

Galley

April 14, 1965

The group of seniors which brought up questions about the ideology of Bennington College as it applies to non-academic activities had its interview with Dean Scott, Mrs. Smith and Acting President Pearson. Our object, as stated in our last Galley, was to "reaffirm common goals" in an effort to alleviate the tension that seemed to be growing between student expectations and unofficial administrative "statements" regarding student freedom. While this aim at present remains largely unfulfilled, Mr. Pearson has called for a Community Meeting to be held on Thursday, April 15, in which the issues at hand will be thrashed out and (it is hoped) a better understanding may be reached. We feel it to be essential that students make every effort to appear at this Meeting. For the problem as we see it now transcends the bounds of those particular issues brought up at the interview regarding liquor, sign-outs, etc., and finally involves what we have called the "vision" of Bennington, i.e. the purposes and ideals for which Bennington stands. Only through vociferous self-assertion can the students make clear their understanding of the "Bennington way", and thereby influence the evolution of the Bennington experiment.

As we were challenged by Mr. Pearson for our credentials as an elective body representing generalized student opinion, we feel obliged to say that we hope, but make no pretense of knowing, that the bulk of the student body might support us by reacting similarly to the ideas and opinions expressed by the administration at the interview.

For ourselves, we objected to the self-evidency with which the administration pointed out to us that Bennington, since it is after all an "educational institution", has the obligation to act in a "supportive capacity" to the students in their non-academic behavior. Early policy which said, in effect, "You're on your own," has been irresponsible, according to a spokesman. In the future the school must offer "situations, institutions and people" which would provide "guidelines" for the students' non-academic development. This would necessarily entail that a student test her own attitudes against "the standards of the Community" and the various standards of the "adult" members of the community.

We protested at the meeting that there tends to exist an inverse relationship between forming one's values independently in a community situation and having them recommended to one by an authority figure. "Then you prefer never to have your moral valuations challenged at Bennington?" Hardly--we prefer a formal neutrality on the part of potential authority figures, a toleration of mistakes, and a sincere effort on the part of the administration to allow self-determination the greatest leeway before a student is deemed a case for administrative "guidance". In a

hypothetical example we differed strongly with the administration's judgment of what constituted a precarious "case": they would feel "obliged" to open up "discussion" with a girl whose sign-out slips indicated that she had been visiting motels quite regularly. This is in express contradiction to the information given in the Handbook, which states that no objection will be made to a student's social activities except where they are found to be definitely hampering her academic progress.

Underlying the administration's attitude seems to be the opinion that there exist greater risks in maintaining a cool neutrality toward student experimentation (and potential mistakes), than in establishing an environment in which intimidation may be met by the students with negativism, deceit, or uncritical compliance. Being incessantly "made aware of the consequences of her actions", a student may well begin to wonder how much self-reliance (let alone retentiveness) is being attributed to and expected from her in all areas of her behavior.

There is no "right" or "wrong" way of resolving the question of experimentation and risks versus safety-first and the less scandalous risks involved therein. Our own position is this: We stand for the identity of Bennington as a unique, progressive and liberating institution, against the forces that would have it become a smoothly harmonious member of society, operating in glad concordance with the standards of the status quo. This, of course, assumes a larger socio-political judgment on our part--viz., that the American social and political reality does not reflect a utopian situation, that therefore its morality and its values in general need not be the ones finally arrived at after four years of undergraduate enlightenment. On this assumption we argue for the preservation of Bennington as an institution in which critical attitudes are encouraged, in which mistakes are tolerated and, consistent with this, in which students are given the benefit of the doubt in social situations involving personal choices.

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