

An Open Letter to the Trustees of Bennington College

I was unable to attend the faculty meeting of October 3 at which the so-called affirmative action program was discussed. I understand, however, that members of the faculty who are not in sympathy with the program have been invited to make their views known to you. Hence this letter. It seems to me, both that the program as defined is hostile to everything Bennington College stands for, and that, if adopted, it will be administered in a fashion almost guaranteed to weaken such claims as we still have to being a significant and in some sense innovative college.

2
The first and most important reason for taking this view is that Bennington College has always taken affirmative action with respect to bringing members of minority groups to the College, whether as students, as faculty members, or as members of the administration and staff. Well before the present era of instant equality, for example, it named a woman dean (she was in fact the only dean), a black professor of sociology, and a black reference librarian. It also seriously considered a woman for its presidency and offered an appointment in anthropology to a black woman, as well as made extra efforts to elicit nominations and applications for its prospective faculty appointments from persons who might be thought to suffer from discrimination against them. In short, Bennington does not need to defend its past record, and recently arrived members of its administration and faculty who clamor against its practices prove only their common ignorance of the principles on which the College has always conducted itself.

1/10/68
Students
In addition, the introduction of an arithmetical quota for representatives of different underprivileged groups clearly portends the admission of students and the appointment of faculty members and administrators who will be judged by their race or sex rather than by their qualifications irrespective of these biological qualities. It is one thing to provide administrative mechanisms by which candidates for appointment or admission will be solicited among minority groups, or by which such candidates may secure a hearing if they think they have been discriminated against. It is another matter to place the faculty or administration of the College in a position in which they must calculate their appointments, reappointments, or admissions in terms of the percentage of blacks or women or other disadvantaged groups that will result from given actions. This is not an idle speculation: as a member of the Faculty Educational Policies Committee, the Faculty Personnel Committee, the Social Science Division, and the faculty at large I have already witnessed calculations of this sort being applied to candidates and prospective candidates for appointment or admission, as if the health of Bennington College depended upon conforming to a numerical standard of virtue rather than maintaining an impartial standard of excellence. In the past, it was a matter of pride for me that Bennington did not observe quotas in its admissions or its hiring, at a time when most private colleges used them to limit the number of Jews on their campuses. Now, apparently, those who kept the faith are to be lumped together with those who did not, no matter what the effect may be on their ability to play a significant role in American higher education.

There are also grave practical flaws in the quota system that further demonstrate its inappropriateness. In the first place, the intention that fifty per cent of the College's faculty and administration be women ignores the fact that the number of available women candidates for any given position, no matter what their quality, is unlikely to equal the number of available men candidates of the same quality. Feminists and advocates of women's liberation may well regret this fact; I question their right to impose their own politically-defined standard of equality in defiance of it. For that matter, if we were to take the total population of the United States as the basis for our calculations, we should have to project more women than men in our employment, a fact that further suggests how little the quota proposed has to do with reality. Clearly, it is a tendentious political demand rather than a genuine effort to secure equal opportunity for equally qualified applicants.

20
The very fact that we are urged to adopt the proposed quota system in order to save the College money also indicates the extent to which it is at war with our educational philosophy. In the past, the College has always been highly principled about rejecting gifts that limited its freedom of action even when its trustees or its personnel sympathized with the action that might be required. For example, it turned aside proposals to create some kind of religious center, possibly in conjunction with the Crossett Library, not because it deprecated religion but because it looked askance at forcing it on the campus. It also refused to participate in a student loan program sponsored by the federal government because the program required both a routine loyalty oath and an additional certification of some sort to be administered by the College. Here I do not assert that the College sympathized with these oaths, but that it refused to administer them in spite of the fact that its refusal deprived needy students of funds they were willing to accept on the terms under which they were offered. It would be an anomaly (to say the least) if the trustees now decided that they must capitulate to a government demand in order to spare themselves some fund-raising when they refused to capitulate to another government demand when it was only needy students whose lives were affected.

20
Finally, there is the question of the manner in which a quota system would be administered. I have already indicated some of my concerns on this score in my first paragraph of comment; let me add here that when a new president and new faculty members are so ignorant of the College as to charge that it has never had a woman administrator, that it has only recently appointed its first black faculty member, and that the trustees clearly preferred a man rather than a woman for president (and this was said of 1972, not 1965), their perceptions of both our principles and our practice are so inadequate and so doctrinaire as to call into question their ability to implement with either intelligence or integrity the "reform" they propose. In addition, I believe that the president and the vice president have betrayed an indecent haste to acquiesce in mechanically-contrived innovations supposedly mandated by the government, when they might better have vouched for our integrity and our achievements as guarantees of our good faith. Under present circumstances, indeed, the energy that has been devoted to devising plans

for "affirmative action," not to mention the vulgarity of the quotas actually proposed, is symptomatic of how far we have abandoned our true purpose, which is to offer an unusually effective education to anyone who is willing and able to make use of it, no matter what his creed, color, income, sex, or politics.

My convictions on this score have been deepened by the manner in which the proposed program of action was introduced. Although members of the administration were well aware of the need for it at least six months ago, they did not acquaint the faculty with their scheme until the last possible minute before the trustees met. At that point they brought it before the full faculty, ostensibly to restore that body's role in the government of the College, but without circulating a draft of it and also without any attempt to elicit the views of the Faculty Educational Policies Committee or the Faculty Personnel Committee, both of which might have offered advice on the problem. (Meanwhile, however, the president had apparently found time to air the proposal before the women's group on campus, as if they had a special right to be informed of such matters.) Presentation of the proposal in full faculty meeting without prior publication also had the effect of inviting the strident partisans of "equality," who lack the confidence of many of their colleagues precisely because they are so clearly partisan, to browbeat those colleagues when they expressed a wish to examine the proposal on its merits. In addition, I am informed that the president also permitted one faculty member who is on leave and who has been replaced to attend the faculty meeting, to participate in its deliberations, and to take part in the straw vote another partisan proposed after perhaps half of the faculty had left to meet other obligations. It is also worth noting that the straw vote was taken viva voce in an assembly made up in large part of persons not eligible to vote on this or any other faculty business.

So much for the machinery by which the proposal gained the assent of the faculty: it was brought forward under the shabbiest of pretenses and with an almost complete disregard for the intelligence, the integrity, and the orderly conduct of the faculty, who were thereby manipulated into acquiescing in a thoughtless reform. The College has been politicized many times over in recent years; the events that I describe, however, represent the most destructive and the least warranted of all the devices that have been employed to force us into conformity with a utopia designed by "innovators" who have no real contribution to make to the life of the College.

Rush Welter

11 October 1973