

HOOKER



Report to the  
Faculty, Students, Administration and Trustees  
of  
BENNINGTON COLLEGE  
BENNINGTON, VERMONT  
by  
An Evaluation Team Representing  
The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education  
of the  
New England Association of Schools and Colleges

Prepared after study of the institution's self-study report and a visit to the campus on  
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## INTRODUCTION:

Instead of writing our own Report after visiting Bennington College in December 1983, we could resubmit to the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education most of the comments written after the previous visit of a NEASC Team in November 1977. There are striking similarities between the conditions found at that time, and those which exist today. Again the visit occurred within about a year after the arrival of a new President. Again there has been much administrative turn-over. And most of the critical remarks made in 1977 still pertain, especially those with regard to what was characterized as "structural problems in governance" as well as those which described educational thinking at Bennington as "a self-contained and self-sustaining tautology."

PR { Yet, at the same time, the positive aspects of the 1977 evaluation are equally pertinent. Bennington College continues to be "unique and successful," as it was characterized then. It is still a splendid institution, with an outstanding and dedicated faculty and an extraordinary student body, a combination which is an almost foolproof formula for excellence in education. In one of the Team meetings, a member of the current group expressed his admiration at the manner in which

"a variety of talented faculty comes at the situation in highly individual ways but all committed to the notion that the students constitute a precious raw material capable of insight and creative expression if allowed to grow with due consideration for individual ideas, experience and feeling."

That spontaneous statement is an apt characterization of what happens at Bennington College. In 1983, we continue to agree that "an association of colleges and universities should cherish the uniqueness of Bennington" and that it is eminently worth preserving.

One might therefore conclude that Bennington College is managing quite well in spite of what both the 1977 and the 1983 Team perceive as weaknesses, and that there is no real need for change. Indeed this is the prevalent attitude among the faculty, who feel that they and the institution have weathered many storms, and that many well intended visitors - as well as Presidents - have come and gone while Bennington has survived with little change. The cry of "wolf" has been heard too often to be taken seriously.

Unfortunately, it is our considered opinion that this time the wolf is indeed at the door, and that Bennington College is facing nothing less than a crisis requiring the attention as well as the involvement of all constituencies: trustees, administration, faculty and students. The situation now differs from past circumstances because of two concurrent and interrelated factors:

- 1) substantial budget deficits, which can be eliminated only by a combination of developing a substantial endowment and, at the same time, maintaining adequate enrollment;
- 2) a sharp drop in the applicant pool and a resulting decrease in enrollment which further aggravates the financial situation.

\* As a result of both of these conditions, Bennington College finds itself in a much more serious situation than in the past. The institution cannot continue to rely only on an intensification of recruitment and fund raising by the President and his staff, with all other components of the Bennington community continuing business as usual. The situation demands drastic attitudinal changes.

In the first place, the present financial position of Bennington College requires the harnessing of the combined energies of Trustees, Administration, Faculty, students as well as alumni and friends. The extent of the problem must be seriously realized by all



constituencies, and these must join in a genuine and sincere effort led clearly by the Board of Trustees. As will be described in greater detail in the next section of this Report, a capital campaign to build endowment is very different from solicitation for yearly giving. Many trustees have given generous support to the College in the past. However, not only a greater degree but also a different kind of involvement is needed now. It is the Board collectively which holds fiduciary responsibility for the institution and which must be actively engaged in the design and implementation of a major endowment drive.

All other constituencies of the College must be part of this as well. Faculty and students can be of great help in the complex fund raising effort. But even more important is that all recognize the gravity of the situation, and the need to examine all aspects of the operation of Bennington College in the effort to increase its financial viability. At this time, the Team found many members of the faculty sceptical about the extent of the problem - the alarm button has been pushed too often. Furthermore, there is a widespread view that budget problems can always be solved by raising money, and that this is the responsibility only of the President - indeed some members of the College view it as his sole job. The team is convinced that such attitudes must change. The Self Study states that "(t)he dynamic process of self-scrutiny, evaluation and decision making...has continued at Bennington to this day." Elsewhere it speaks of "continual self-examination". It is time to bring reality to this rhetoric. The College must take a critical look at its academic program and practices and ask itself whether changes are needed which will make it more attractive to prospective students without attacking the basic integrity of the institution. It is also necessary to examine whether it is possible to meet student needs and interests in ways which may be less all-consuming of faculty time and energy while still remaining consistent with Bennington standards. Above all, it must undertake a collective effort to set priorities and to make choices. Resources are limited, and if new programs are needed, something old must go.

Currently, the ability of Bennington College to deal imaginatively and constructively with its future is hampered by a widely pervasive mixture of defensiveness and complacency. There is much evidence of the self-contained and self-sustaining educational thinking criticized in the 1977 Report. Complacency has its obvious dangers. But it is even more important for the Bennington College faculty to realize that there is no call either for defensiveness. The very academic strength and vitality of Bennington College makes continuing scrutiny both necessary and feasible. The basic educational philosophy of the institution and the fabric of its academic enterprise are sound and can only profit from an ongoing search for the optimal means to reach its desired ends. Back in 1961, an internal study of the College called for certain changes and stated that these

"point not to the need for new theory but to a need for new techniques to serve generally agreed-upon ends."

The same statement is valid today. The subsequent sections of this Report will contain a number of specific suggestions for reexamination and adaptation. These are made as suggestions to strengthen the ability of Bennington College to meet the challenges of the present and the future in ways which are fully consistent with its basic principles and standards.



## THE FINANCIAL SITUATION:

This Report starts with a brief overview of the current financial picture because of its centrality to any evaluation of the College.

The founders of Bennington College, fifty years ago, felt that an endowment might place constraints on educational innovation, and the institution never accumulated any capital reserves beyond a small amount used to provide financial aid. All other operating expenses were essentially carried by tuition, which until 1974 was kept relatively low. Ends were met by maintaining very inadequate faculty salaries: the 1977 Evaluation Report commented that "(t)he faculty are not paid well by any standards of comparison." In addition, administrative staffing was minimal. In recent years, the College has recognized the need for substantial tuition increases. The Self-Study reports that since 1978-79 student fees have grown at an annual rate of 11%, and that average faculty salaries went from \$15,800 to \$25,600. During that same period, however, other operating costs also increased considerably, resulting in appreciable annual deficits. Several factors contributed to this:

- an increase in the financial aid budget from approximately \$750,000 in ~~1978/79~~ <sup>1979-80</sup> to \$2.1 million in ~~1981/82~~ <sup>1983-84</sup>
- a substantial increase in administrative costs from \$950,000 in 1976/77 to \$2.1 million in 1982/83, reflecting a determined attempt to improve the weak management recruiting and fund raising;
- the decision by the Board of Trustees in the early seventies to construct two major buildings (the Dickenson Science Building and the Visual and Performing Arts Center) without any provision for ~~debate~~ service. This alone now adds more than \$400,000 to the operating budget each year.

To meet the resulting yearly deficits, Bennington College has resorted to short term loans, secured by the endowment as collateral, and using part of the endowment itself. The institution presently finds itself with an endowment which has dwindled to approximately \$2.3 million, a short term bank debt of more than 3.2 million (including \$700,000 which are being borrowed during the current year in order to cover shortfalls), and two unsecured notes payable to members of the Board of Trustees totalling about \$450,000. The total debt service on these obligations and on the buildings will be about \$900,000 for the current fiscal year.

The gravity of the current fiscal picture has been increased by some recent factors, particularly the decrease in enrollments. But in its essence it should have come as no surprise, and in fact was clearly predicted in the mid-seventies. The controversial remedies proposed by the "Futures Report" at that time unfortunately obscured the validity of its financial diagnosis, and the turmoil of those years prevented any timely steps. Their need was clearly seen by some. A magazine article about Bennington College published in January 1975 quotes the late Jessie Emmett, long time Trustee of the College, as saying that

"...it was time for the College to take a good look at itself. Bennington was counting on its reputation. Also it was quite plain that the financial projections pointed to disaster - not today, not tomorrow, but in ten years time. We had to get the arts building paid for and we had to get an endowment. In order to get the money, we had to have a clear idea of why we wanted it."

Mrs. Emmett was, unfortunately, quite correct, and the institution is indeed facing disaster in 1985, ten years after she made this statement. The new Administration,



confronting this situation, is taking a number of forceful steps. In the first place, it has made careful and realistic projections of expenditures and revenues for this and the next two years. These indicate operating deficits (including debt service) of approximately \$1.3 million for 1985/86. These figures are predicated on a considerable increase in annual giving for this year and next, and a somewhat smaller amount in the third year. The calculations also assume stable enrollment at current levels. Under these conditions, and if nothing else were done, the College would use up its entire endowment in covering operating deficits during the next three years, and would find itself, by the end of 1985/86, without an endowment, no security for its bank loans, and a continuing deficit operation.

President Hooker and his colleagues clearly realize that drastic steps are needed to avoid such a scenario, and are undertaking two major efforts. The first of these, already well under way, is to bring about an ingenious Lease/Lease Back arrangement under which Bennington College and five individual partners would lease physical assets of the College appraised at \$8 million. The steps are explained in some detail in an Appendix to this Report. The institution would receive a cash payment of \$3.6 million with which it would be able to retire all of its short term bank debt and retain a small amount to reduce the deficits of the next two years.

Members of the Team discussed this at length both with President Hooker and Vice President Vanderpol. We are satisfied that the prospects for the success of this arrangement are favorable. The President appears to have identified the individuals interested in entering into the partnership, and expects that all the necessary steps will be taken during the next three to four months. However, he fully realizes that this will postpone but not by itself eliminate the danger of institutional insolvency.

That can be done only by substantial increase in the endowment of Bennington College, and plans are being made for a major capital campaign. Mr. Theodore Milek joined the institution at the beginning of November 1983 as Vice President for Development, and has been charged with the task of planning and implementing a drive to raise a very large endowment in a comparatively short time. The hope is to be able to increase income from endowment sufficiently fast so as to offset the anticipated \$1.9 million deficit in 1985/86 and place the College into the black from then on. On the basis of an estimated 7.7% return on endowment, this will require raising \$17 million of new endowment in 1984/85, and an additional \$8 million in 1985/86.

There is no question that a major capital campaign is essential to the long term survival of Bennington College, and the Team applauds the vigor and determination with which President Hooker and Vice President Milek are initiating this effort. We have confidence in their eventual success, especially if the Trustees clearly recognize their central role in this undertaking, and if, in addition, all components of the Bennington community participate actively. However, the projected time table for the campaign appears to be very optimistic for several reasons. In the first place, Mr. Milek has just arrived, and although he is himself an experienced professional, he has only just been able to begin recruiting and training the necessary development staff. It is also probable that current estimates of staff needs are inadequate. In the second place, Bennington has only a limited tradition of annual giving, and no experience at all in a capital campaign. It takes time, effort and resources to develop an effective national organization of alumnae and friends, and also to produce the necessary documentation and publications. Lastly, and perhaps most important, a capital campaign must be based on a case statement which clearly lists and explains the anticipated uses of the funds. That will require a common internal effort, joining Trustees, administration, faculty and students, in order to set clear priorities for Bennington College. As Mrs. Emmett stated in 1975, if Bennington wants to raise a large amount of money, it has "to have a clear idea of why (it) wanted it." In turn that required the kind of critical self-



evaluation suggested in the Introduction to this Report. To expect all of this to happen in time to raise substantial sums in about two years appears to us to be overly optimistic.



## ADMISSIONS AND ENROLLMENT:

The College's financial projections are predicated on maintaining enrollment at least at current levels while continuing to increase tuition at an annual rate of 8% while increasing operating expenses, including financial aid, by 6% a year. Because Bennington's success in attracting and retaining an adequate number of students is clearly crucial, the Report will deal with this issue next.

One important component, obviously, is the effectiveness of the College's recruiting effort. Because of the drop in new enrollment for the current year, an unusually large class will have to be brought in. This task is in the hands of a new team in the admissions office. A new Director of Admissions, Mr. White, joined the College in August and an entirely new staff was hired by him in recent weeks. Mr. White has had extensive experience in admissions at Johns Hopkins and at Stanford, and the members of the Team who met him were impressed by his intelligence and energy. However, he is starting his difficult task with a real handicap. A good part of the first months of the traditional recruiting season was taken up by the necessary orientation and training of the new staff. In addition, the change over in the Admissions Office took place during the summer when faculty and students were not on campus. There is much resentment about this, further fueled by the circulation of an anonymous letter containing racist slurs about the new Director. However, the participation of students and faculty in the recruiting effort is essential, and these barriers must be overcome by an effort on both sides. It is very important that the Director of Admissions and his staff take the initiative to engage other members of the Bennington community in what must be a joint undertaking.

The recruiting effort would benefit considerably from a review of the image which Bennington College currently projects to prospective students and their parents through its publications. Public memories are short, and it is unlikely that the wide publicity given to the problems of the mid-seventies continues to influence decisions. The yearly newspaper stories about Bennington topping the national list of college costs probably have much greater impact, and by and large there is not enough general information about Bennington's positive aspects to offset this. More emphasis should be given to features such as the quality and the intensity of the tutorials (a much better term than "counseling") from which all Bennington students profit, and to the fact that most graduates of the College either go on to graduate or professional schools or immediately enter interesting and rewarding careers. The latter would answer some of the real concerns which both prospective students and their parents currently have about choosing Bennington.

It is even more important that the faculty of Bennington College reflect more fully on these concerns and their implications for the academic program. At one level, the prototype of the Bennington student has not changed since the founding of the institution. She - and now also he - continues to be self-motivated and intellectually adventurous. Bennington students still have no need for rigid requirements, and they would scorn narrowly vocational programs. Yet at a different level the students of today differ markedly from those of earlier generations. They have had more and different experiences before entering college, and most of them intend to pursue a career after undergraduate or more advanced studies. That so many indeed do so successfully after attending Bennington is not adequately known on the outside nor fully acknowledged within the institution. Yet these changes have profound implications for curriculum, for the Non-Residence Term (NRT) and for support services. In addition,



the changes sharpen the competing attraction of other institutions which now offer some of the special features of Bennington while at the same time paying more explicit attention to the career aspirations (and fears) of their students. These issues cannot be dismissed with the phrase that Bennington does not intend to become a trade school.

More attention needs also to be paid to the needs of the students who enter with high potential to become motivated and self-starting, but in whom these characteristics essential to survival at Bennington still need to be developed. If the College is truly interested in broadening its applicant pool and extending its current socio-economic and ethnic spectrum, it will probably have to attract and particularly also to retain more such students. For many of them the requirement of a NRT already in the freshman year, the complete freedom to choose courses, the need to prepare a Tentative Study Plan quite early: all these can be quite frightening to relatively unsophisticated students, in spite of the considerable availability of faculty counseling. Current studies indicate that the high attrition may be largely due to such factors. The College would do well to consider some alternative approaches, such as, e.g., making NRT optional during the first year, and providing intensive opportunities for self-assessment and career guidance.

Improving the retention of its students is as important for the College as is a successful recruiting effort, and demands considerable attention. There are many aspects of Bennington which place a premium on aggressive self-confidence and which foster competitiveness. As a result, the campus can be lonely and discouraging for many students who may find it difficult to approach faculty members for individual tutorials or the supervision of projects.

#### ADMINISTRATION AND GOVERNANCE:

The Team was very impressed by the uniformly high caliber of administrators currently at Bennington College. President Hooker had brought together an outstanding team. The Dean of the Faculty and the two Vice Presidents appear to work together very well and harmoniously. In turn they are backed by excellent individuals in charge of the several administrative departments. It is clear that in this respect the situation has improved substantially since the previous NEASC site visit. The College now has in place a sound and capable management structure well able to cope with the problems as well as the opportunities of the years ahead if it can establish appropriate working relationships with the faculty. Much progress is needed in this respect.

We were taken aback and concerned by the continuing fragmentation and lack of coherence among the several constituencies within the institution. In particular, there is still substantial isolation between administration and faculty. As mentioned earlier, many faculty members continue to view the administrative role as being limited to getting money and recruiting students, the faculty having full authority over the conduct of all institutional affairs. This questionable view is further aggravated by the limited effectiveness of any collective faculty action on curriculum and other academic issues because of the College's excessive emphasis on individual autonomy and "space." The faculty as a whole very frequently exercises a veto, but rarely agrees on constructive actions.

The gulf between administration and faculty together with this stress on individual prerogatives combine to perpetuate the impression of the earlier Team that in its academic activities the College is essentially unmanaged. Caveats expressed in 1977 about the danger of drifting along have become even more pertinent because of the situation in which the College finds itself. We urge that a concerted effort be made to



\* remedy this. This is not a call to create some arcadian vision of harmonious cooperation, and even less to force Bennington into a rigid hierarchy. The College needs effective collaboration between faculty and administration in defining the priorities for the institution, in finding optimal ways of dealing with continuing change in external and internal conditions in ways which are consistent with its basic goals, and in making the necessary choices and decisions.

The first requirement to establish effective working relationships is clarification of the extent as well as the limits of the authority of all constituencies of the College. This is particularly important in the area of resource allocation. Even if Bennington's financial situation were more favorable, it would have to accommodate new needs by eliminating some existing activities. Under the actual circumstances, this need is unavoidable. Yet during the past several years Bennington has dealt with new program developments in a haphazard and inadequate fashion because of the institutional tradition that the faculty must approve any shifts in resources. This approval has not been given, nor would one expect it to be. It is neither fair nor reasonable to expect a faculty to make the difficult decisions: that, to put it bluntly, is what administrators are paid for. Trustees and administration must have the courage to insist that the allocation and reallocation of resources is an administrative responsibility which, however, must be carried out only after extensive consultation with the faculty. On the other hand, the administration must recognize that the faculty has the right to make prior recommendations and to review all academic appointments. Furthermore, all constituencies of the College need to be provided with full information and rationale on personnel decisions within the limits of the individual's right to privacy.

~~book~~ It is also important to realize the impossibility of establishing effective working relationships between the administration, on the one hand, and sixty to seventy individual faculty members on the other hand. One consequence of the current atomization is that there are too many committees requiring too much time from too many faculty members, and yet decisions often still do not get made. To a considerable extent this happens because the eight divisions continue to have "divisional secretaries". This is the pattern which was severely criticized in the 1977 Evaluation. Since that time, an attempt was made to change the term of these secretaries, without, however, changing their authority. The result, predictably, was that their task was prolonged but their effectiveness remained unchanged: the job continued to be one of extensive responsibilities without commensurate authority. At the moment, the situation is again what it was in 1977, with secretaries serving for one year (in the Arts division for one semester!) acting as little more than divisional administrative assistants, assuring that all the various faculty committees are formed and active, that the extensive reports and other paperwork get done, that budget requests are forwarded on time, and that recruiting, purchases and other divisional operations happen - but with no authority in any of these areas.

Change is most urgently needed. There needs to be, between the administration and the individual faculty members, an organizational level occupied by persons who are more than conveyors of communications and conveners of meeting. This is in the faculty's own interest. Effective representation and strong advocacy of divisional interests is possible only through individuals with delegated authority sufficient to speak for their colleagues. The need for this will become apparent when the inevitable steps are taken to reallocate resources among programs. However, it is obvious that the weight of tradition and the recent abortive efforts to increase the length of office of divisional secretaries will make it very difficult to bring about change. Perhaps Bennington College should review not just the role of divisional secretaries but indeed the entire divisional structure. With a total faculty of only seventy, eight separate



divisions appear to result in excessive fragmentation. A reorganization creating a smaller number of more inclusive departments might be considerably more manageable. It would also ease the implementation of one condition which is essential: the individuals with the responsibility of managing the faculty units, whether these are the present divisions or newly defined departments, cannot continue to perform their tasks in addition to all of their regular faculty workload. It is imperative that they be given released teaching time and/or additional financial remuneration.

The weakness of governance in the divisions affects not only various academic issues but also personnel matters in ways which can be harmful to junior faculty. None in the division has the responsibility of providing orientation, advice and informal evaluation to a young faculty member. In addition, the lack of continuity leads to what are widely perceived as inconsistencies in personnel decisions.

Strengthening faculty organization at the divisional or departmental level needs to be accompanied by a corresponding increase in the effectiveness of college - wide faculty governance. We would urge that the Faculty Educational Policy Committee assume a more active role as speaking for the Faculty as a whole, and as the instrument of the Faculty in the systematic and thorough review and evaluation of the College's academic programs and policies.

We want to end this section of our Report on a very positive note by commenting on the Student Services staff. It is aptly named, because it considers itself as having the task of serving student needs, and it does so exceedingly well. To quote one member of our Team with much experience in this area: "Bennington College has as good a team (in Student Service) as I have seen anywhere." They have a thorough understanding of their work, enjoy - justifiably - a high credibility with students and with other members of the Bennington community, and perform near miracles through enormous dedication and very hard work. We know that our visit to the campus took place in the wake of the tragic deaths of two Bennington students which affected everyone on campus very deeply. Observing the student services staff and the student-staff relations a few days later made evident that in such an extreme situation the staff knew precisely what to do, and did it exceedingly well. This is just one indication of their extraordinary interest in student and staff morale, shown as well by their availability on a 24 hour basis, and also by the effective functioning of the NRT office which will be described in the next section. Given the size of the student services staff - reduced now to a minimum in relation to the size and the issues of the College's student population- it is remarkable that the staff is willing and able to display so generous an interest in the well-being of the College.

## ACADEMIC PROGRAMS:

### a) General Impressions:

On the whole, there appears to be a gratifyingly high correlation between actual practice and the Bennington ideal of integrating the experiential with the conceptual in the course of the student's education. Only to a limited extent is this achieved by formal curricular structures. There are, e.g., relatively few analytical and critical courses in history and literature to supplement the creative and performing activities of students in the arts. Similarly, there are few systematic attempts to relate the practical experiences obtained by students in Literature, Languages and the Social



Sciences during the NRT to their theoretical course work. The integration occurs primarily through less formal avenues of study, such as group and individual tutorials. These are usually initiated by students when they recognize the need to make connections between different subjects.

The success of the Bennington approach in its present form, therefore, depends heavily upon (1) independent student initiative, which in turn requires a high degree of self-confidence; and (2) faculty commitment to a variety of teaching formats, and their willingness as well as ability to refer students to a broad range of contextual sources. Bennington College is fortunate in that both of these conditions are currently met to a considerable extent. It may not always be able to count on this in the future. It would do well to consider alternatives. One can conceive of a number of ways of linking the experiential and the conceptual in a more structured fashion without resorting to the rigidity of requirements. These should be explored as part of the general self-examination which is being recommended throughout this Report.

Individual and group tutorials not only provide a major contribution to the achievement of the Bennington synthesis, but are at this time essential to meeting the curricular needs of its students. This exacts a considerable price: an overwhelming workload for the faculty. In addition to the average responsibility for two scheduled courses, almost every faculty member at the College gives several tutorials - and then there are the manifold committee and report writing responsibilities. The brochure "Bennington College Perspectives" states that in the Fall 1982, the faculty gave a total of 251 individual and 14 group tutorials, which averages to about four tutorials for every faculty member in addition to all other duties. This heavy burden has been possible in the past because so many of Bennington's faculty in the arts made the campus their artistic workshop and the focus of their creative energy. Many faculty members in the letters and sciences concentrated fully on teaching. But many individuals currently attracted to the College are more inclined to pursue their professional careers away from the campus. They will wish to spend more time in research and creative activity in ways which will make them less available for tutorials.

Again this is a basic issue requiring systematic reexamination. One avenue worth exploring would seem to be finding ways of creating more overlap between student needs and the range of formal courses which are offered each semester. We are told that in the early days of Bennington, some time was spent at the beginning of each semester during which student requests and faculty interests were matched as well as possible. That approach may no longer be feasible with the present size of the College, but it is easy to imagine some system of pre-registration well in advance of each semester which would yield the optimal list of courses to be scheduled. This is precisely the kind of academic "management" which is urgently needed at the College. At the moment, the only way of implementing it would be through a substantial increase in the committee activities of the faculty who would have to meet for many hours. A group of divisional or departmental chairpersons, working with the Dean of Studies, could accomplish the same result with much less investment of faculty time.

It would also be well to give the Dean of Studies authority to spread out class times so as to reduce student scheduling conflicts. At the moment, scheduling of classes is the sole prerogative of faculty, although in some division a collective attempt is made to avoid overlap. Again this is done by many hours of committee work rather than through a chairperson.

The basic paradox of Bennington College is that the autonomy and individual freedom of the faculty to teach current interests and to initiate (or impede) serious examination of educational issues is both strength and liability. The paradox can be resolved by a serious attempt to distinguish between those prerogatives which are essential and intrinsic to the nature of the institution, and those which are merely traditional and which, in fact, impede the optimal uses of faculty time and energy.



b) The Non-Resident Term (NRT):

The management of the NRT has been significantly improved during the past few years. The College now has a well staffed office which solicits placement and provides counseling and other help to students. They maintain elaborate files on available openings, including the comments of students who have used these in previous years. The office also provides considerable assistance in writing resumes and in helping to find housing.

It is clear from conversations with students and faculty as well as with the student staff that NRT is increasingly viewed as a major factor in the career preparation of students. The NRT experiences often help them in choosing (and sometimes eliminating) future careers, and having letters from several employers is usually valuable in getting a job after graduation. Often a job is found in the setting of a prior NRT. In addition, it is also evident that the period of the NRT is an essential respite for most faculty from their intensive and draining involvement with students during the regular terms. For many students, as well, a break from their academic work during the bleakest months of the Vermont winter may well be very beneficial.

Yet there are, as well, some negative aspects of the NRT. As mentioned in an earlier section, some entering freshmen (and their parents) find it difficult and even frightening to be thrown onto their own devices for such a long period. It constitutes, in effect, a second traumatic transition very soon after the first shock of entering college in a remote location. Furthermore, NRT is decidedly regressive in its financial implications. The most interesting and most career-oriented jobs are voluntary ones, which in many cases rules them out for students of limited means. Current financial aid procedures make no allowance for this.

Another questionable aspect, mentioned earlier, is the absence of any systematic attempt to bring about an explicit relationship between the NRT experiences and classroom work, in the social sciences and in languages and literature. Unlike the common practice in many colleges which place considerable importance on internships, there is no contact between the faculty and the students' supervisors during the NRT. The latter are asked to provide a written evaluation of the students' work, which is useful. The required written comments by the students' faculty advisor, on the other hand, are of little value and could be eliminated in order to reduce the paper work requirements on the faculty.



#### c) Student Evaluation:

The principal reason for the large amount of report writing expected from the faculty is, of course, Bennington's system of substituting written comments and evaluations for a more traditional grading system. On the whole this is being carried out by the faculty with great conscientiousness. Extensive comments are supplied both at mid-semester and at the end of each term for every student in every course and tutorial. Whether the cherished absence of grades is really worth such an enormous effort is too emotional an issue to be raised. We are, however, satisfied that the completeness of the written comments provides a transcript which is more than adequate for admission to graduate or professional school.

#### d) The Divisions:

Dance: The emphasis in this Division is on composition, supplemented by a heavy load of technique classes. Notation is taught, but no history, and there is little interest in developing greater emphasis on this. One of the faculty members occasionally teaches a course on criticism. The program now teaches the Alexander technique which stresses alignment and movement as an expression of the individualized physiology as opposed to uniform imitation. The approach is appropriate to a situation in which dancers of all different levels of experience work together creatively.

The Dance faculty would welcome more opportunities to develop ties with former students, and with to attract a larger number of experienced male dancers to the College.

Drama: On the basis of only a limited perspective on the work of this division, we have the impression that here, perhaps more than in any other performance division, there is need for additional strength. There are three areas of need: playwriting (now offered only as an occasional tutorial by one of the faculty members of the Literature division), directing (taught by an actor and occasionally by visiting faculty) and history. The last area could be taught through the speculative reconstruction of earlier dramatic productions, thus preserving the commitment of the Division to production activity. These three fields could, with careful recruiting, be filled by means of two revolving positions. However, the most serious lacuna in Drama is in the the area of directing. Students in a program of this sort are in need of an integrative perspective that comes naturally to an experienced director.

Literature and Language: The Division's declared purpose is to cover three major disciplines in its programs: criticism, writing and language. The purpose is well served. The teaching of the Division's faculty is quite impressive. All faculty members teach a wide variety of courses - in diverse genres, period and authors. Often the courses are comparative in nature. Faculty are on the whole very enthusiastic about their work, and enjoy the close contact with students. They believe in the College's fundamental educational goals, though they are not uncritical of certain flaws they perceive in the way the system operates, both at the divisional and the collegiate level.

The Division's academic programs are generally sound. A strong divisional Curriculum Committee gives close scrutiny to courses every year. Major literature fields and periods are covered biannually; language courses are offered every year. Tutorials are provided more or less on student demand; the scope of student senior projects is vast, and includes writing projects (e.g., plays and short stories), translations, literary analysis and theoretical topics. Most projects for students concentrating in a foreign literature are written in the foreign language.



The divisional Student Plans Committee takes seriously its charge of supervising student academic plans so as to ensure coverage of a broad range of topics within the field of concentration. The effectiveness of this Committee and of the Curriculum Committee show both how much can be accomplished without strong divisional leadership, and also how much faculty time this costs. The Division presently functions well, and the atmosphere is one of collegiality. However, the Division Secretaryship is an unwelcome task for all.

The Language Program is geared toward getting students past the language-learning stage in the first year in order to allow study of literature in subsequent terms. It is a good system and, on the whole, works well. The fluency level of majors is comparable to that of students in good liberal arts colleges elsewhere. However, the Language Lab is not sufficiently used. The Division seems to cling to the old fears of "technological teaching aids" - using a system of tutors instead of taking full advantage of newly developed audio-visual methods. Existing materials in the lab should be upgraded and some research in the field could lead to improved use by the faculty.

The curriculum of the Division is generally characterized by a lack of innovation and progress, and a paucity of interdivisional courses. This is very unfortunate since Bennington would appear to be the ideal place for approaching a field of study from different perspectives. At this time, interdivisional plans of study are regarded as eccentric and are perceived by some faculty as undesirable. Students submitting such plans have to obtain approval from two faculty members in each of the participating divisions, and this probably discourages pursuits of such projects.

A major weakness of the Division is the lack of continuity in the staffing of Spanish courses. Steps need to be taken to ensure a solid and continuous academic program in Spanish literature.

Music: The Music faculty is an extraordinary combination of old-timers who have devoted their creative lives to teaching at Bennington and yet have managed to maintain links with the broader, national music scene, and younger faculty with somewhat more conventional background who spend more of their time in professional activities off campus. All, however, draw heavily on the basic principle that all students, regardless of previous musical experience, design their programs of study with primary focus on the process of composition.

In the weekly music workshop, students perform for one another in the presence of the entire faculty, and have their most recent compositions sight read by marvellous faculty musicians. This is a luxury unparalleled elsewhere, and has a great deal to do with the impressive level of technical capability, expressive courage and lack of inhibition which characterizes performance at Bennington. The instrumental and vocal faculty - mostly excellent young musicians commuting to the campus from New York City - teach individual and group lessons, and participate with longer-term faculty in the development of student skills in composition and theory. History, apart from extensive exposure to the repertory, is de-emphasized, as is formal classroom instruction in theory.

A few faculty members are critical of an "anti-intellectual" attitude which inhibits reorganization of the curriculum to encompass broader contextual material, but cited their own freedom to teach such materials as tutorials. Many in the division express regrets at not making more useful contacts with other divisions, but cite very heavy teaching loads as not leaving time for this.



There are fewer majors in Music than one would have expected, but the level of ability of many non-majors is as high as that of the majors. The students are articulate, thoughtful and loyal to Bennington, but there is much emphasis on the difficulty of being forced to work primarily on the basis of individual initiative. The social isolation of individual students is extensive. Bennington graduates seem to do well in graduate school and in professions, and have the intellectual tools to make up for what they missed at Bennington. They possess what many graduates of more conventional school lack: the experience of aggressively initiating contacts, and of valuing their ability and expressive power as individuals. This is very impressive.

Black Music: The Division is not only separate from the Music Division but, in many ways, also from the rest of the College. Its curriculum is more structured, reflecting the character of a tradition which is more clearly defined both temporally and culturally. Students are expected to learn fundamentals before engaging in a "free performing style.

Interesting plans for the establishment of an Institute of Black Music bear continuing scrutiny.

Natural Science and Mathematics: This division is small in terms of faculty and enrollment, but gives a good impression of vitality and movement. In part this is due to the impressive Science Building in which it is housed - next to the Visual and Performing Arts Center the newest and more attractive structure on campus. Laboratories are spacious and well equipped, even for advanced instruction, and most of the faculty is young and as involved in research as their heavy burden of teaching and committee work allows. As a result, Bennington, contrary to prevailing external perceptions, is able to provide an excellent undergraduate preparation for medical school and for graduate work in the biological sciences. The placement record of its graduates in these areas is impressive. Chemistry and Physics offer primarily service courses, as, on the whole, does Mathematics.

In recent years the College has developed surprising strength in Computer Science, and this development is a striking example of both the strengths and the weaknesses of the institution. On the one hand, the degree of autonomy enjoyed by individual faculty members allowed two individuals - one in Mathematics and the other in Chemistry - to devote essentially all of their energies and teaching time to the computer area. As a result, over 100 students are currently enrolled in computer courses this Fall, which is an impressive number for a college of Bennington's size. On the other hand, the absence of any effective planning and coordination at either the divisional or the collegiate level has resulted in an unexpected decrease of staffing levels in both Chemistry and Mathematics from two to one. This makes it essentially impossible to offer anything approaching a major except through heroic tutorial efforts by the remaining individuals. Perhaps such a shift of resources is in fact appropriate in terms of long range student needs and interests, but one would wish for a more rational and deliberate process of arriving at this configuration.

Social Science: The program of this Division is designed to provide a general spread of social science courses. By and large there are not enough offerings in any one field to designate majors as being in "economics", "politics" or "history". Yet this is the common practice among students. Many faculty in the Division consider this to be misleading. They would prefer a "social science" major, and are also concerned at being regarded primarily as a service department to the other divisions of the College.. These issues create a mini-identity crisis within the group. In general, however, the faculty are committed to the Bennington idea, display a generous attitude toward each other, and give a sense of competence. They are deeply dedicated to their students,



hard working and almost totally involved in teaching, counselling and writing student evaluations. There is a danger that an emphasis on the details of student evaluation and advising may prevent systematic attention to the contents of their disciplines and the coherence of the curriculum. It tends to divert the Faculty's considerable energies toward the procedures rather than the substance of their educational mission.

Visual Arts: It is quite fitting that the alphabet makes this discussion of the several divisions end with the Visual Arts, because, together with the program in Music, the Visual Arts best illustrate the Bennington pedagogic philosophy in action. The reality of the principles of the College's founders manifests itself in the professional ambience pervading the Visual and Performing Arts Center (VAPA) through the interaction among faculty and students. The Division's programs are governed by professional standards of high quality, as demonstrated in the end-of-semester critique sessions. Objective and conceptually profound critiques of students' work reflect a healthy, unpressured yet highly motivated and critical training environment. The excellent support systems provided by such criticism is the primary factor in the students' artistic training and growth. It is provided to non-arts students as well as to majors, which is unusual and perhaps even unique. All students in the division receive equal attention, and some of the advanced non-majors are acknowledged by the faculty as being as good or even better than some of the majors. As a result, the program achieves its goals of developing not only future artists but also more professionally oriented audience participants, and this is viewed as being in the best tradition of a liberal arts education.

The divisional program is broad in spite of the limited number of faculty. As in the other units of the College, the relatively few formal offerings are substantially extended through tutorials. A dedicated and highly motivated faculty and student body make it possible for the spectrum of offerings to equal more complete and formalized programs in larger institutions. The quality of the Bennington program places it above that of many art schools in spite of the limitations of faculty members and course offerings. Observers sense the ambience of a first rate graduate or professional art school.

This explains the success of Bennington students after graduation. Many are accepted in the best graduate schools, and are nationally recognized for their self-reliance and conceptual individualism which compensates for certain gaps in their technical preparation. In general, the curriculum requires students to experience both two - and three - dimensional training and encourages explorations into a broad variety of media. Just as in Music there is no formal classroom instruction in theory, there is no separate course work in Design theory and practice in this Division. History is de-emphasized even more than in Music because of a deliberate avoidance of the passive study of other people's work. All contextual and analytical understanding flows directly from the students' practical work.

In spite of the excellent diversity in faculty origins training and aesthetics, is there surprising unanimity about the basic pedagogic approach of the Division, with some sense of self-satisfaction at having arrived at the best of all possible solutions. Considering the success of the graduates of the program, such perceptions may be correct, yet one would welcome a more self-critical analysis, and some exploration of alternative approaches.

Only recently has there been some activity in the area of film and video, and the future direction of this is as yet unclear. There is considerable student interest, but the development of adequate strength is impossible without cutting back elsewhere. That is the kind of tough decision which, until now, Bennington College has been unwilling and unable to make.



Another potential area of development which would require a shift of resources is that of an adequately utilized study collection. Bennington College actually owns an astonishing array of works by modern American artists - many of whom were on the College's faculty during its early years, however, most of this collection is stored in a vault, and is virtually inaccessible to students and faculty.

e) The Library:

The Library continues to have a minimal collection, reflecting years of systematic neglect caused by the reluctance of Bennington's founders to have students make use of secondary sources. This attitude is shifting as the nature of the faculty is changing, and the inadequacy of the Library is increasingly apparent. The Librarian and others are acutely aware of the extent to which the collection falls short of the standards recommended by the Association of College and Research Libraries. They view this as a high priority for new resources. In turn this will also require more space for books, for readers as well as for processing and cataloguing. The Library is unduly crowded even now.

Despite these weaknesses, the Library is remarkable for a number of strengths. The Librarian has a clear notion of the objectives of the College and seeks to maximize the Library's resources by working closely with faculty and with appropriate committees to make optimal use of existing materials and the available budget. In addition, although the number of volumes is small, the quality of the collection is excellent and indicated judicious selections over an extended period of time. The emphasis has been on primary materials, eschewing text books, trendy or popularized works, and focussing on the best possible sources. In many respects the collection is eclectic, reflecting specific faculty interests and revealing substantial gaps in certain disciplines. At the same time, the collection includes many standard and classical works in all the fields represented, as well as indexes and abstracts which guide students to materials which can be obtained through inter-library loans.

The professionalism of the Librarian is commendable, as are her current efforts to automate services and to obtain additional para-professional staff, with whom she has excellent rapport. Through effective use of limited space, the library provides a pleasant atmosphere for research and study.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Wonderful things happen at Bennington College, and we admire the energy, dedication and talents of all the individuals who are involved in its activities. Yet it is also an institution in which individual interests take precedence over collective ones, and which is characterized by internal fragmentation and considerable insularity. As a result, the whole is in many ways less than the sum of its parts. The College falls short of realizing its full potential of being in its entirety as exciting and as attractive to students and faculty today as it was in earlier years.

Under different circumstances, a visiting team might have expressed regret at this and left it at that. We cannot in good conscience do this in view of the situation we found. Bennington College is facing an acute crisis of which budget deficits and decreasing applications are clear symptoms but not necessarily the root causes. Major efforts of recruiting and of fund raising are obviously necessary, and that alone will already require more unity within the College <sup>than</sup> we have observed. But these efforts alone will not be sufficient. We believe that the College must reexamine not what it wishes to accomplish - because its basic goals appear to be as valid as they ever were - but how it goes about it. It must indeed regain the "Bennington way" of continual self-examination which its Self-Study, with all too typical complacency, claims but which we did not find.

We are convinced that such reexamination is necessary, and that it can only help the College, precisely because its components are so strong and its purposes sound. We believe that Bennington can move toward greater coherence, better academic organization, more institution-wide planning and decision-making and sounder internal relationships without losing any of its essential strength. It can implement new approaches appropriate to new circumstances without violating its basic integrity.

We urge all members of the Bennington College community to address themselves to these issues, and hope that this Report will be of some help in this process.



## SUMMARY OF PRINCIPAL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

### Strengths:

1. A good faculty which is strongly committed to teaching and gives students a great deal of personal attention and intellectual stimulation;
2. A new administrative team which works well together and is capable of providing constructive institutional leadership;
3. An outstanding Student Service staff which is dedicated to serving student needs and does it very well;
4. An excellent student body whose creativity and curiosity are greatly stimulated and nurtured by Bennington's educational approach and the faculty's commitment;
5. Great strength and vitality in many components of the academic programs.

### Weaknesses:

1. A critical financial situation caused largely by past failures to build endowment and to provide for debt retirement, and aggravated by a decline in applications and enrollment;
2. A pervasive internal fragmentation and precedence of individual interests over collective ones, manifested in a continuing gulf between administration and faculty and an absence of effective academic governance;
3. An equally pervasive insularity and complacency resulting in an unwillingness to undertake critical self-examination and review.