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PLEASE RETURN TO MISS GRIMWOOD NOT LATER THAN 9 a.m., TUESDAY, MAY 5th.

Omitted: Ideas of no trial major, narrow major and counselling versus tutoring. To be inserted somewhere?

A Report from the College on Plans for the Future

Build up

This spring Bennington completes its first decade. Recently the College, with the help of outside experts, appraised the program worked out in these years and last fall we reached a consensus about changes that needed to be made. The advent of war has confirmed rather than uprooted our conclusions. Among the efforts we are making to rise to the crisis, the most profound is to do better what we were doing before. The occasion of the tenth year is taken for a report to the alumnae and friends of the College on plans to that end. Full specifications for a revised curriculum will appear in the fall bulletin. Meanwhile, the nature of the changes we plan to make and the reasons underlying them are here set forth.

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It should be said at once that revision is by no means intended to invalidate the present Bennington curriculum. The continuity of our educational plan may seem endangered, but continuity is a matter of purposes rather than practices. The time to fear for continuity is when a college can no longer imagine how it could change. While we hold fast to the purposes with which

Bennington began, we believe there should be no
hesitation in altering its practices.

The End in View

Should this be moved
to peroration?

Educators have debated for years the relative merits of paying primary attention either to the individual or to the cultural tradition. Leisure for that debate is over. It has become increasingly clear that the continued existence of our society depends upon a truly balanced relationship between order and personal freedom. We have examined the Bennington curriculum in the light of that conviction.

The classic conception of citizenship stands for the end toward which we should like to move. The long belittlement of the word by association with empty or disingenuous behavior, has made it misunderstood when used outside of wartime. Being patriotic, it is true, is one sense of the word; but being educated can be another. To expect education to cultivate citizenship is enough to hope for it in this or less appropriate times. Under pressure to recognize that the present war is a war for survival, we submit that citizenship, adequately defined, is the moral equivalent of survival.

The Background of Bennington

The mandate from the founders of Bennington was to build a curriculum on the interests and needs of students. A very useful curriculum resulted which has served six generations of students well. When the College began, there was no fixed array or settled sequence of courses; subsequently, courses were formed at the points where students' choices converged. Actually they fell into the subject matter normally of interest to graduates of American secondary schools, but they were much more freely arrived at than is common. Alterations could be made easily when the necessity arose. Equal place in the program was given to fields like the arts, often neglected. Members of the faculty were chosen for their ability both as practitioners and as teachers. The judgment of this faculty constituted the authority under which the first choices of studies became stabilized into the curriculum we have followed now for some time.

The result of this procedure was for separate fields to grow strong in themselves. As the curriculum became established, the worth of the material and the effectiveness of its presentation in each field were unquestionable; but there appeared a lack of overall coherence. An emphasis of this kind is not inherent in the Bennington plan. Ten years' experience with the power of interest in inciting students to learn has given us a wholesome respect

for it. We shall abandon none of the ways we have found to deal with the individual student; her needs, her interests, her aptitudes and idiosyncracies. We do intend to anchor the student's choices more securely by enlarging the logic within which she makes and pursues them.

The Principle of Selection

The first problem of a college is to find a principle of selection by which to locate the material for a curriculum and establish the categories within it. The points of reference should be the student and the culture to which she belongs. These are our assumptions. Therefore, we are agreed that the material for the revised curriculum is to be selected on the principle that it ^{is} either basic to an understanding of Western culture or essential to competence in a field. The curriculum is to be divided along this line into two categories: Basic Studies and Special Knowledge and Skills.

The Revised Curriculum

The curriculum as revised under this principle is new in the important sense that it includes agreement on what is significant content for the College as a whole. This fresh emphasis supplements, but does not supplant, the original provisions for individual work. Individual interests and needs are to be met chiefly through courses in Special Knowledge and Skills, common interests and needs chiefly through courses in Basic Studies. Individual effort must be connected with some common human purpose; otherwise it is at best futile, at worst vicious. We have every reason to encourage Bennington students to explore for a permanent field of work and persist in it when they find it. We have as good reason to take care that their private interests are consciously grounded in the content and meaning of their own civilization. Most of the innovations in the Bennington curriculum arise from this second determination, and they are not lightly made. The quest for greater unity of language and purpose, deeper agreement about values important enough to deserve agreement, goes on at this moment in places larger and more critically placed than Bennington College.

The need for common ground within the College has always been felt. Devices such as seminars, an annual series of meetings on general topics, and the like were used. They were inadequate. A serious

examination of the curriculum showed the need was pervasive and could best be met by the introduction of a central body of studies.

In accepting the cultural heritage as the point of reference for these studies we have no notion of presenting a falsely unified interpretation of contemporary life, its origins and the outlook for it. The conflicting currents of opinion that mark the times flow also through this College. Our hope is, through the Basic Studies program, to identify the real differences and let them animate rather than thwart learning.

The idea underlying Basic Studies is that at some point in the education of young people it is imperative that they acquire a sense of history and of their own place in it. This is the least common denominator of cultural literacy. The capacity to discern and pursue certain spiritual ends, the control of a few fundamental methods of thought and investigation, the power to read and employ the non-verbal languages of the arts and sciences, cannot be reduced to formulae. Nevertheless, a determined effort must be made to teach students to command at least the rudiments of these abilities.

The structure of the Basic Studies program follows the logic that Western culture may be understood through a grasp of the humanities as the cultural matrix, recognition of the impact of science on Western thought

and action, awareness of the embodiment of cultural elements in the arts, and analysis of the political economy under which Western civilization is governed. These are the four points of focus within the program.

Basic courses are not intended to provide a composite survey. Nor are they designed as background for advanced work in a particular field, although secondarily this purpose is served. Their meaning for the student is not contingent on direct application to some other kind of study. Even where courses are designed to follow one another, the relationship between them is not a sequence in the strict sense; but rather a continuity which the student may or may not pursue throughout. The problem is quite unlike that of devising introductory study and much more difficult. The basic courses attempt to select, combine and relate knowledge from many fields because of its decisive significance to a great humane tradition.

The requisite method in Basic Studies is to examine and expound basic texts, fundamental works, crucial formulations, whether ancient or modern. We have no bias about the relative merits of classic as against contemporary materials for study. Emphasis on the here and now has served a corrective purpose in modern education, but it has been guilty of over-compensation. We see no guarantee of wisdom for the student in urging upon her only the old which may bemuse or the new which may fascinate her. Certainly

Build up Method

any antithesis between the two is unreal.

In any field there are instances of such import that they define that field. They illustrate its method and technique, establish its standards, its intellectual and spiritual content. They occur in the non-verbal forms of expression like music and mathematics as well as in the verbal ones. These classic instances give at least the clues to the whole history of a field. Moreover, they throw light on one another and provide their own exegesis and criticism. The theory is that the masters of an art, the great originators of thought, are its best teachers and the student should be put as closely as possible in touch with them.

Without laboring the point and before citing examples, it should be noted that greatness and importance are not always self-evident. There are more times, settings and ways for meaning to become clear to students than any program of studies can control. As many eventualities as possible should be anticipated; beyond that something must be left to the student.

The operation of basic courses can be seen in examples illustrating the four points of focus of the program: humanities, science, the arts, political economy. The first example is a two year course in the humanities. We accept the humanities to include the study of philosophical, religious, narrative, poetic and dramatic works. In the first year it is

proposed to study a modern novel, a Platonic dialogue, a tragedy of Shakespeare, and a group of lyric poems. The attempt is to make the student master the text itself and learn to read these major forms. The emphasis is upon method, upon reading, and hence upon ways of ordering perception and thought. The historical relationships are not stressed, though we have selected a modern, a classic, and a Renaissance text. In the second year we propose to read parts of the Bible, a Greek tragedy, certain of Chaucer's narrative poems, and selections from philosophical prose of the Renaissance. Here the emphasis is put on historical relationships and the development of the Western tradition. In both years basic texts constitute the chief content of the course, with collateral reading in other classics and in criticism, philosophy, psychology, anthropology and history. It is obvious that this scheme not only allows but assumes great flexibility. We do not attempt to decide which tragedy of Shakespeare or which dialogue of Plato shall be canonical and we do not intend to teach exactly the same selection year after year. This applies still more strongly to the collateral reading. By this approach we aim to recognize the diverse interests and abilities of faculty as well as students, and also the fact that the main line of the tradition provides standards and orientation which no selection can possibly exhaust.

(Insert here science and music examples)

(In connection with music example)

There has been, in the educational language, a separation of learning by doing from other learning. While this separation has been useful, it seems no longer necessary. On the other hand, we do have every faith in the contention that books are not all. The curriculum of Bennington has always included non-verbal as well as verbal kinds of study. As a result we have been rewarded with one of the richest experiences any American college has had from the arts.

Another way to characterize a basic course is to compare it with study in a special knowledge. Political Economy, in which a course is to be offered, is concerned with the art of government in the widest sense. The basic texts from Plato to Veblen which, with our actual political habits constitute its tradition, are the materials. A course such as Economic Analysis, on the other hand, deals with the specialized logic of a subject. A conception of the art of government is inseparable from any intelligent view of culture and some means indispensable to secure. But technical economics is a branch of a particular subject. Many students will work in both courses at once or successively, but Economic Analysis is neither a prerequisite to Political Economy nor its necessary sequel.

The nature of Special Knowledge and Skills should already be apparent. Within this category are conserved

all of the opportunities for specialization devised and proved good in ten years at Bennington. Here are the particular provisions for the student to find her main interest and follow it in detail. Special studies include techniques and technical fields, intensive work in the laboratory or studio, winter field work and other variations of practical experience, related work in the library and classroom. The qualifying test in this area is that the student within a reasonable period, usually two years, locate a clear and plausible line, set out on it and proceed steadily toward enough competence to justify the time and energy spent in the acquisition.

It does not follow that the division of responsibility between Special Knowledge and Skills and Basic Studies is cut and dried. No effort will be expended on fencing off one kind of experience from another or crediting to the student only the outcomes formally identified with either category. One strength of the new plan is that it more clearly allocates^{curricular}/re-sponsibilities without destroying flexibility.

Colleges have been forced not only to promise their students a general education, which is certainly proper, but to disclaim vocational education as improper. In the first place, a college can scarcely intend in four years, for students from eighteen to twenty-one, to determine their final life work or to civilize them completely. In the

second place, at this age students progress toward specific competence and general maturity at one and the same time and by almost indistinguishable means. The testimony of graduates, Bennington graduates included, bears out the plain truth that life for the student after college is too complicated for any institution to foretell with accuracy or foreordain with assurance. This grows more true every day. Nevertheless, cooking or carpentry cannot be taught as intellectual exercises. Bennington does not teach either one; not because they are poor things to know but because, in the educational division of labor, we have other responsibilities. At the same time, we do not pretend that students do not require food and shelter after they graduate, nor would ^{we} like them to conceal the fact that this is on their minds. Actually the difference between narrow training and broad education has been argued to the confusion of the real issue. A college needs a far more subtle principle of selection than this. And even if such a principle is found and followed, it does not change the fact that the student in the end has to decide how to earn her own living and live her own intellectual life.

The Sum of the Changes

The sum of the changes is that the two large categories of study already represented in the Bennington curriculum are consolidated, and their weight is equalized. There is no desire to create an imbalance in favor of general as against special study, nor to put faith in some one body of subject matter as offering all things to all students. The mosaic of the new curriculum depends for its entire form on an orderly arrangement of contrasting elements. The principle of selection we have used conveys no special magic. We have still had to choose from among almost infinite possibilities. The bulk of a choice already made is represented in the large part of the original curriculum intact in this new plan. But in the light of ten years' experience, we have had to take a further step. We have had to declare that some things are trivial or unnecessary, and we cannot afford to spend time on them; other things are of the utmost importance in our culture, and must be taken seriously.

Change to two functions
of College now:
preserve culture
in troubled world,
prepare students
for citizenship
in same?

The members of a college can have no delusions of grandeur about their effect on the fate of the nation. They can, at the same time, entertain no doubts about the requirement to justify their existence. The elaborate pointlessness of which American undergraduate education is capable has always been deplorable. Under the stringencies of the war and the deeper strictures of the peace, it promises to be unpardonable. A fair contention is that colleges must be held more directly responsible to what has been indicated as the cultivation of citizenship. Otherwise they may fail to be of consequence even though they continue to survive.

In revising the Bennington College curriculum, we mean to assume that kind of responsibility. By this token, we expect to make clearer our part in advancing the cause of American education - the endlessly developing dialogue, with many voices, about the things that are important for civilization.