

Bennington College

Message from the President

September 1, 2021

Dear Bennington Community,

Our academic year has now begun. Many of you joined the convocation yesterday under the tent by VAPA to celebrate the beginning of the 89th academic year at Bennington College. (You can watch the [full event](#).)

This year, we welcome home our returning students and the new class of 2025, the largest in Bennington College history, students from 14 countries and 31 states. We're especially proud that 25 percent of our students are Pell eligible and 18 % first generation college students.

At the convocation, I was joined by two new members of the senior team: Maurice Hall, the new Provost, and Alfredo Medina, our new Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Faculty member Mariam Ghani reminded all of us of the tragic events unfolding in Afghanistan and our responsibility as individuals and a community of learners to assist now and going forward. Flo Gill, a senior and the president of the Student Educational Policies Committee, spoke eloquently about our community and how "in our differences, lies our beauty, our authenticity, and our truth."

Empathy and compassion are values that are at the heart of this college. We will live these values this term as we work together to keep COVID at bay, as we follow the latest research and public health best practices. For all COVID updates, please refer to the [Weekly COVID Message](#), which was sent earlier today.

Confronting challenges at home and globally

As we start this year, we are reminded that what we do here – and how we do it through collaboration – is critically important.

The challenges before us could not be greater – continuing to confront and address systemic racism and inequality, protecting voting rights to preserve our democracy, and standing up as allies for people across the globe who are fleeing oppressive governments. We face urgent challenges which require individual strength and powerful collaboration...the kind you learn at Bennington.

CAPA has organized a series of seminars as part of the [January 6th Project](#) to examine the historical, cultural, and political events that led to the assault on the Capitol last year. It is open to all members of our community and the public.

Faculty member Noah Coburn and I have joined other education leaders and students to support the [Scholars at Risk Network](#) and their work in Afghanistan. We hope to bring a scholar to our campus and plan to work with resettlement groups in southern Vermont. Noah has also refocused his classes this fall to include the evacuation process in Afghanistan and has lined up speakers to address these issues. There are also research opportunities. Please check out the [course description](#) or [email Noah](#) for more information.

Working Group on Palestine

I would also like to thank the group of staff, students, and faculty that took the time this summer to have a fruitful conversation around how Bennington College thinks about and engages with the conflict in Palestine and Israel. The group made several recommendations and I have been working to immediately implement some of them.

Reading the group's recommendations and talking with students, faculty, and staff about this complex issue, reaffirms my belief that Bennington, with its reflective approach to student-centered learning, its flexible curriculum, and its commitment to social justice and antiracism, is well-situated to work as a community to grapple with some of these most pressing issues of our time.

- Based on the group's central recommendations, I have also asked Alfredo Medina, the Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, to work with a group of students, faculty, and staff to organize and sponsor a speaker series that aims to shed light on the conflict and explore voices that have been marginalized.
- We are also looking into classes or tutorials that will run parallel with the series, providing students with a space to discuss the material from the series, as well as opportunities to discuss difficult discussions over FWT for work on these issues. Please [email Alfredo Medina](#) if you are interested in participating.
- In addition, as the working group recommended, this academic year we will continue to evaluate our relationship with the Arava Institute. We will also seek support to bring an artist in residence and Palestinian and Israeli students to our campus.

As we start the new year, our thoughts are also with students and their families impacted by Hurricane Ida and the recent earthquake in Haiti. If you need help, or have concerns you'd like to share, please reach out to [Student Life](#).

I am so excited for the new year and that we are here together in person. There's an energy on the campus right now that is truly palpable.

Finally, I want to give a special thanks to so many who have worked so hard to prepare the campus this year. Please join me in thanking our extraordinary staff, especially those in Dining Services, Buildings and Grounds, Campus Safety, Student Life, IT, Health Services, and our faculty and students. Everyone has worked so hard—even

more than normal given staff shortages due to the pandemic, and transitions. We appreciate everyone's efforts.

Rosh Hashanah this year is September 6th. For those who celebrate, I wish you a very happy, healthy and creative New Year.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Laura Walker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Laura" being more prominent than the last name "Walker".

Laura Walker