

February 7, 2020

Dr. Barbara Brittingham, President
New England Commission on Higher Education
3 Burlington Woods Drive, Suite 100
Burlington, MA 01803-4514

Dear members of the Commission:

We are grateful to the Commission for creating an accreditation process that emphasizes rigorous self-reflection throughout the multi-year effort. The practice seems to be waning in many spheres. To do it right is difficult and time consuming, but the benefits are enormous.

Although self-reflection has long been deeply woven into Bennington's principles and practices, the extended, formalized act is much strengthened by the generous engagement of colleagues both at NECHE and on the visiting team. We understand that visiting teams voluntarily give large portions of their time to an institution under review, drawing from their varied experiences in the attempt to help the institution improve the education it offers. We are especially grateful to President Stephens and the team that visited the College in late September of 2019.

Understanding Bennington is no small feat, and attempting to do so over the course of just three days at the beginning of the academic year is a real challenge. We were happy to see that some of Bennington's strengths became visible to the visiting team during that time. We cite directly here from page 43 of the report submitted by the team in December of 2019:

- 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.

While there remain a few parts of the report that reveal errors of interpretation, we do not want to dwell on those here. Instead, we want to focus on what lies ahead. Below we provide updates on the three areas for improvement identified by the visiting team (also on page 43); those areas, as the team accurately points out, "are already well known to the Bennington community" (43) and are considered in some detail in our *Self-Study*.

1. Assessment

We are appreciative of the visiting team's comments and encouragement on the assessment of student learning outcomes. Though we have made significant progress in recent years in understanding what students gain as a result of their education, we acknowledge in our *Self-Study* that progress has been halting as of late. The visiting team's report—and the accreditation process overall—has reinvigorated our work on the Capacities as a framework for teaching and learning at Bennington, and we are eager to fully implement this set of institution-level learning outcomes.

In conversations that have taken place since the team's visit in the fall, we have come to situate our work on assessment within the context of effective shared governance structures (as below), particularly in the realm of the faculty and the two committees that will be essential for our assessment efforts: the Academic Policies and Curriculum Planning Committees (APC and CPC, respectively). The Chair of APC is already engaged and thinking deeply about how to advance our assessment efforts, especially at the institutional level within the Plan process. And we started last term to reshape the charge of CPC to create more space and allow for productive conversations around matters of curriculum, assessment, and ways of making learning and learning outcomes more visible in course descriptions, syllabi, and within disciplinary and interdisciplinary coursework. We plan to couple this committee work with faculty-wide workshops and programming around assessment so that we can develop the shared language, understanding, and approaches necessary for effective measurement of student learning.

2. Shared governance

Prompted by comments from the visiting team, as well as internally acknowledged deficiencies in our governance structures, we took the following steps during the fall term to initiate improvements in this area.

At the first faculty meeting following the external review team's visit, a brief excerpt from Bowen & Tobin's *Locus of Authority: The Evolution of Faculty Roles in the Governance of Higher Education* (2015) was distributed with the intent of developing a common language and setting overarching goals of eventual reforms. The College Steering Committee (CSC) engaged in ongoing discussions over the term aimed at developing strategies to meaningfully engage faculty in governance conversations. They considered reading materials that could be shared with faculty, eventually agreeing to share a longer excerpt from Bowen and Tobin, and generating prompts to fruitfully discuss with faculty some of the core issues relevant to Bennington in this moment.

The Interim President and the Acting Provost consulted regularly during the fall term with Dr. Melody Rose, affiliated with the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges and former president of Marylhurst College. Her experience with an institution with a similar culture around governance was useful in formulating specific steps in the development of more effective governance structures. Based on our numerous conversations and the range of governing documents concerning the college that we provided, she drafted and revised a useful

memorandum outlining the likely challenges we will face and how to best navigate them as we develop new governance structures.

At the final faculty meeting of the term, the CSC led a series of break-out discussions among the faculty, using the prompts that they had developed. Notes were taken in each group and will inform how work in the spring term will be structured. Of particular interest was the exposure of misunderstandings and flawed assumptions concerning the nature of shared governance, as well as factual inaccuracies concerning faculty.

In the meantime, we have increased the number of scheduled and ad hoc all-staff meetings to keep staff more regularly informed (with regard to the accreditation process, for example) and to offer more opportunities for discussion and feedback. The Board sub-committee on governance has discussed how to increase substantive interaction between the trustees and staff, faculty, and students, and will return to the subject at the March and June meetings.

3. Resources

As of February 3, 2019, our application total for fall 2020 is the third highest in the history of the College (4.5% higher than last year). While yield and discount rates are not entirely within our control, we have implemented several new strategies to improve our outcomes in those areas in this unpredictable market.

First-to-second year retention, as of the fall 2019 census date in October, improved by almost 10% from the prior year, from 73.1% to 82.8%. We believe that this is due in large part to improvements in our (still relatively new) First-Year Forum experience. As of February 3, retention for the 2019 first-year cohort is still running well ahead of the prior three years. Retention among other years of students has also been holding steady or improving. We are now projecting a higher than initially anticipated total enrollment of 640 for the spring 2020 term.

The endowment continues to grow apace by way of our ongoing campaign, “The World Needs More Bennington.” Since September, we have received an additional \$1.4 million in new gifts and pledges to bring the endowment total to \$52.2 million—over halfway to our \$100 million goal. Not included in that total is a \$10 million bequest from an anonymous donor, which we are in the process of documenting.

In August of 2019—just as we were completing the *Self-Study*—we held a special meeting in New York with the board of trustees to analyze our progress with regard to one of the three pillars of our strategic plan: “Ensure Bennington’s financial stability.” The plan articulated in the Ten-Years Goals (adopted in 2015) emphasized significant growth in the areas of enrollment (1000 students) and endowment (\$100 million) in order to address our dependence on annual fundraising. To visualize this growth, a matrix had been created that showed our annual budget gap steadily decreasing as our enrollment and endowment increased.

While we have seen that major progress has been made in the areas of enrollment and endowment, we have also recognized that certain dynamics in the area of admissions, much written about in the higher ed press, have been negatively affecting our yield and discount rates—even while our application rates remained high. The assumptions built into the matrix mentioned above no longer held, in other words. Our tuition revenue has not been increasing in the way we planned for; and endowments are by their nature slow to provide immediate revenue. This has left us, as usual, with a heavy reliance on annual fundraising.

The August meeting with trustees was meant to spur plans for other sources of revenue that Bennington can begin to develop. The regular September and December meetings with trustees followed this line of thinking and discussion, as will the upcoming March and June meetings. While we cannot at this time say which specific plans will be approved by the trustees and supported by faculty and staff, we can say that there are several very strong proposals under development for initiatives that will increase our tuition revenue. Each of these proposals would increase net revenue over both the short and long term while supporting and extending our mission. As Robert D. Leigh wrote in *The Educational Plan for Bennington College* in 1932: “Institutions have too often begun well abreast of current educational thought and practice only to become in time stupidly complacent and set in their ways. Bennington is seeking all available means to avoid stagnation, to test its original hypotheses, and to revise its program in the light of its own and others’ actual experience.”

We will be happy to provide details concerning the above plans as they take shape. In the meantime, we look forward to further dialogue with the Commission.

Sincerely,



Isabel Roche
Interim President