

Bennington College Inaugural Address **Mariko Silver**

Alan, Bennington trustees, former presidents of Bennington, faculty, students past and present, and representatives of colleges and universities everywhere—thank you for your warm welcome.

Thank you, Adam—the Williams–Bennington connection is long and rich, may it continue to be so.

Thank you, Ellen—to be welcomed to the ranks by an alumna, great friend and wonderful colleague, and mentor—what could be better? It is an honor.

Thank you, Stuart and Matthew—my family and I are thrilled to be part of your communities.

Thank you, Michael Wimberly, Susie Ibarra, Bruce Williamson, our student musicians, and TK, for kicking us off in STYLE.

Thank you, Michael Dumanis, for capturing Bennington so beautifully.

Thank you, alumnus Jonathan Lethem, for throwing down the gauntlet in true Bennington fashion—and Will Larsen, class of 2017, for giving it voice.

###

Every Bennington education begins with a question. My Bennington education did.

My question is: Why?

Why Bennington?

Why now?

In 1932, with the eyes of educators everywhere upon them, Bennington College's founders invited the first faculty and students to join in what they called a higher education laboratory. A place where education is driven by the paired interests and mutually reinforcing engagements of teacher and student. Where humanities, social sciences, science, and arts are intimately intertwined.

Teachers here are practitioners working at the very edge of new ideas. Students are researchers, collaborators, and scouts in uncharted territories, learning by doing, learning by making—every moment, every day.

Faculty, students, and staff don't come to Bennington to get something. They come here to do something—to make something.

Peter Drucker came here to learn, through teaching, what he needed in order to develop the theories that informed and inspired modern management. Later he said of Bennington, "I was given freedom to teach whatever subjects I thought I needed

learning in: political theory and American government, American history and economic history, philosophy and religion.” Bennington, he said, was where he felt most truly at home.

Alumna Megan Marshall, who two weeks ago won a Pulitzer Prize for her biography *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*, first discovered the subject of that biography in a class here with poet and faculty member Stephen Sandy. Donna Tartt, who won this year’s Pulitzer Prize in fiction for her novel *The Goldfinch*, began her first novel at Bennington.

Yes, that’s two Bennington alumnae Pulitzers this year.

This work takes more than inspiration; it takes persistence, it takes perseverance, it takes the kind of drive that can only come from inside. This drive does not come from the desire only to please others, or to tick all the right boxes so that you can get a degree. Thriving within this community takes self-discipline and individual initiative.

At the core of Bennington’s philosophy are two fairly simple ideas: That the student be at the center of his or her education, and that the College be at the center of the conversations shaping our world. The linkages between these two ideas are, in Bennington-speak, ‘our work.’

Of course, we talk about all of this as work, and it is. But somehow, time and time again, I’ve been told that it doesn’t feel like work.

One alumnus explains, “I have never for a minute felt I was doing work. Everything I’ve done here has been an expression of who I am. This is the kind of work people long to have.”

I see this every day now at the College, as Bennington students form connections and discover intersections—new to them and even new to the world. They build their lives around their work and they do this in the best ways. They do it in the way we all seek to live our lives—where work and life are seamlessly, and pleurably, intertwined.

You love your work and it feeds you, so you talk about it over dinner, in the houses, late into the night. You talk about it when you return to campus every winter after seven weeks working out in the world—in Guatemala, Sierra Leone, Brooklyn or Alaska, whether it’s your first Field Work Term or your fourth.

The College’s job is to kindle a spark. To help our students use it to illuminate our world in ways replete with wonder and grace, wisdom and beauty.

Profoundly... personally... our efforts revolve around a search for perspective—the sweet-spot that locates a body, a mind, a concept. A place, this place, that allows us to stand within the swirl of ideas and actually build a deeper understanding.

Alumnus Mark Edmundson, class of 1974, once described what happens here as the “archetypal Bennington project of becoming ever more insistently and complexly who you are.”

This archetypal Bennington project is to my mind the highest form of higher education.

Our interwoven world requires something that is not quite captured in the words “interdisciplinary education.” It requires an approach that transcends disciplines.

The intensity of the work takes real rigor, the demands of the questions and problems we face require new frameworks.

Rigor unbound by convention.

###

For my part, I came to Bennington because I believe deeply in this institution’s design and purpose. I am here to help lead this institution forward, to be sure.

But among the many ideas that Bennington has infused in me, I know that leadership depends first and foremost upon listening and learning.

I have spent my life listening and learning—studying institutional design: colonial institutions, international development organizations, technologically mediated communities, multinational corporations, governments, and, yes, colleges and universities.

How do institutions come to be as they are, how do they succeed, and how do they remain resonant?

In my own exploration, I have traveled to some 50 countries—not nearly enough. I have worked in state and federal government, for nonprofits, intergovernmental organizations, companies, colleges and universities, and with groups of all sizes. I do not pretend to know the answers to my questions, or even all of the questions.

But I do feel, through my research, my professional experience, and my deepest intuition, that Bennington is doing something that is far bigger than this “pocket utopia.”

I sensed it from my first interview, when I was asked by the Board, “What of yourself do you see in Bennington and Bennington in you?”

The expectation (almost a demand) that one’s relationship with this community be deeply symbiotic—for me, but also for everyone who touches this place—this idea grabbed hold of me. It is a place where you give as much as you receive. Education here is a reciprocal affair.

###

In today’s national conversation about higher education, we talk a lot about how you get in, how you make the right student-college match, how you pay for it. We talk about what happens after you graduate.

And these are important issues, to be sure.

At the same time, we should be engaging in a deeper conversation about what happens while you are with us. How we support, encourage, call forth the best, most surprising work from our students. How we help them uncover the path they will want

to follow when they leave. How we help them become not just leaders but stewards—of their own lives, of their communities, of the planet, and of our future.

We no longer live in a world of single careers, lifelong employment—of “company men” and corporate pensions.

Our world requires us to make (and remake) new rules, and new roles—constantly. And, we wouldn’t want it any other way. It is how Bennington College has been engaging our students to approach life for more than 80 years.

This world is made for a Bennington education and a Bennington education is made for this world.

Life has never been lockstep or linear, but we human beings created institutions to try to make it so—life plans, secure lifelong employment, predictable social environments, stable hierarchies.

Humans are ever seeking to capture the complexity of the world and bind it into little boxes. In this world of boxes we find so called “modern man.” And modernity is now struggling, slogging through complexity that cannot be boxed up.

Maybe this is not such a bad thing. I would argue that the lives so many have long tried to live—all boxed up—have not brought our global community to our best selves.

A mentor of mine has often said that if we think the world today is perfect—just as we want it to be—then we should absolutely continue to replicate the dominant institutions and ways of the past.

But if we want change, if we want progress, if we want fundamental shifts and improvements in the human experience—and the state of the planet as well—then we need to require our institutions to advance and even to break course and take on new, as yet never realized or even yet unimagined, directions—new boxes, or maybe no boxes.

We face this challenge at a time when there is an unprecedented questioning in the public conversation about the value of college.

But, the evidence is clear (1) . We know that on virtually every measure of economic well-being and career attainment—from personal earnings, to job satisfaction, to the share employed full time—college graduates are outperforming those with less education. Moreover, when today’s young adults are compared with previous generations, the disparity in economic outcomes between college graduates and those with a high school diploma or less formal schooling has never been greater.

But this is not the whole story. Education must be a creative process, not a consumer product. And education—especially at Bennington—is very much about the individual and his experience, her process—the path, or as we call it, The Plan.

And yet, education is—and must be—about something bigger, too. It is about what kind of world we want to make.

Higher education institutions in the United States are a lynchpin for societal formation and a vital point of intervention, and we have the most envied higher education “system” in the world.

And yet, the reason it is so valuable and valued is because, in fact, it is not a system; it’s an ecosystem, drawing its strength at least in part from its institutional diversity.

Meanwhile, today’s national conversation about education flattens that notion, and we run the great risk of driving to someone’s idea of “better” and “worse” versions of a single kind of institution rather than embracing and enhancing the great landscape of possibility and human endeavor.

Whom we “let in” to these hallowed halls (libraries, classrooms, and studios) is an issue of great consequence, since these decisions—like it or not—do help determine who gets to lead, whose ideas get noticed (or funded), and who holds power. Our obligations, therefore, are immense.

But it is about even more than those who go to college and what they gain; about more than the social mobility of those with the opportunity to attend college—though that is a lot. It is more than the transmission of existing knowledge, as well.

Our obligation, at its best, is about generating, together between teacher and student, new ways of knowing, thinking, and doing—new ways of seeing, listening, and being. Our obligation is about new ways to conceptualize the world and new ways to participate in it, new ways to imagine, to shape, and to make it.

This is why I came to Bennington.

###

The ideas that constitute a college—its culture, its practices, its institutional design, its history—are even more important, therefore, than they may first seem (and they seem quite important already). We must live our values.

Now, we must ask of Bennington College what we ask of our students every day: Develop your voice—maybe even to a roar—sing out, speak up, dance, show us what you are made of, show us who you are.

And we must ask this of each other, of ourselves.

- We must become increasingly interconnected with all of our communities—from the Town of Bennington and Village of North Bennington, to New York City, Los Angeles, and everywhere in between, and abroad—for our students and faculty from Senegal to Sri Lanka, from Nigeria to Norway, from Pakistan and Paris to India, Australia, and beyond.
- We will build on the partnerships we have, and forge new ones just beyond the gates (with the wonderful museums, schools, and communities right in our neighborhood) and around the globe. Now, more than ever, we must bring Bennington to the world and the world to Bennington.

- We will nurture and connect as ever more of a community. Alumni already work together across industries and across the years, just ask Peter Dinklage (or read about it in Esquire). But, it is time for the College to engage alumni more broadly and directly. And, we need those who understand the power of this place to be with us in shaping its future: as collaborators, as thought partners, and as supporters.
- We will be more accessible. If we believe in this work, we must increase access to the Bennington way of problem-solving and generating new ideas. No student who is ready for Bennington, who is ripe for Bennington, who needs Bennington, should be left at the gate for lack of funds.
- We will find or create technological platforms that support the rich, individual, and ever-changing nature of our work and the work of our faculty and students. Alumnus David Zicarelli developed MAX, one of the most widely used electronic music programming languages in the world with his heart set on recapturing a single sound he heard as a student in this very room. Just last week, he returned to hear today's students create their own auditory experiences with the tools Bennington inspired.
- And, as always, let's remember that this work is hard, and we need to be kind, generous, and supportive of ourselves and our community. Progress demands patience equal to passion.
- This is Bennington becoming ever more insistently and complexly who we are.

Which brings me back to my question:

Why?

Why Bennington?

Why now?

Because today, more than ever before, the world needs institutions that match its creative restlessness; that embrace the complexity and diversity of our planet; and that are focused not on the final shape of what the institution wants to be, but on the hope for the way the future can be.

And this has been true from our noble beginning—as expressed in our own traditional commencement statement:

Bennington regards education as a sensual and ethical, no less than an intellectual, process.

It seeks to liberate and nurture the individuality, the creative intelligence, and the ethical and aesthetic sensibility of its students to the end that their richly varied natural endowments will be directed toward self-fulfillment and toward constructive social purposes.

53 words. 366 characters. Together they capture the ideals and expanse of what we do here.

We know who we are.

We know why we are here.

Now it is time to show the world anew.

###

(1) The Pew Research Center, "The Rising Costs of Not Going to College." February 11, 2014