019 Self-Study asserts that “all our academic structures – from the Plan process to the means by which students achieve their goals defined within it, namely the curriculum, Field-Work Term, and co-curricular work – are intended to further develop the Capacities . because they provide a foundation for a meaningful, self-directed education” (27).

Development of the Capacities as institutional outcomes is positive, even though it is still a work-in-progress to embed them in both the culture and the classroom. They will be strengthened further if it is clear how it will be known when those outcomes are met. Introduction of a baseline student self-assessment in the new First Year Forum can down the line, with a later assessment, provide one piece of the answer.

One would, therefore, expect to find regular and frequent references to the Capacities in course syllabi, in student First-Year Essays, in Plan design, in Field-Work proposals and reflections, in Senior Year Essays. One would expect to see the Capacities serve as student learning outcomes across the curriculum, attended to in course proposals, and assessed (directly and indirectly), and in the Program Review Guidelines. And yet, the measures of and evidence about the success of these five intellectual activities can only be found inconsistently in any of those places. Faculty expressed a variety of reactions to the Capacities framework – from “they are embedded throughout the curriculum,” to “they simply give a name to what we’ve always been doing,” to outright resistance because they were imposed “top down.”

While faculty are encouraged to employ the Capacities overtly in their narrative evaluations of student coursework and to make direct references to them in Plan meetings (3-4 faculty for each student Plan), the Self-Study discloses that assessments of these uses remain inconsistent at best. Our review of the sample Plans and the syllabi provided to us demonstrates that this is indeed the

case. If faculty are not using these concepts to guide their teaching and their Plan advising, then it comes as no surprise that “students, in turn, have not adopted the language of the Capacities consistently” (34). Even though the Self Study identifies a tension between faculty and administrators, and a perception of the “Capacities” as a top-down initiative, it is nevertheless agreed that there remains a need to more tightly and overtly incorporate these pillars in the academic culture and in the deployment of the academic program (48). The recent addition of the First-Year Forum is a sound move in this direction, paying as it does particular attention to the Capacities, introducing language to the faculty, training faculty in using the language of the Capacities in their Plan work with students, and embedding the Capacities as a marker of the Bennington experience into student culture from the start of their education. Some of that embedding will continue with the development and execution of Plan writing groups for second-year students. Although Bennington plans to assess these initiatives, it remains equally important to develop systematic, regularized methods of measuring knowledge of, commitment to, and learning around Capacities.

While Capacities “seem natural” to the Bennington experience, and perhaps every course has some component of every Capacity, it remains unclear how individual courses directly incorporate or attend to Capacities. Course proposals require course descriptions, which may or may not overtly address one or more Capacities; syllabi may or may not mention Capacities; no systematic tagging of Capacities makes them visible to faculty, advisors, or to students. Again, these absences make it difficult to measure student progress in both qualitative and quantitative ways.

The intentional scaffolding of the Bennington BA degree seems evident in the steps required in the Plan process. The student works with an advisor, completes a reflective First-Year Essay, designs a Plan that includes Field-Work Terms as well as 2000 and 4000 level courses and self-directed research, and their learning culminates in a Senior Reflective Essay. In terms of academic content, however, faculty advisors are frustrated with the First-Year and Senior Reflective Essays, and view them as lacking in intellectual substance. Bennington is to be applauded for its assessment and readjustment of the first-year entry point, with the launch of the First Year Forum (one outcome of the three-year Mellon grant) that provides more structure to first year academic advising and the First year Essay. The First Year Forum demonstrates Bennington’s ability to continue iterating and improving on its promise, in this case, reducing the variability in the advising experience and strengthening the intellectual core of the pre-Plan essay submitted in the third semester. Willingness to balance Bennington’s celebrated culture of self-reliance with such support systems and structures seems to be a very positive development.

Similar assessments and revisions around the Senior Essay as the culminating point of the Plan are awaited.

Further, the scaffolding of knowledge as one moves through the curriculum is limited to 2000 and 4000 courses. The primary difference between a 2000-level course and a 4000-level course is in the prerequisites: 2000-level courses do not have prerequisites whereas 4000-level courses do, even though some of those are not always explicitly stated.

In 2009, Bennington began its ten-year cycle of program reviews that combined internal reflection with external evaluation. The second round begins in the fall of 2019. The reviews demonstrate

not only intensive reflection by faculty on teaching, student work, and alumni feedback, but have also resulted in specific recommendations (e.g. the change in the name of a concentration from “Social Sciences” to “Society, Culture, and Thought,” or re-situating introductory language courses within the curriculum). Continued attention to the reviews and their consequential action plans will realize the ongoing, meaningful growth from assessment to curricular revision.

Because “the role of the faculty is to help students refine their own questions, to give them the tools they will need to adeptly and diligently pursue the subjects of their inquiries, and to guide them as they create truly original works characterized by informed insights” (Self-Study, 29), the Bennington curriculum thrives on its fluidity and responsiveness to student and faculty interests – actualizing what one faculty member called the “particularly organic nature of the Bennington experience” when those interests intersect. The BA degree does not require specific courses, and so all courses are electives until they appear within a student’s Plan.

Conversation operates as the coin of the realm at Bennington and enables students and faculty to identify and propose courses on topics of immediate “pulled from the headlines” interest in “pop-up” courses, as well as two- or four-credit courses planned one semester or more in advance. Such fluid curricular planning creates a responsive, evolving curriculum that underscores Bennington’s progressive educational model. However, it also practically disadvantages students’ intentional forward-moving design of their programs of study, decreases the effectiveness of advisors, who need to know course options well enough and sufficiently in advance to guide students appropriately, and interferes with adept and strategic resource allocation “on the basis of academic planning, needs, and objectives” (standard 4.7). Tutorials further confound issues of resource allocation, impeding the curricular visibility necessary for students and faculty to have a solid sense of their work over one-, two-, or even three-year cycles.

The Standards require that all degree recipients demonstrate competency across the primary domains of knowledge (social sciences, sciences including math, and arts and humanities). At Bennington, there are no distribution or breadth requirements. Rather, the vehicle of Plan form steers the Committee to identify areas of study to complement that main line of inquiry. In conversation with the Associate Dean for Curriculum and Pedagogy and others, it was emphasized that Plan committees ensure adequate breadth. However, the perusal of sample Plans and conversations with students during the visit gave the visiting team the impression that many Bennington students graduate without such breadth.

An audit of the degrees of graduates would provide evidence in support of or against this impression. Such an audit could similarly offer evidence of the balance between lower-level and advanced-level courses that are typical in a student’s record.

## The Major or Concentration

Bennington is not organized into more traditional academic departments. Instead, discipline groups “house” (28) faculty and serve as the homes for student Plans. These discipline groups are: the Center for the Advancement of Public Action (CAPA); Dance; Drama; Cultural Studies and Languages; Literature; Music; Science and Math; Society, Culture, and Thought; and Visual Arts. Individual faculty advisors oversee student Plans, which are often aligned with two discipline

groups. The advisor shepherds and provides critical feedback to the student to achieve breadth, depth, and advanced work in the proposed plan of study.

Students determine their own areas of study through the Plan. Each student works with a faculty committee comprising three or four members who review the student's Plan, guide the student through the various courses and iterations of their Plan, and assure that the individual Plan has breadth and depth. The Plan Committee often crosses disciplinary lines and, by design, directs students not only within but also across disciplines.

The Self-Study identifies a general faculty desire to be more deliberate in creating and supporting interdisciplinarity in student Plans. Faculty across campus reported the desire to do so and, in this area as in others, the faculty and College must move beyond identifying an issue and discussing it toward implementing a solution. The best example of that movement comes in the development of the First-Year Forum to serve student Plan preparation and to improve the depth and quality of faculty advising.

## Graduate Programs

Bennington offers three MFA degrees, the MFA in Writing, MFA in Dance, and MFA in Public Action. The MFA in Writing (also known as the "Bennington Writing Seminars") was one of the first to adopt the low residency model now popular with many MFA programs in which students spend 10 days in January and June in residence, supplemented by packet exchanges (about 100 hours per work for each packet) with a single faculty member in guided writing/study during the interim. Each student completes two residencies and concludes with a fifth term. Students in the MFA in Writing program are accepted on the strength of their creative work and need not have completed an undergraduate degree. As graduate students, they complete their studies with at least one full manuscript in their selected genre (poetry, fiction, nonfiction, or dual-genres) and they complete (and deliver) one academic lecture. To date, the five terms of the program consistently engage students in scaffolded integrations of critical and academic work within a genre (or dual-genre), and conclude with the fifth residency's delivery of a creative thesis, a 25-30-minute lecture, and a formal reading of creative work, thereby demonstrating professional mastery in three forms (creative work, academic lecture, and public performance). However, following a review of the quality of the 25-30-minute lectures, the MFA Writing program director and the faculty will implement a curriculum change in the summer 2020 to replace the lecture with a more extensive, developed, and critiqued critical essay, which is to be reviewed by a faculty panel.

The MFA in Dance is a two-year program of, ideally, four consecutive terms during which students complete 16 credits each term. Students design their own programs in close consultation with faculty, and a 6-credit graduate research course centers their work. They complete advanced work in the undergraduate courses they might take. MFA-Dance students participate in the Works-in-Progress programs, and often engage in undergraduate teaching and faculty collaboration as they hone their professional and artistic skills.

Whereas the MFA in Writing does not require a baccalaureate degree and candidates are judged solely on their creative submissions, the MFA in Dance and the MFA in Public Action expects applicants to have "substantial professional experience" beyond undergraduate studies. The MFA in Public Action, which began in Fall 2018, fosters "accomplished artists working as agents of

social change” (website) to provide them with the opportunity to combine new work with academic research. The MFA in Public Action requires two years “wherein each candidate completes 16 credits of coursework each term, comprised of 6 credits in the course Graduate Research in Public Action, 4 credits in the Course Pedagogy of Public Action, 2 credits in the Graduate Assistantship” (43) and a combination of 2-4 credit tutorials (for a total of 64 credits). The program places students with a faculty mentor as they teach a 4-credit undergraduate course.

Taken as a whole, these three programs move individual artists beyond undergraduate studies and progressively through advanced coursework, meaningful self-designed and mentored creative work, and complementary teaching experiences that develop the entrepreneurial realities of the creative career. The students are taught by seasoned professionals drawn from the Bennington faculty and by well-known and qualified professionals.

Bennington also offers a post-baccalaureate program to prepare students for graduate programs in the health sciences. This enables 8-10 students without prior science backgrounds to complete in a single year (Fall, Spring, and Summer sessions) the 8 courses required in the physical and biological sciences, many with associated labs.

### Integrity in the Award of Credit

The Bennington BA degree requires 128 credits of academic work, completion of the Plan, and one Field Work Term (FWT) for every two terms of full-time undergraduate study at the College. The Registrar’s Office maintains transcripts of student work, including Plan statements and narrative course evaluations. Faculty determine course credit in terms of in-class hours per term (1 credit for 13 hours per term, 2 credits for 26 hours, and 4 credits for 52 hours). The connection between time spent in the classroom and out-of-class preparation is not specified (49). Students may elect to take a course for a grade or not, but all students receive narrative evaluations that become part of their transcripts.

The current curriculum and selection of courses (along with past curriculum offerings) is available online. The flexibility of the curriculum, extensive faculty involvement in student Plans, and the tutorial options assure that students can complete their degrees within the typical program length (two or four years for the MFA and BA respectively).

Bennington maintains control over the academic offerings, from curricular proposal to syllabus development to course offerings. While publication of learning outcomes and attention to the Capacities has been uneven in course syllabi, the increased prompts in various Plan and narrative evaluations of student work have attempted to bring these increasingly to the fore. Narrative evaluations provide description and analysis of student work on an individual basis. This tailored feedback attends to the student’s developmental trajectory and progress as learners of course material.

Bennington also maintains integrity over its degree in its cross-enrollment opportunities with Williams College. The established parameters around student eligibility give students freedom in selecting courses from the Williams catalog, and require the student to describe how the identified course fits with their Plan.

The innovative Prison Education Initiative (PEI) extends the reach of the Bennington teacher-practitioner and student-directed learning to the Great Meadow Correctional Facility in Comstock, NY. The program aims to enable incarcerated students to earn an academic degree that positions them for further education or better employment after their release. Bennington faculty teach off-site, have determined the curriculum, run the program across three semesters yearly, complete student evaluations, and hold students to the same expectations as on-campus programs.

Bennington has clear transfer policies and processes for undergraduate students described in the Self-Study and published in the Student Handbook. At the graduate level, the College does not accept transfer credits in the MFA in Public Action or MFA in Dance. However, the MFA in Writing has recently transferred credits for one student, rejected a transfer petition from a second, and is considering a transfer request from a third. The stated transfer credit policy of this program is to accept no more than 16 out of 64 degree credits.

Bennington is in the first year of a pilot program which grants credit for prior learning. Transfer credits are limited to 64, with 64 credits earned at Bennington in order to earn the Bennington BA degree. Bennington has a number of academic partnerships, many through CAPA, as well as an extensive network of Field Work placements.

There is an appropriate and clearly published policy on plagiarism in the Faculty Handbook and on the website. Articulated as the Academic and Artistic Ethics Policy, it defines plagiarism as contrary to the values of the College and outlines both the process (including appeals) and various consequences, depending upon the number of offenses. Policies on Academic Standing are published in the Student Handbook and on the website and clearly outline the different statuses (notice, warning, probation, SAP plan, appeals) and the roles of the Provost, Dean of the College, and Dean of Studies.

Grade distribution reports made available to the visiting team as well as a chart on the increase in the percentage of failing grades over the past half-decade demonstrate integrity in the award of grades for individual courses.

In summary, it is important that, in addition to guidance provided by the Plan committees and faculty advisors, disciplinary groups make expectations for rigor and quality explicit and transparent. It is clear that, within the Plan, the Senior essay is not fulfilling its purpose as a culminating ‘capstone’ component. The decision to move its submission date to the start rather than the end of the 8th semester is one way to encourage intellectual seriousness, but other ways need to be found as well.

Since there are no Department chairs, faculty oversight of the curriculum is inconsistent. It was characterized by one faculty member as “nebulous” and “idiosyncratic,” and varies greatly across disciplines. Faculty expressed concerns in a climate survey, and also during the site visit, that they do not have sufficient voice in decisions and policies. This is beginning to shift with the transparency demonstrated by the interim president and with the appointment of faculty to three new academic deanships. These positions bridge curricular initiatives (that seem to be top-down), make those initiatives more visible to faculty and students, and ensure their integration into the Bennington experience. Given the unique challenges of curricular planning at Bennington, the

expected changes to the ways in which the Curriculum Planning Committee operates will ideally offer more faculty oversight.

While assessment of student learning within courses and the Plan is strong and ongoing, there is insufficient assessment of student learning beyond those areas (within the disciplines, or with respect to the College-wide institutional outcomes, or Capacities). Institutional assessment of degree breadth (across the primary domains of knowledge) and depth (the number and rigor of advanced classes) would also be beneficial. In general, assessment too often consists of conversations that seldom resolve with deliberate implementation plans to execute change which can then, in turn, be assessed. The recent changes in the MFA in Writing Program (to increase faculty of color and LGBTQI+ hires, to reconsider the transfer of credit policy, and to reconsider key features of student critical work) might serve an exemplar.

## **STANDARD FIVE: Students**

Bennington College describes its students as intellectually curious, engaged, independent doers. The College seeks to create a diverse campus community of progressive, creative and autonomous students. Bennington enrolls traditional undergraduate students and graduate students who are both part time and full time. The NECHE letter of 2018 required the comprehensive review to focus on success with enrollment goals. While many of the strategies outlined in the 10-year plan for enrollment have begun, the college enrollment over the past four years has not approached its goals. Current enrollment averages between 699 to 741 with the current year enrollment of 714 undergrads and 98 graduate students.

Students apply to Bennington through the common application or the dimensional application which allows for portfolio or a collection of work completed in high school. Online information includes procedures for home schooled students and other special circumstances. Print materials outline the academic philosophy of the school and the mechanics of the Plan as well as post graduate data to appeal to prospective applicants.

The new vice president for enrollment, a new director of admissions, and six other new staff in admissions and financial aid have brought new energy to the enrollment strategy. The College uses practices standard in the sector, including SLATE software for integrated outreach and recruitment. The Admissions staff also relies heavily on personal contact from alumni, high school counselors and others who are familiar with the College, and several students mentioned during the visit that they were introduced to Bennington in this way. The Admissions department prides itself on maintaining professional best practices and approaches by its involvement with the NCAC and the College Board. Bennington is test optional and eliminated its application fee for first year students. The College has also introduced more rigor in the review process in an attempt to impact yield and retention.

Turnover in the Admissions and Enrollment area have resulted in inconsistent results in meeting enrollment goals. From 2013-15 the number of applicants declined; however, from 2016-18 they rebounded with a new approach to recruit international students using technology and partnerships such as the United World College. This strategy leaves Bennington vulnerable due to changes in the number of international students attending US colleges. A recent decline in applications of 11% in 2019 was attributed largely to a decline in international applications. Diversity of the domestic students has grown through partnerships with KIPP foundation schools. Enrollment of diverse domestic students has grown from an average of 12% between 2008 and 2013 to 21% of the incoming class in 2019. Pell eligible students have also increased from a low of 14% in 2008 to 25% in the current class, with first generation students at 21% in the current class (Self-Study, 60).

The strategies outlined for the 2019-2020 admission cycle are robust and include changes to the application process by reducing the number of essays and earlier notification for both early action and regular decision applicants. Strengthening partnerships with feeder high schools and an expansion of the recruitment territories, including specific territories in countries where they have not yet been represented, have already begun. The current yield of 22% is a concern for the College, which is planning a number of strategies to increase the yield by increasing the number

of inquiries and applicants, and also by increasing visits to campus earlier in the process, early notification, and additional programming at the yield stage. One international student mentioned that ongoing, close contact with Admissions staff was a factor in her decision to attend Bennington. Another student who works in the Admissions office mentioned the value that the staff have for personal contact with the families of prospective students.

Despite a number of strategies to increase the applicant pool, identifying students who will “fit” at Bennington has not been clearly articulated. Student concern about “fit” is a factor in attrition. To address this issue, the College strategically reviews the retention data of students from different “feeder” high schools, and periodically changes the mix of names purchased in order to increase applications and improve yield and retention.

While admission is one part of the enrollment picture, retention is also a key factor. After a 5- year decline in the retention rate of first year to second year, the 2018 entering cohort has been retained at 82% (up from 73% the previous year). Efforts to strengthen retention have been spearheaded by the Retention Task Force whose focus has been to analyze data on why students leave. In 2016, the task force was expanded to include representatives from Student Life, Admissions and Financial Aid, and the dean of studies. Through sharing of information, they are able to change practices to enhance retention in various areas across campus. There is little assessment of the current student experience to provide data that would determine the effectiveness of the efforts of the task force, however the retention rate of the current class may be an indicator of progress. Identifying at-risk students and employing strategies to improve their experience has not been the purview of the committee, and it is not clear whether there is any systematic coordination in support of such students.

The graduation rate is a serious concern at 59% over 4 years and 76% over 6 years. Further study of the reasons for this wide range has been undertaken by the Retention Task Force. While the mental health leave of absence is surmised to account for 30% of the leaves, other forms of attrition are yet to be examined. One hypothesis is that the progressive education provided by Bennington allows for students to take more time to reflect and clarify their academic goals and therefore time off might be appropriate. If such a hypothesis were to prove to be true, and were this trend to persist over time, the College might consider presenting it as an option that could be planned for, both by the student and the institution.

Bennington offers both need-aware and merit-based aid to students, with 90% of students receiving some form of aid. \$24 millions of institutional scholarships were awarded to students in the 2018-19 year. The college voluntarily issues an annual student debt letter outlining repayment plans and resources for graduates. The college reports a 2.9% cohort default rate compared to the national rate of 11.9%. College work study opportunities have been a challenge; however, the college has increased opportunities for work study students by utilizing the new software Handshake and requiring students to use it to apply for on campus jobs. Handshake allows the College to give preference in employing students who have federal work-study. Campus employment is also being considered a valuable part of the academic Plan, allowing students to reflect on the learning from their campus positions. A work readiness curriculum is being offered in the first year to assist with this process.

## Student Services and Co-Curricular Experiences

The institution ensures a systematic approach to accessible and effective student support programs through its first-year orientation program and the First-Year Forum described under Standard Four. Students are grouped by residential house community and by First-Year Forum cohorts to learn the values of the College, including the mechanics of the academic program, including the Field Work terms. They are assigned advisors who eventually work with them on their academic Plan. They also attend sessions on bystander education, and take online courses for alcohol education and sexual assault prevention. Academic policies are reiterated throughout the course of the year through the publication the *Academic Minute*, which is emailed to students weekly. Several students commented on how helpful this is. The faculty for the First-Year Forum serve as the faculty advisor. These classes cover the Bennington approach to education, review processes and address transitional issues. Ongoing, required workshops address community life topics. The APC has recently approved expectations for advising in an attempt to ensure consistency. An advising survey was conducted in 2015 and has been administered again since then. Based on feedback from these surveys, a new “advising hub” was developed as a useful tool to consolidate student information for the faculty advisor, compiling information from a variety of sources.

The traditional Bennington college commencement statement is used to articulate the mission of the college and the values that underlie the student experience. The Student Life division at Bennington has been in transition as the institution moves forward with a model of self-governance of the residential and student experience in recognition of today’s student. The new dean of students was promoted into this role in January 2019, and recently assumed leadership of the public safety and health and psychological services. A comprehensive Student Handbook is available online and outlines process and procedures for academic and field work, community standards and policies, and procedures for student safety. Future plans for a restorative justice model and mediation training will further the administration of a fair and ethical student conduct system.

The new leadership of the Student Life division has brought a new professional focus to the College’s work in this arena. There are 30 staff members who support the student experience. Most hold bachelor’s degrees, with those in the dean and director levels holding advanced degrees. A new assistant dean position was created to support the residential experience. Health Services, Psychological Services, and Campus Safety are now a part of the division and allow for integrated support services. In the fall of 2017, psychological services, health services and health promotion joined together in a newly renovated building to become the student health center. A “students of concern” team meets weekly to ensure supportive structures for students who are at risk.

Psychological Services is staffed with 7 clinical professionals (6 full time therapists and 1 part-time psychiatrist) who provide a variety of services including opportunities for individuals and groups. Health Services is staffed with a full-time physician and a part-time nurse practitioner. Approximately 30% of the student body has used Psychological Services in the past year, which is consistent with NCHA survey data. Bennington has recently been named a JED campus, working with the JED foundation to strengthen mental health, suicide prevention and substance abuse prevention efforts. The JED campus program has allowed for a student Healthy Minds Survey and a self-assessment of structures and policies that will be used to develop a strategic plan for implementation over the 4 years in the program. While faculty were not involved with the self-assessment, academic administrators were. The new integrated structure, with Health and

Psychological Services and Public Safety working closely with the dean of students, is very promising, especially when taken alongside the JED Foundation work. However, one barrier to access, identified by students, is the lack of a student health insurance plan that covers mental health. This is compounded by a paucity of options for off-campus therapy or treatment, particularly in light of the lack of diversity in the on-campus Psychological Services. The JED strategic plan may be able to help strategize on this concern by recommending technological solutions.

The residential model includes students from all classes in mixed communities, living together in houses. Recently, off-campus apartment-style housing options have been added, along with shuttle transportation. Consistent with their ethos of independent students and self-governance, the structures of the house management include undergraduates who serve as a house chair and a social chair. The house chairs model of self-governance includes undergraduates who are trained by the student affairs professionals to nurture community engagement and mitigate concerns regarding health, safety and community standards. They are supervised by professional staff in regular meetings during the semester. Their experience augments their learning and aligns well with their Plan development work. They facilitate roommate agreements and community living agreements to foster community. Recently the focus of the training has been on inclusive practices to ensure support of their increasingly diverse community. Social chairs of each house community help to infuse healthy and inclusive practices and mitigates unhealthy social activity.

While these roles have traditionally served to convene the community and liaise with the administration, the significant challenges of student mental health and substance use have added pressure to the house chair role and attendant risk to the college. This year the training for the house chairs included up to 8 hours of valuable content to support the role of identifying and referring students, however this is not enough training to assure the competence needed to address serious mental health concerns. Bennington must confront the challenge of how to live up to its value of self-governance and student leadership while also maintaining a safe residential environment for all students, including the house chairs.

According to the website there are 40 clubs and organizations created by student interest taking advantage of the beautiful campus surroundings. There are no faculty advisors to clubs and organizations, however two staff members in the Student Engagement office serve as advisors. There are no identity-based advisors (for Black, Asian, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ students) and students view this as a lack of concern for them on the part of the College, especially when such an advisor has been assigned to international students. Student government, and the leadership of clubs and organizations, continues to be a challenge, which is not entirely surprising, given the strong ethos of individuality and independence at Bennington. The Student Educational Policies Committee seems to be a very effective body in addressing issues affecting academic life. There are an array of clubs and organizations as well as club sports, recreation and residential leadership opportunities. The college may wish to examine its staffing levels in the student engagement and residential life area to ensure that these levels provide sufficient oversight to these areas.

## Advising

All first-year students receive a faculty advisor who oversees the development of their plan and serves as a mentor to help them develop key questions. Group advising in the First-Year Forum and the Plan committee offer additional connections with faculty. As noted in Standard 6, Bennington has identified faculty advising as an area which could use better methods for assessment. The institution places a high value on advising as a form of teaching, but it is not treated as such in the evaluation process.

First year students are also assigned a first-year counselor to assist with transition. International students are also provided with an advisor who is available to assist with admission and transition concerns, as well as an academic dean for academic services. Peer writing tutors and career assistants are also available for all students upon entry and throughout the four years. The international advisor also manages the immigration status, as well as CPT and OPT for students.

Faculty who oversee the programs serve as the advisors for graduate students. Postbac students also have an advisor who oversees the program. Training for faculty on how to support a student in distress has recently been added and may also need to be tied to a larger vision for student support. The JED Program will likely prove valuable in this regard

## Diversity

A recently appointed vice president for institutional inclusion, equity and leadership works across the college and reports directly to the president. This year, her second, she has implemented a faculty climate survey and has deployed programs to train and educate the community in order to equip the students with the skills to have difficult conversations. An action plan for diversity has not yet been developed. Student concerns include the need for a meeting space for identity development. We understand the College to be exploring this option.

## **STANDARD SIX: Teaching, Learning, & Scholarship**

### Faculty and Academic Staff

As an institution that grants both baccalaureate and master's degrees, the faculty at Bennington include those who teach only undergraduates, those who teach only graduate students, and those who teach both. There are 124 faculty spanning positions that are full-time, part-time, visiting, instrumentalists, as well as instructors in the MFA-Writing program. There are 16 academic staff. In June 2019, there were 78 FTE faculty teaching in the undergraduate program (9:1 student:faculty ratio) and 23 faculty dedicated solely to the writing program, in addition to a handful who teach students at both the levels of the BA and the MFA (all programs). It is important to note that while the faculty to the MFA in Writing are counted as part-time, they are designated as "core" faculty and teach year after year.

All faculty are nontenured and unranked, in keeping with Bennington's core principles and educational philosophy as a laboratory for teaching and learning that is nimble and responsive to students' intellectual interests. Historically, the governing principle was that all faculty were active practitioners in their fields, and thus would only be affiliated with the College for brief periods of time and would cycle in and out of the institution. Further, without tenure and rank, faculty would be equal to one another, regardless of the length of their appointments or discipline, and this would enable deliberations to occur in a truly egalitarian manner.

Each category of faculty has a specific set of responsibilities, outlined in the Faculty Handbook. Full- and part-time renewable faculty appointments are typically multi-year contracts that start as three years in length. Full-time faculty teach 20 credit hours of coursework. The maxima for class size range from 20 for 2000 level courses to 12 to 15 for advanced courses. In addition, Graduate Fellows in the MFA in Dance and the MFA in Public Action programs often take on teaching responsibility under the guidance of a faculty mentor. Faculty who teach only in the MFA Writing program have a different set of duties given the structure of its low-residency design. do not have set contract lengths. Reappointment contract lengths range from 3 to 10 years depending on the strength of a faculty member's performance, evaluated in the review process.

Faculty responsibilities are also outlined clearly in the letter of appointment. Such responsibilities include teaching, curriculum development, advising, and Plan committee participation. Faculty are expected to contribute to their discipline group, engage in committee and other College service, and participate in College-wide initiatives. As practitioners, they are also expected actively to pursue professional activities. Visiting faculty appointments are structured in response to specific curricular needs. They are often sabbatical replacements or serve to fill an existing curricular or disciplinary gap. They may teach for one semester or over the course of the academic year. Full-time faculty typically have three-, five-, or ten-year contracts with newer faculty having shorter contracts and the length of contract extension increasing somewhat after years of service, and dependent on periodic positive review of performance. Administrative/faculty appointments are a more recent category and include those who have advising and service duties, and lesser teaching responsibilities, so they can assume administrative duties; examples include the Usdan Gallery Curator and the director of undergraduate writing initiatives. The associate deans are rotating administrative positions held by faculty.

Given the nature of the Bennington undergraduate curriculum, faculty are selected for their specific training as practitioners and are not housed in traditional departments. Instead, they are affiliated with discipline groups that vary widely in size from 3 in Dance to 18 in Visual Arts. Hiring goals are determined by the Academic Policies Committee (APC), which consists of elected faculty, plus ex officio administrators, namely the President, Provost and Dean of the College, the Dean of Studies and the Vice President for Finance and Administration. The APC is charged with making recommendations concerning academic policy and planning. It conducts an extensive review in the Curricular Needs Assessment; according to the APC's 2017 memo to the faculty, this comprises "surveys of faculty, students, and alumni, narratives from each discipline, and data on the pressures and opportunities within the curriculum. Review of the Needs Assessment was followed by extensive discussion by the Committee, research on peer institutional hiring, and for new faculty hires, APC will review these requests and make recommendations to the President and Provost and Dean of the College."

MFA Writing faculty are hired and reviewed through a different process. They are recruited and hired by the Program Director with faculty input. Recently, the MFA Program Director noted that the then-faculty did not reflect the intellectual and creative needs and interests of students. As a result, he committed to hiring younger faculty as well as people of color and/or queer-identifying individuals. After hiring six new faculty in his first year, he reported that applications increased and that yield improved.

Considering the need for the curriculum to accommodate student interest and to anticipate course demand, it is clear that an ongoing protocol will be useful, one that reflects the discipline groups and interdisciplinary focus and ensures that the distribution of faculty within discipline groups is right-sized. Even as the distribution of recently hired faculty reflects Bennington's commitment to maintaining a liberal arts curriculum, it also creates some tension in the College's commitment to design a curriculum that directly reflects student interests and their self-direction. As indicated in the self-study (Standard Four: Academic Programs, 28-29), for 2017-18 students were distributed unevenly across the curriculum. One third are in Visual Arts, while only 18 (12%) are in Society, Culture, and Thought. When interdisciplinary plans are included, that number increases by 18 to 25 percent. There appears to be some tension, then, between the need to respond to faculty-driven interests in the evolution of their discipline groups and the shifting needs and interests of the students. While faculty explained that advising can often be managed quite effectively by colleagues in disciplines quite different from their advisee's area(s) of interest, the question still remains whether the curricular needs are effectively managed by the current staffing/hiring plan. As the College's core mission is to support student-led, self-directed intellectual work, it begs the question of how that can be sustained if the shifting needs and interests of students are not built into hiring plans. Further, this raises interesting questions regarding the curricular depth provided by the faculty as students move through their programs, while also ensuring cross-disciplinary breadth as students explore their options.

According to a March 2019 faculty salary benchmarking study, "investments over the course of fifteen years in personal adjustments to faculty salaries (about \$1.16 million since 2004, in addition to cost of living increases) have better positioned Bennington within the higher education landscape." Compared with two comparative sets of colleges, Bennington falls in the 81st

percentile for salaries. Starting faculty fare well, such that their salaries were higher on average than the comparison groups. Longer-serving faculty experience salary compression, however, and the College has expressed a commitment to address this. While overall progress has been made, faculty reported that they have experienced salary freezes, though, as discussed above (13), this was really only the case for most faculty in 2018-19. The College Steering Committee (consisting of six elected faculty) advocated to the president and trustees for a cost of living adjustment (COLA) to their salaries in 2019, an adjustment which was, according to the College administration, already planned. Developing a multi-year salary plan based on projected staffing needs would likely help shape a comprehensive hiring strategy for Bennington.

Bennington repeatedly asserts a desire to diversify the student body (international students and domestic students of color). As stated elsewhere in this report, those efforts risk failing or seeing less than satisfactory results as long as these students cannot find role models within the administration, faculty, and staff. The struggle to retain faculty, especially faculty of color, (Self-Study, 90) compromises even the richest academic endeavor. The time and money to recruit faculty feels ill-spent when that individual cannot be retained to participate in the full arc of institutional endeavor. Not only does the identity of the College writ large suffer because of its persistence as a white institution, but also the students of color (on campus and prospective) don't have immediately role models and the hallmark mentoring within the faculty. As a result, the faculty of color who do stay on campus bear a heavier, often invisible responsibility for mentoring and "unofficially" advising students even as it becomes increasingly more difficult to recruit students.

To that end, the hiring of a vice president for inclusion, equity, and leadership development stands as a noteworthy accomplishment. How that position exerts its influence and calls for accountability on all fronts will be an essential part of Bennington's future. The faculty expressed the "hidden tax" on faculty of color, many of whom hold Visiting positions, and stressed the importance of continuing to hire, retain, and support faculty and staff of color with whom students can identify, feel safe, and experience affinity. Staff report an attrition of under-represented people in their ranks, as well. The site visit offered a specific example in the MFA-Writing program, where the faculty program director noted the need for inclusion as a necessity for their collegial, creative, and academic community but also for meaningful recruitment of students of color. While this represents a special case, in that these faculty teach in low-residency programs and do not typically live locally, the Bennington administration should consider what it can learn from this case study, as well as how it will support other departments in attracting under-represented faculty to full-time positions at the College.

Full-time faculty typically teach 20 credits in an academic year. They undergo performance reviews toward the end of each contract period in a process overseen by the Faculty Performance Review Committee (FPRC) (Faculty Handbook). The provost, in conjunction with the advice of the FPRC, makes contract renewal and extension recommendations to the president. Reviews consider "the quality of teaching and advising, and the quality and quantity of professional work and service" and involve external reviewers to assist FPRC in assessing the professional work. Faculty characterized the review process itself as rigorous, comprehensive, and both equitable and fair, even though they would like more opportunity to respond to comments/contributions to the review made by members of the Bennington community. Faculty also noted that, historically, senior leaders had not been clear regarding what determined the length of the contracts they were

offered. This is reinforced by the 2019 college faculty climate survey. According to the May 2019 report of findings, faculty want more clarity regarding the review process. When asked whether there is clarity in evaluating their performance, significant numbers either strongly disagreed or disagreed for teaching (30.98%), scholarship/professional work (29.58%), service (38.03%) and most strikingly for advising (61.98%). Trustees have also discussed this issue. According to September 2019 Board meeting minutes, they explored the possibility of a reappointment process that would “help others understand why the appointments are different lengths” (2).

Plan advising and tutorials remain an elusive aspect of a faculty member’s workload. The institution is reviewing the assignment of workload credit to advising, a consideration that’s been facilitated by the implementation of the First-Year Forum. Similarly, the College is developing a process to assign one-twelfth of one workload credit to each tutorial a faculty undertakes. The workload has been described as difficult, challenging, yet rewarding. This perception appears to be borne out by the data. For example, just under 50% of faculty indicate in the climate survey that they are able to balance the range of teaching, advising, service and professional work expected of them.

Bennington’s faculty demonstrate the necessary academic and professional requirements to be teaching in a liberal arts college. Faculty credentialing ranges from PhD (35%) to MA (45%) and BA (16%). In traditional academic fields, faculty hold doctoral degrees (e.g., nearly all those in natural and social sciences and languages do (86); whereas faculty in the arts (writing, literature, dance, advanced degrees generally do not. Six open faculty searches are being conducted in 2019-20 for appointments beginning in 2020-21.

Recently, the College designed some faculty/administrative positions (gallery curator and director of undergraduate writing initiatives) that have a reduced teaching and advising load, as well as three new rotating associate dean positions (associate dean for advising, associate dean for curriculum and pedagogy, and associate dean for faculty affairs). These positions have involved the faculty—in these individual cases and collectively as a faculty—in some important assessment and resulting change initiatives at the College. For example, the associate dean for advising collaborates closely with the director of the first-year experience in designing and launching the First-Year Forum, an essential educational opportunity for incoming students and faculty. The course not only deliberately guides students through the unique Bennington culture of self-directed learning, but also introduces students to Capacities, to Plan, and helps them to navigate the specifics of curriculum and faculty mentoring. In addition, faculty report that through the piloting of this course they have become better advisors, aware of and more intentional in tracing and evaluating student Plans through the Capacities.

Academic freedom and the freedom for intellectual, self-directed inquiry characterizes the Bennington faculty as well as the Bennington academic program and overall culture. To that end, faculty have considerable latitude in deciding what they want to teach (from planning courses ahead a year or two, to deciding to teach a ‘pop-up’ course on a relevant topic almost immediately). Faculty discuss their courses within their discipline groups and then enter them into the curriculum directly. Curriculum Planning Committee representatives review the courses for their discipline group to minimize conflicts and review coverage, and then CPC as a body reviews the entire curriculum prior to publication.

The academic work of the institution is supported by 60 staff members who hold at least a baccalaureate degree and who hold a range of positions from librarians, technicians, program coordinators, academic services, Field Work overseers, Registrar's Office, to Career Development. The College has a dean of studies, staff in Academic Services, (including the dedicated first-year advisor and academic services and accommodations coordinator), first-year experience director, International Student Services, director of grants & fellowships, and director of learning beyond Bennington. In addition, Buildings and Grounds staff and the dining staff are unionized.

As a whole, the staff feel positive about Bennington, and are committed to its academic endeavor. While they expressed concern about budget cuts, they also feel included in and informed by the administration about fiscal realities. Staff do not have an overt governance structure; however, they pointed to some good examples of engagement, such as "First Fridays" in the Provost and Dean's Office, which provide connections between staff and some job-specific professional development and cross-training. Staff would like more social and professional opportunities to interact with Bennington faculty, administrators, and students as they collaboratively seek to build a shared community.

One potential link between the faculty and staff might be around affinity groups. Just as the faculty need to recruit and retain faculty of color and LGBTQI+, so, too, does the staff need this kind of diversity. As the College does this work, affinity group connections between faculty and staff could support and sustain these individuals, but also support marginalized students.

## Teaching and Learning

Academic staff and faculty articulate very clearly their commitment to the unique ethos of Bennington and the educational opportunities they offer to students. They often referred to the holistic, engaged student experience, one that relied on student agency and self-efficacy. They embrace the individualized approach to student learning as one that introduces students to the "messy reality" of life, encourages them to be "active problem solvers" who "embrace ambiguity" and seek that opportunity in their own professional collaborations.

Despite some earlier historical disagreements with prior administrations (especially around the Capacities), the faculty and administration seem to be finding ways for meaningful connection. However, lack of clarity around some governance structures (e.g. Academic Policies Committee and the Faculty Performance Review Committee) continue to put such faculty committees in the position of advisory bodies which are consulted, rather than benefiting from the genuine collaboration borne of shared responsibility.

Within the undergraduate curriculum, each student develops a four-year pathway through the curriculum that requires their engagement with the five Capacities (outlined in Standard Four). Such a curriculum means that students coordinate their course of study at the individual level, with close and intensive guidance from faculty and Academic staff. In fact, advising is so essential to student success that it is considered a component of faculty teaching.

Bennington faculty and administrators demonstrate a deep and abiding commitment to student-directed learning. Ensuring a robust, individualized and rigorous academic experience depends on

coordinated curriculum development and intensive advising. Faculty advisors work closely with students from the First-Year Forum through the execution of their Plan and culminating in a final Senior Reflective Essay. Faculty committees of three form a student Plan committee to give comprehensive and regular feedback to students on their Plans. Faculty teach in more traditional ways – from seminars to lectures to labs – and they undertake supervision of creative projects as well as tutorials to address specific student interests. Pop-up courses, which fortify the culture of contemporary intellectual inquiry that characterizes Bennington, are proposed and offered in response to current events unfolding locally, nationally, or internationally. The courses draw on an established academic discipline to provide relevant history, context, and/or theory.

While the Bennington faculty seems quite at home experimenting with courses and with teaching, the “Bennington Pedagogy” values student-directed learning, interdisciplinarity, and student exposure to a variety of intellectual and critical methodologies and faculty. Students may opt for grades, but all receive narrative evaluations of their course work. These evaluations go beyond summary to demonstrate a deep knowledge of the student’s progress in a course. Similarly, the extensive Plan advising keeps student development at the heart of meaningful feedback intended to foster student development. Bennington’s size enables a small faculty to work within and across disciplines to foster their own intellectual and creative development, often in conjunction with the students’ pursuit of knowledge, and they are working to make those boundary crossings easier. Students are actively involved in the review of their classes in two distinct ways. There is a group of students called the Student Educational Policies Committee (SEPC), responsible for the collection of qualitative feedback for courses and they co-designed the course evaluations with the Academic Policies Committee. At the mid-point in the semester, they organize a student-led meeting in each class during which students discuss the course as a whole, from the feedback received to the nature of assignments. A student representative then meets with the professor to offer detailed feedback which can be used to make adjustments for the second half of the semester. While assessment of student learning outcomes continues to be a challenge and a regular topic of conversation at Bennington, the narratives of faculty performance, of student intellectual engagement, of Plan goals and ideals, form a rich and textured tapestry crafting the Bennington student and faculty experience.

In Bennington’s Ten-Year Goals, the College states that “[t]eaching manifests the dynamic interplay between student, faculty, and institutional inquiries while remaining oriented towards concrete learning goals. Advising encompasses the whole student experience.” In order to meet this objective, faculty and staff are expected to develop assessment of advising and learning goals as reflected in the Capacities. While faculty embrace values akin to the Capacities, the extent to which they have embraced them as learning goals is less clear. This reluctance was noted in the Self-Study. The opportunity exists to provide further training in ways that embed the Capacities in syllabi, and are woven into assignments in ways that make assessment more likely, and ensure its impact.

Support for faculty as scholars and artists is \$2400 a year, for which faculty must apply each semester. Faculty indicated to the team that this support is an important acknowledgment of their professional identities as scholars and educators, though almost 36% indicated in the recent survey that this support is inadequate for their needs.

Faculty describe themselves as independent and autonomous both as scholars and as educators. They draw satisfaction from their discipline groups which enable them to collaborate with regularity. This structure requires faculty to engage in constant conversation with one another about their curricular visions. Some recognized that there is tension between maintaining the flat hierarchy (which is valued), and which ensures that a wide range of curricular decisions are made by the faculty, with the need to have certain decisions made by faculty in leadership positions on behalf of faculty.

## **STANDARD SEVEN: Institutional Resources**

### Human Resources

As of June 2019, Bennington employed 83 FTE faculty members and 218 FTE administrative and support staff of which 50 are unionized. Faculty salaries have been moved to a more competitive position over the last decade. The College's full-time faculty salaries are benchmarked against two sets of peer schools, as well as a broader set of private Carnegie classified baccalaureate arts and sciences colleges. The March 2019 Faculty Salary Report indicates that all full-time faculty salaries were at the 81st percentile of all arts and sciences colleges. The student to faculty ratio at Bennington is 9:1. A staff survey compensation study was completed by a consultant in 2016. The study concluded that, in the aggregate, Bennington's average base staff salaries are 3% below the market median.

External conferences for staff have been limited due to the lack of available funding. However, on-site training workshops conducted by Human Resources staff are provided on a range of topics, and these are highly valued. Bennington aims to provide a competitive benefits program. The contribution under the 403(b) retirement plan has increased from 5% to 7.5%. A goal of 7.5% is included in the FY2020 budget. Human Resources reviews competitiveness of benefits annually, as it is critical for recruitment and retention. Human Resources reviews benefits at peer institutions and participates in benefits surveys.

Bennington has established grievance policies and informal structures for employees to share concerns. Union employees have a structured process. A Staff Handbook and a Faculty Handbook is provided to all faculty and staff. Performance management training is required for managers. Annual performance review is required annually and merit increases are approved only if an annual performance review is on file.

### Financial Resources

Bennington College is a small, tuition-dependent college with an enrollment of 735 students, and with 59% of operating revenues coming from net tuition (tuition, fees, and room and board less financial aid) in 2018. In addition to being tuition-dependent, the College's other major revenue source is private gifts, which accounted for 31% of operating revenues in 2018. The College has a strong history of meeting its fundraising goals.

The College's external financial statements are prepared in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles and examined by an external auditor. The independent external auditor did not find any corrected or uncorrected misstatements; in addition, they found no significant deficiency or material weakness in internal controls. For the year ended June 30, 2018, Bennington recorded a total operating deficit of \$723,297, with an unrestricted operating deficit of \$3.1 million. While there was a total operating surplus of \$2.2 million in the prior 2017 year, there was still an unrestricted operating deficit of \$3.3 million. The College's discount rate calculated as financial aid over tuition and fees revenues was 62% and 56% in FY 2018 and FY 2017 respectively. The College's investments totaled \$21.8 million and \$22.5 million as of June 30, 2018 and 2017 respectively. In 2018, the College borrowed an additional \$26.3 million to fund

renovations to the Commons, and, accordingly, the note payable balance increased from \$25.0 million to \$51.3 million.

The College provides to the Board the implications of the accrual based budget for raising cash donations when it is considering the approval of the operating budget. All elements of the total budget are included, and are presented in a format that facilitates the Board's understanding of the implications for fundraising. Core operating deficits do not include depreciation, fundraising revenues, and fundraising expenses. Core operating deficits from FY 2014 to FY 2019 were between \$7.4 million and \$10.9 million. Private gifts revenues are planned to address core operating deficits and the amount planned in FY20 is \$18.8 million, or approximately 40% of operating revenues.

The annual budget process for the upcoming fiscal year begins between December and January each year. Departments are asked to submit their budget requests. The Provost works on developing the request for faculty lines. During this time, net tuition revenue is forecasted based on admission results from the January 1<sup>st</sup> application deadline, along with the expected financial aid amount. Revenues, gains and other support are compiled with net tuition revenue as the primary source of revenues. Expenses are compiled including departmental budget requests and compensation and benefits. For the FY20 budget, compensation included a general salary increase of 2.5% and retirement benefit was included with a College contribution rate of 7.5%. The College's operating budget does not include a contingency line item.

Since the renovation of the Commons in the summer of 2019, the College has secured a five-year agreement with Middlebury Language Schools to host their programs over the summer. This agreement will generate about \$700,000, net of expenses, to support the College's operating budget. Bennington is actively seeking other revenue sources. A recent position of Senior Vice President for Strategy, Philanthropy and Partnerships has been created in order to build a network that can help in maintaining financial sustainability. Specifically, opportunistic partnerships from foundations and unaffiliated donors are sought. Bennington has had success with the Art for Access program where art may be donated to fund scholarships. The College has partnered with Christie's to conduct the sale of art to benefit student financial aid.

The Board of Trustees approves the annual operating at the May meeting with full disclosure about the cash needed from fundraising to cover core operating deficits. Options such as reducing general salary adjustments are discussed with the trustees before approving the fundraising cash needs.

Cash from fundraising is dependent upon gifts from alumni, parents, and trustees. The Advancement Office is responsible for developing a strategy to solicit gifts from prospects. There are approximately 500 prospects with various giving capacities; 100 with a capacity of \$500,000, 75 with a capacity of over \$1 million (approximately ten with \$10 million capacity). The important question is how many of these prospects are inclined to give to Bennington, and whether giving at these levels is sustainable. In FY 2019, the College received cash gifts from over 2,000 donors totaling \$15.3 million of which \$11.1 million (72.5% of the total) came from eight donors with gifts over \$500,000; \$9.9 million from six donors with gifts over \$1 million and \$1.2 million from two donors with gifts between \$500,000 and \$1 million).

Quarterly updates of actual results compared to budget are presented to the Board of Trustees, with an emphasis on the amount of cash needed from fundraising. Department managers have real-time online access to the status of their budgets. The staff at Bennington appear to be knowledgeable about the status of the College's finances. However, the faculty at Bennington did not seem as informed, stating that future financial challenges have only recently been communicated by the interim President.

The vice president for finance and administration monitors cash on a regular basis. A weekly cash flow forecast is prepared and updated to monitor the College's cash position. This cash forecast includes receipts from annual gifts and signed gift agreement for pledges greater than \$50,000, and monitors when the College would need to use their cash reserves. Cash reserves as of September 13, 2019 totaled \$9.0 million of which \$6.9 million is from unrestricted endowment funds. If \$6.9 million in unrestricted endowment is used to fund operations, the endowment value would decrease from \$21.8 million in 2018 to \$14.9 million. While this cash forecast does not include any future gifts or pledges greater than \$50,000, it is important to note that the College would need to use its cash reserves in October 2019 and these reserves would be depleted by April 2020. This cash flow forecast is regularly reviewed with the Chair of the Finance Committee of the Board of Trustees.

To the College's credit in addressing financial challenges, its *Ten-Year Goals* include goals to increase the endowment and net tuition revenue by increasing enrollment. A key effort of the Campaign, "The World Needs More Bennington," is to raise enough cash to build an endowment with a \$100 million value. With an endowment value of \$21.8 million as of June 30, 2018, the College would need to raise \$78.2 million for the endowment. The College reports that it has secured \$26.2 million in pledges leaving \$52.0 million remaining to raise. Assuming a 5% spending policy, the endowment would generate \$3.9 million in additional support to the College's annual budget. However, considering that \$18.8 million in fundraising is planned for FY 2020, and even with an increased endowment, the College would still need to raise \$14.9 million, or 32% of operating revenues, through annual fundraising.

The administration has created a model to plan for different net tuition scenarios. This models varying retention rates, incoming class size, and discount rates. The incoming class size was modeled under best-case (225 students, middle-case (200 students), and worst-case (175 students) scenarios. The net tuition revenues estimated for FY 2020 ranged from \$24.5 million to \$29.5 million, a \$5 million difference. Applying assumptions for future years, the net tuition revenues estimated for FY 2023 ranged from \$24.2 million to \$34.0 million, a \$5.8 million difference. These models were reviewed with the Board of Trustees in December 2018. The strategy to increase the incoming class size to 225 students is as yet untested.

Multi-year modeling for the College only takes into consideration different net tuition scenarios. A complete multi-year model should also include other revenues and operating expenses to see the full financial picture. Modeling assumptions for operating expenses should include salary increases, benefit increases (especially health insurance), debt service, and other expenses. It is important to estimate what the core operating deficit would be so that the College can determine its ability to raise annual gifts to cover this deficit. If raising the funds would be a challenge, the

College would need to explore other revenue opportunities and reduce expenses to be financially sustainable.

### Information, Physical, and Technological Resources

For FY20, the Capital Budget includes \$3.0 million for information technology, buildings and grounds, and for major equipment. The Commons renovation project from the FY20 capital budget totals about \$2.3 million, or 77%, leaving \$700,000 for other capital items.

The Bennington College campus, comprised of approximately 360 acres of rolling fields and forested land, consists of 63 campus buildings. The vice president for facilities and planning indicated that the College's three major facilities' needs have been addressed: 1) the renovation to the Commons, 2) steam line replacements, and 3) renovations to the science building to meet current building code standards. The Commons building with nearly 45,000 square feet in social, dining and academic space was fully renovated and completed in the summer of 2019. A critical infrastructure need to replace the steam lines was planned using a phased approach; four out of the five phases have already been completed. The Facilities department maintains a list of maintenance needs and the current list shows approximately \$6 million in deferred maintenance. The College typically plans for \$1 million in the capital budget process to address deferred maintenance.

The technology infrastructure is in need of some upgrades which have seen some \$800,000 in recent years. Specifically, underground pipes need to be replaced and there is no redundancy. The highest priority capital need is to upgrade network gateways, firewalls and administrative and teaching infrastructure (network closets and wireless aps). In addition, a complete wireless upgrade to a 12-year-old system in student housing is needed at an estimated cost of \$120,000. Ongoing annual technology capital needs are about \$100,000 per year.

The College has moved almost all of their applications to the cloud and has no application on premise. Laptops or computer towers are provided to faculty and staff. There is no replacement cycle for laptops or computers. The College has a break-fix policy where replacements are provided only if a computer or laptop is broken. Faculty have minimal technology needs for teaching and mostly require audio visual equipment in classrooms.

The College's library provides access to resources and a variety of instructional services including peer learning. Technology is used to enhance services and collections such as a discovery search service and a cloud-based interlibrary loan platform.

## **STANDARD EIGHT: Educational Effectiveness**

### Measurement of Student Learning

Since its last interim report, Bennington College has demonstrated meaningful progress in developing a framework for assessing educational effectiveness and student success. To support its effectiveness efforts, the College has recently revamped one staff FTE and added a second “dedicated almost entirely” to strengthening informed decision-making within the College’s Research, Planning, and Assessment function (2.0 FTE) which (along with a staff of 3.0 FTE dedicated to registrarial services and institutional reporting) serves as the central hub for the College’s educational effectiveness efforts. Additional responsibilities are distributed across the institution.

The most visible development in the Educational Effectiveness standard is Bennington’s progress in defining five Capacities, previously described as the essential outcomes of a Bennington education. These educational goals directly reflect the College’s mission and are featured prominently in the College’s statements about what students will gain from Bennington. The College has also recently created opportunities for assessing these Capacities at various points across student careers, including student self-assessments as first years, in Field Work Term evaluations completed by employers, and in its Plan Assessment Forms.

However, these developments have occurred almost exclusively at the undergraduate level. That is, neither the self-study nor conversations with the visiting team present Bennington’s educational effectiveness efforts as being integrated across the undergraduate and graduate programs, with the latter largely absent from these conversations.

While Bennington’s progress in developing an assessment infrastructure described above is notable, self-study documents and campus conversations confirm that the College has not extended the Capacities into an assessment program that is widely adopted by faculty, nor into one that is currently capable of fully informing the College about what students gain from a Bennington education that might guide planning, pedagogy, and resource allocation. Bennington candidly acknowledges its challenges with engaging faculty in conversations about the Capacities and implementing assessment of the Capacities in its academic programs. Similarly, the E-Series form, campus conversations, and other documents demonstrate that knowledge, acceptance, and use of the Capacities among faculty and administrators is not regularized. For example, while the College describes these Capacities as a framework around which it defines and measures education breath and assesses general education within its open curriculum, the E-Series does not list any curricular changes that have been informed by or resulted from assessment efforts linked to the Capacities. Similarly, campus conversations confirmed the limited integration of the Capacities across the College’s various discipline groups or in the planning and enrollment decisions made by students.

Despite a lack of broad momentum, the College has made some limited progress in the use of the Capacities. For example, incoming students’ self-assessments on the Capacities are now fed into an advising tool which provides advisors with useful student information. The College has also included explicit reference to the Capacities in the Plan proposal and progress forms, embedded the Capacities into its newly launched First-Year Forum, and into assessments of its Field Work

Term. The College is exploring incorporating the Capacities into course descriptions or “tags,” making the Capacities more visible in course syllabi (where some limited progress has emerged). However, these efforts focus on the collection of information and do not yet systematically inform the College’s efforts to improve its educational offerings, instruction, advising, and other aspects of a Bennington Education. We encourage the College to continue with this work.

Bennington describes its co-curricular experiences as essential to and working in tandem with academic classrooms to foster progression of the Capacities. To this end, however, the College does not systematically assess the relationship between co-curricular experiences and learning outcomes and has not yet developed a plan for this work. However, the College has begun to implement some student life effectiveness initiatives with more limited scope such as using its National Collegiate Health Assessment and Everfi AlcoholEdu results to assess student needs and inform policy conversations. We encourage the College to implement its plans to “create clear pathways where students and faculty can see the learning taking place beyond the classroom.”

The College employs some indirect measures of student learning such as surveys of graduating seniors and alumni surveys. As discussed in the self-study, survey results highlight students’ perceived strengths and shortcomings in learning outcomes closely related to the Capacities. For example, the College reports that while many students report gains in “creating and revising work” (67%), only 36% report gains in “conducting research.” However, the college does not provide examples of what, if any, changes and actions have resulted from these findings.

## Retention and Completion

Bennington addresses its challenges related to undergraduate student retention and completion with candor in both the self-study and staff were similarly candid during conversations with the visiting team. Undergraduate retention rates have fallen in each of the past four years, from 84% in 2014 to 73% in 2018. Bennington falls near the bottom of its peer group for retention (5 percentage points below the peer median) and graduation rates (12 percentage points below the peer median).

Additionally, while the College’s most recent graduation rate data show improvements in completion for the cohorts entering Bennington in the early 2010s, the retention rates for more recent incoming cohorts foreshadow a likely decline in the College’s graduation rates. Finally, data provided to the visiting team indicate a large gap in Bennington’s four- and six-year graduation rates, with the former falling ten percentage points below the latter for the most recent cohort (fall 2013 cohort: 66% and 76%, respectively). These retention and completion challenges contribute to the College’s financial pressures, especially in the context of the College’s ambitious enrollment goals laid out in the Ten-Year Goals.

The College has responded to the downward trajectory of student retention by forming a Retention Task Force comprised of representatives from Admissions, Finance, and Research, Planning & Assessment. This group has worked to integrate and improve the quality of data it has available to study this issue and has gathered and analyzed available data to uncover patterns and predictors of student attrition. Conversations on campus and supplemental materials indicate that the College has devoted significant focus and effort to studying and responding to this issue, and that the

College is making some gains in the availability, quality, and accessibility of the data on hand to examine this issue.

Analyses conducted by the Retention Task Force have yielded important but mixed findings. Somewhat surprisingly, the student characteristics typically correlated with retention in higher education (such as Pell status or admissions academic ratings) have not proven to be predictive of attrition at Bennington, where retention rates among domestic students of color (77%), Pell students (75%), and first-generation students (77%) do not differ from Bennington's overall retention rate (78%). Similarly, the College has found a minimal discrepancy between the six-year graduation rates for its overall undergraduate population and its domestic students of color (72% and 68%, respectively). The College did, however, discover the significant impact of mental health on attrition, with nine percent of its fall 2017 incoming cohort failing to return for their sophomore year due to issues related to mental health. Supplemental materials reveal that student "fit" (or lack thereof) is another reason students often cite for leaving. The College is working to understand and support students around issues related to mental health and well-being, and the College will continue to monitor its retention and graduation performance. Early results look promising: preliminary fall 2019 retention figures are up nearly ten percentage points over year prior to 82.8%.

In addition to the undergraduate statistics discussed above, the College monitors retention and completion rates for its graduate and post-graduate students, as well as various undergraduate student sub-populations. This work has uncovered uneven rates among graduate students, partially due to these programs' small numbers.

### The Success of Recent Graduates

To understand how its graduates fair on outcomes such as income, employment, and graduate education, Bennington leverages information garnered from an internal alumni survey, augmented with data from the College Scorecard, LinkedIn, and the National Student Clearinghouse. At first blush this work reveals favorable employment rates: 88% for one-year out and 94% when considering a longer window and robust rates of graduate school enrollment (68% at 15 years out). There is evidence, too, of the strength of Bennington graduates' engagement with their careers, and possible concerns over alumni income levels. However, campus conversations revealed that some reported outcome measures may not be highly reliable due to the fairly low participation/knowledge rates on which they are based (ranging from 35%-50%) and/or the broad way in which outcomes are defined. For example, employment outcomes include those who are employed on a part-time basis – something that may not be understood by the consumer.

In addition to the outcomes listed above, the College lists "creating/performing art as professional at one year" and "started or owned a business at 5/10/15 years out" as other measures of student success and achievement in the Data First forms. However, the College did not provide any evidence demonstrating its success in these mission-related outcomes. On its website the College also reports that 85% of graduates hold a first job directly related to their field of study. The College did not provide success metrics beyond completion for its graduate or post-baccalaureate programs. Some low-hanging fruit here might include medical school attendance rates for graduates of the College's pre-medical program.

## **STANDARD NINE: Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure**

As stated in the Self-Study, evidenced during the onsite visit, and viewed in online and printed materials, Bennington College strives toward integrity, openness and transparency with all constituents. Through plans, policies, procedures and practice, the College lives its “almost” mission, endeavors to fulfil its vision, and projects its core values. Examples of this are found on the public web site, in the way the College is organized, and with communication and collaboration at most levels. Information provided online, in print and in person is generally complete, accurate, clear and sufficient. Most information is timely, easily accessible and readily accessible.

Examples include information found at: <https://www.bennington.edu/consumer-information>, and <https://www.bennington.edu/about/outcomes/fast-facts>.

When using the public web site, there were examples of missing items that did not have direct links, but these were easily found with the search tool (“consumer information” for example). Information is updated online regularly by the Communications office with most items updated at least once a year in the summer and many items updated more often as needed. Printed publications are updated as needed, and as budgets allow.

### **Integrity**

Evidence that the College expects members of its community to act responsibly, ethically and with integrity can be seen in the Staff Handbook, the Faculty Handbook and the Student Handbook, as well as in several other policy documents. The College leadership is generally seen as open to discussions about integrity, with expectations that students, faculty, staff, and board members will assume responsibilities for this in their areas.

Overall, the visiting team found no evidence to assume anything less than truthfulness, clarity and fairness in College relations. Policies and procedures are applied to both undergraduate and graduate students. Policies were reviewed in the areas of academic honesty, academic freedom, fairness, intellectual property, privacy rights, non-discrimination, Title IX, and others show they have been reviewed and updated recently, as needed and as documented in the data first forms. Some concerns were raised during on-campus interviews about policy and procedure documentation for a variety of issues including student governance, faculty governance and Title IX. A local Intranet, instead of the current paper processes, to provide these and other documents to faculty, staff, and students is being considered. Board members annually sign Conflict of Interest disclosure statements. The College regularly reviews the Board By-Laws.

The College’s commitment to the free pursuit and dissemination of knowledge is evidenced through statements in the Faculty handbook. The College has followed federal, state and program accreditation requirements, and has formal state authority to grant all degrees it awards. Non-discriminatory policies for prospective students, current students and employees are in evidence in the Student, Faculty and Staff handbooks, Admissions and HR web pages and non-discrimination, harassment and sexual misconduct policies overseen by the Title IX coordinator, currently the acting dean of the college. An office of Diversity and Inclusion was created in 2015 to develop a comprehensive infrastructure for the advancement of inclusion, equity, and pluralism. While international students generally felt supported, some domestic students voiced concerns that this office and other services were not meeting their needs. Examples given included limited

reaction by college officials to racial slurs and high costs for College mental health services, depending on the health insurance plan of the individual domestic students. For international students, the College covers the co-pay for mental health services.

As reported during onsite interviews, the institution manages its academic, research and service programs, administrative operations, responsibilities to students, and interactions with prospective students with honesty and integrity. One example mentioned during on-site interviews was a recent meeting between the Provost, faculty, and admissions/financial aid staff discussing if certain prospective students were really ready to attend the College, even while overall enrollment is lower than expected.

Sample partnership agreements and memoranda of understanding used by Conferencing Services and the senior vice president for strategy, philanthropy and partnerships validate the Self-Study reports that the College is responsible for all activities that carry its name. These documents are reviewed by the president, CFO, Board and/or legal counsel as needed.

Typical policies and procedures for grievances brought by students, faculty and staff are addressed in the Student Handbook, Staff Handbook and Faculty handbook. Some concern was raised by faculty during on-campus interviews about the College's grievance processes.

The College strengthens institutional integrity by applying findings from periodic assessments of policies by members of the College. An example of this includes a recent review of the pass/fail policy. The college allows students to get a traditional grade or a pass/fail for courses. A Pass generally meant a grade of C- or higher. This was discussed because a GPA of a 2.0 (C or higher) is generally thought of as a passing grade. The new pass/fail system equates a Pass to a C or higher while a D- to a C- is now coded as Marginal Pass.

Several years of regular communications between the College and NECHE provided to the visiting team show examples that demonstrate honesty and integrity. Other examples include numerous testimonies of alumni, trustees, faculty, staff and students received during the onsite visit.

As confirmed by conversations with all other visiting team members, in addition to the considerations stated in this Standard, the institution adheres to those requirements related to institutional integrity embodied in all other Commission Standards.

## Transparency

Over the past several years, the College has continued to focus most communication with its various constituents on-line. Handbooks, the Bennington Magazine, a weekly student news bulletin, and an Admissions packet of typical printed brochures for prospective students are a few of the remaining printed items. One notable item missing, and listed in the Self-Study, is a College Intranet which could host a variety of documents, including the Staff and Faculty Handbooks. While the Student Handbook is on the public website, archived copies were not to be found there. The president meets in-person with the community at regular college-wide meetings and upon request.

The majority of the College's printed and online publications are written and designed in-house by staff in the Office of Communications. A new streamlined public web site was implemented in 2016 to provide an attractive and easy-to-use interface to find most College information. Additional opportunities for an enhanced public web site and an Intranet are being explored. The public web site is attractive, user-friendly and provides prospective and current students sufficient information to make informed decisions about admissions and enrollment at the College. The search functions work well for most commonly searched items (for example "campus maps" provides a link to:

[https://www.bennington.edu/sites/default/files/sources/docs/CampusMap\\_June17\\_v3.pdf](https://www.bennington.edu/sites/default/files/sources/docs/CampusMap_June17_v3.pdf)).

New content was found on the site after multiple visits to the same pages over several weeks. Faculty and staff contact information, academic information, grievance information, employment information, and policies/procedures are all appropriately placed and fairly easy to find with the search tool

Printed publications are up-to-date, attractive, and consistent with online materials. Archives of items like the student handbook are kept in print versions. Placement success information was validated during the visit. Social media content is updated regularly.

## Public Disclosure

The College's public information is the responsibility of the Communications Office. Public information is coordinated through the Director of Communications to provide consistency. The mission, vision, core values and partnerships are prominently displayed, along with points of pride and the College's history.

In 2015, a consulting firm was hired to develop a marketing strategy. After talking with over 100 students, faculty, staff, alumni, counselors, parents and friends of the College, much information was gathered to provide marketing and branding materials. The current iteration of the public website was created in 2016 to improve accuracy, as well as timely, accessible, and comprehensive information. The College does not have a tagline, but the \$100 million campaign tagline "The World Needs More Bennington" appears on the public web site and in printed fundraising materials.

The College does not have a traditional Catalog, but rather places much of the same information in its Student Handbook as well as the Curriculum section of the public web site. Other policies and procedures are found in a variety of locations on the public web site (including Admissions and Financial Aid). The College provides other traditional publications, including the Student Handbook, Staff Handbook and Faculty Handbook. These publications, along with other regular communications online and in print, generally provide a complete and accurate picture of the College, its programs, resources, policies and procedures. These publications are distributed upon arrival and as requested to appropriate internal and external constituents. They are professionally produced, attractive, and reflect a consistent image and public relations theme. Academic information including faculty, departments, programs, degrees, campus location, and services were all easily found. Pass rates for licensure examinations is not relevant to this College. Current and previous courses offered are found on the Curriculum and Faculty sections of the public web site. The consumer information web page and the Fast Fact web pages provide much information

to the public. It is easy to find most commonly requested public information, with contact information provided for all areas to allow for questions and assistance as needed.

Many faculty pages do not show the degrees held or the institutions granting the degrees, but do show telephone and email contact information. Information requested during on-site interviews shows that most full-time faculty hold terminal degrees. Courses, programs (a.k.a. Student Plans), and services are listed. A process to remove three-year inactive courses is not needed, as there is no course catalog. There are only curriculum lists of courses showing current, future, and previous courses. Lists of the previous courses offered are available for over ten years. Student success rates including retention and six-year graduation are published on the Fast Fact and Consumer Information web pages (example: <https://www.bennington.edu/about/outcomes/fast-facts>) and easily found with the search function. While six-year graduation rates are listed, four-year graduation rates are not. Typically, about 85-90% of the students who graduate do so in four years. Cost and financial aid availability is published and up-to-date. The net price calculator service is published at:

<https://www.bennington.edu/admissions/apply/financing-your-education/tuition-and-fees/net-price-calculator>

The expected amount of student debt upon graduation, reported as \$25,960 is easily found on the public web site. Placement information one-year out is listed at 88% in the Fast Facts web page. A recent survey had a 64% response rate for students one year after graduation. Graduates are also surveyed 5, 10 and 15 years out, with typically lower response rates. A 2017 Security and Safety (Clery) report is available on the public web site with prior year's information. Current accreditation status and information, including request for comments, and site-visit information was found via the search tool at <https://www.bennington.edu/invitation-public-comments>.

### Affirmation of Compliance

To document the institution's compliance with Federal regulations relating to Title IV, the team reviewed the College's Affirmation of Compliance form and received affirmation of knowledge from students and faculty groups during onsite interviews. Bennington College publicly discloses on its website and in its Student Handbook policies on transfer of credit and articulation agreements. Public notification of the evaluation visit and of the opportunity for public comment was made by the College on the College's website. The institution's grievance procedures for students can be found in the student handbook and on the public web site. A secure online self-service log-in tool (<https://sso.bennington.edu/>), with credentials emailed to students, is used to verify student identity. The team's discussion of Bennington's credit hour policy can be found under Standard Four, in the section on the Integrity of the Award of Academic Credit.

## Conclusion

In summary, during its three-day visit the team found a great deal to admire about Bennington College. The key strengths, already repeatedly mentioned in this report, are worth underscoring:

- The strength and uniqueness of the mission and purposes of the College.
- The commitment and engagement of the faculty, staff, and students.
- The distinctive opportunities for learning in individualized and experiential ways.
- The agency and freedoms of all participants in College life and work.

We believe that the most important areas for improvement identified by the visiting team are already well known to the Bennington community. Underpinning all of these is an imperative that College constituents move beyond naming a challenge, and conversation about it, to action. That action should be directed with some urgency to the following areas of focus:

1. In the area of assessment, the team encourages Bennington faculty fully to implement and consistently to measure the Capacities, thereby making progress on a data-driven model of assessment that is in keeping with the College's ideas about individualized and experiential learning, holistic development, as well as integrated advising.
2. In the area of resources, the College is urged to:
  - a. address declining enrollment and improve retention and graduation rates;
  - b. seek ways to reduce the discount rate;
  - c. reduce the very high dependency on annual use fundraising;
  - d. continue to grow the endowment;
  - e. identify ways to reduce rising or fixed costs and to develop new revenue streams alongside reputation- and opportunity-enhancing partnerships.
3. Finally, in the area of governance, the team acknowledges the lack of understanding and experience of, as well as the inconsistent practice of shared governance, and encourages the College—that is the College leadership all the way up to the trustees and throughout all constituent groups—to develop more robust vehicles for shared governance and participatory decision-making.

The team was impressed by the leadership of the College, by its faculty, staff, and students, and believes that Bennington should derive yet greater benefit from the vision, commitment, creativity, and vitality of the individuals in its community in a future shaped by the development of a unique form of collaborative governance that speaks to the institution's deeply shared purpose.