

Report from Bennington College
to the
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
New England Association of Schools and Colleges
November 29, 1995

Introduction

As the fall term of 1995 draws to a close, we are cautiously optimistic that the bold restructuring announced by the Board of Trustees in June of last year has set Bennington College on the road to long-term financial viability. The two principal keys to success in this venture are enrollment and fund raising. Even as we are sobered by the challenges we face on both these fronts, we remain confident that we will be successful.

Financial Overview

Bennington's fundamental problem is a substantial imbalance between earned revenue and expenditures resulting from underenrollment and an inordinately high ratio of financial aid. The acceleration of these trends, first evidenced in 1991-92, was an important factor in the Board's decision to launch a year-long examination of the College (the Symposium) which culminated in the far-reaching decisions of the Symposium Report issued in June, 1994.

Although many have characterized these decisions as a downsizing of the College, the correct description is that Bennington embarked on a significant reorganization of itself, especially in its academic life. There are, to be sure, slightly fewer faculty FTEs than before. Yet virtually all disciplines formerly taught at Bennington are still offered. In fact, there are new curricular offerings in such fields as languages (Japanese and, next year, Russian), gender studies, and media studies. The Symposium Report also had little effect on the number of non-faculty positions, as most cutting of administrative staff positions had been completed in 1992.

In our judgment there is no appreciable reduction in expenditures, for personnel or goods and services, which can be made if Bennington is to offer a sound and attractive liberal arts curriculum. The problem, therefore, is a lack of sufficient revenues from tuition and fees, not an excess of expenditures.

Our expectation for annualized undergraduate enrollment this year is 275 (an actual fall enrollment of 285 and estimated spring enrollment of 265). Expenditures for institutional financial aid will approximate 46% of undergraduate enrollment revenues.

Our goal for some years, reflected in the Symposium Report, has been an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 600 students, with institutional financial aid at approximately 30% of charges. The attainment of this goal five years from now (academic year 2000-2001) would enable us to bring the operating budget into balance. This achievement is made easier by the fact that the incremental costs of slightly doubling enrollment are, relatively speaking, not great. While there would be some increase in the outlays for such items as food and utilities, there would be virtually no increase in administrative staff. The increase in faculty size would be minimal since we can double the size of the student body and still remain within a 10-1 student-faculty ratio.

Until enrollment recovers, special fund raising is required. Last year we were able to meet our needs and to balance the budget by raising over \$4.6 million to meet current operating expenditures. We estimate that our fund raising goal for the five-year transitional period will be approximately \$30 million. Given our initial success, when the uncertainties as to the future were greatest, we think we have reason to be confident that we can reach that goal.

We are also working with the College architects to develop an overall plan for upgrading the physical plant since we want to be positioned to implement such a plan as soon as resources permit. The estimated overall cost will be \$4 million.

Fund raising

Our preliminary success is, of course, extremely encouraging. In order to build on this initial momentum the development effort has been revitalized and reorganized as part of a newly-created Office of External Relations. Headed by Debra Townsend, who joined Bennington as Vice President for External Relations this past May, this office combines Media Relations, Publications, Alumni and Special Events, and Development in a single unit whose aim is to position the College in a coordinated way from the perspective of both development and admissions.

Ms. Townsend joins the College after an extensive career in politics, higher education and private industry. She has rejuvenated the staff with several new appointments in corporate and foundation relations and media relations. Polly Runyon, who orchestrated last year's fund raising campaign prior to Ms. Townsend's arrival, has recently been named Director of Development.

The willingness of several foundations (including Mellon, Pew, Hewlett, Culpeper, Starr, Davis, Christian Johnson Endeavor) to support Bennington's efforts was crucial to last year's success. Bennington's trustees, alumni and friends provided even greater sums in last year's endeavor which, as noted above, provided, from all sources, more than \$4.5 million toward the operating budget.

A high level of activity in support of a reanimated Bennington, commenced last year, continues unabated. Our efforts are focused on securing a few multi-million dollar commitments from private donors, increasing Annual Fund giving with a challenge match from large donors, and replicating last year's success with foundations.

Enrollment

Enrollment recovery is the long-term answer to Bennington's current situation. That recovery has been the primary goal throughout. Given our current class of 285 undergraduates, we need to double enrollment. Were this number in the thousands, the odds would be slim, but in our case it involves a net change of slightly over 300 undergraduates. We consider that well within our range given the academic changes that have occurred and given the significant increase in the quality of our enrolled students. We anticipate that the turnaround in enrollment will begin as of Fall '96 when the changes in the academic life of the College have begun to register with prospective students.

Dr. Elena Bachrach, Dean of Admissions and the Freshman Year, now in her second year in this position, has assembled a talented and energetic staff. Her office has revised recruitment strategies, admissions publications and office procedures. They have also put into place a number of initiatives and innovations and the response so far has been immensely encouraging.

The deadline for applications is February 1, 1996, so it is too soon to have comparable figures, but the level of pre-application activity has increased markedly, most critically in the realm of campus visits.

The companion to the admissions effort is retention. Bennington's retention efforts have been enhanced and better systematized with the arrival this June of Dr. Lydia English, formerly of Brown University, as Associate Dean of the College. She has formed three-person review teams which are responsible for reviewing the academic progress of every Bennington student. We expect this program to have some positive effect on retention.

Conclusion

In embarking on a redesign of Bennington, the trustees chose to meet the enrollment problem with an academically revitalized College. The first task - to accomplish that transformation - is well under way. That upsurge in quality also had to attract significant non-tuition dollars during the necessary period of transition while enrollment rebuilt. So far that too has been accomplished. The course for this College is undoubtedly a demanding one, but we are firmly on course.