

STUDENT NRT TOUR REPORT

We visited sixteen colleges: Haverford College, American University, Georgetown University, Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies, Villanova University, University of Pennsylvania, Kenyon College, Ohio Wesleyan, University of Chicago, Lake Forest College, Notre Dame University, Adelphi University, Stoneybrook, University of Rochester, Yale University, and Harvard University. We appeared on numerous television and radio news and interview shows, and before two civic groups, the Jaycees in Chicago and the Kiwanis in Philadelphia. In every location we were interviewed by student and public newspapers.

On campuses, our contact and sponsor was the editor of the student newspaper. He generally set up a meeting for us, sometimes only for invited guests and often open to the college at large. Although we requested that faculty and administration members be invited to attend the meeting, they seldom did. We felt that we were at the mercy of the editor's organizational ability and reputation on campus; the groups ranged from six to two hundred students. The groups were never representative of the entire student body, either because some students were unaware of the meetings or chose not to attend. At the co-ed schools, girls usually failed to attend or did not speak out; exceptions were the University of Pennsylvania where the girls dominated the meeting, Ohio Wesleyan and St. Mary's (South Bend, Indiana) where the girls were concerned with their roles as women. The students who did attend usually felt a responsibility to represent those not at the meeting, and therefore tried to explain all aspects of student sentiment on their campus.

Prior to each meeting, we would try to talk to students and learn about the school's history, academic life, current problems, and atmosphere. This helped us to direct specific questions at the meeting. We usually began by introducing ourselves and telling about the tour, NRT, Bennington and its philosophy, and Self-Study. We explained that the tour was a continuation of self-study, and that we saw it as a way to achieve a new perspective on Bennington's problems, as well as to make recommendations to the community at large. Such an explanation was necessary to combat the preconceptions they had of us, sometimes as a missionary trio, sometimes as professional agitators out for hire. Our recommendations in this report represent a synthesis of suggestions gathered at all the schools rather than specifics found at any one particular school.

We usually met with antagonism and defensiveness at first. Students began by attacking Bennington on the following points: that the Bennington system was only applicable to a small number of students; they doubted the ability of college-age students to structure their educations properly, according to their respective definitions of a liberal arts education; they assumed that Bennington was isolated, elitist, racist, and financially inaccessible to most students i.e., the student body is preselected for non-academic reasons; they felt that the Bennington education is too individualistic and as such irrelevant to current problems; occasionally, students objected to the credit granted to the arts at Bennington.

When we explained that we, too, challenge Bennington on these matters; that we share common interests and a concern for educational reform, they relaxed, and an open discussion followed. On many campuses, discussions like ours hadn't been held before. We were especially glad when students began to talk to each other, often disregarding us. At some schools, educational reform is a frequently discussed topic; in these cases, we took a less dominant role in the discussion as, for example, at the University of Chicago and Stonybrook. Of course, there were always many unconcerned students -- those we did meet usually estimated that 10% of all the students had any concern at all, probably 3 - 4% were concerned enough to become actively engaged in change. Even at the University of Chicago during the sit-in there were students who knew nothing at all of the activity. This was most depressing and hard to fight, but we think it is more human nature than just student-nature.

Also depressing -- even sad -- were the reasons some students gave for being in school: draft-dodging, husband-hunting, time-wasting. At Haverford, for example, after expressing some discontent, they slipped into abstracts to better avoid the reality of what they were doing -- wasting education, time, money. Not only at Haverford, many boys told us that they would not be in school if it were not for the draft.

More than ever before, we realize that Bennington offers an unusually stimulating education. Many students we talked to are demanding reforms which have been in practice at Bennington since its inception. We do not feel that the Bennington education is desirable or desired by all students; there must be as many options for studies as there are students. Bennington's structure cannot work on a large scale although we would like to think that the attitudes toward education could be transferred. However, many students objected to the individualism of Bennington's approach. They maintain that students must either think more collectively or more practically to achieve relevance in today's society. We do not think that Bennington's philosophy should be abandoned in light of these attitudes, though modification with an eye to relevance is essential to its continuing validity. We see Bennington as a place that teaches its students to continue learning and to question the status quo. This in itself is a form of relevance. However, it is no justification for its own perpetration. Here at Bennington, there is a status quo: since Self-Study, we have ceased to question it. Should we continue with this attitude, the value of Bennington as an experiment will end.

This is not a professional research project. We are not sociologists, economists, or educators; we felt that the strength of our inquiry was that we were students, though we were often expected to perform professionally. This approach allowed us greater freedom and the ability to improvise according to the situations we faced. Before we began we had no preconceptions about the students we would meet, schools we would visit, or even topics we would discuss. This was both an advantage and a disadvantage; we often failed in efficiency but succeeded in being receptive to any proposed topic of discussion.

We thought a report on our trip would be most valuable to Bennington in the form of recommendations, which follow. We realize that many of these things have been said before, but we speak from a different perspective here; we think that these points require emphasizing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Coeducation -- three types of housing are necessary for effective introduction of men at Bennington male, female, and coed.

Too many schools are attacking coeducation from a cautious viewpoint, creating problems that we can avoid altogether.

The theory of coeducation, as we see it, is to learn totally, therefore the opportunity for choice should be provided. This is in tune with the Bennington idea that social development should not be separate from intellectual development. Coeducation cannot exist simply in the classroom.

Kenyon is starting a coordinate women's college where the students can see that they actually want and need a complete coeducational college. They are building unnecessary future problems.

University of Rochester: coed dorms (women's and men's floors alternate) work very well; students were quite responsible, based activity on consideration. Very casual working arrangement.

Both sexes should have the same rules.

Ohio Wesleyan: the girls involved in their own revolt over hours-- far more restrictions exist for women than for men.

Hours at Bennington should probably be established on a house basis, to allow individual choice.

Curriculum: -- Students and faculty should be encouraged and not hampered in creating new courses.

*When freshmen are sent course-listings in the summer, they should be able to suggest new courses. More courses should be started as one - or two - term experiments.

Courses should be offered in each department to help students correlate past and present events and also to make our studies more relevant to current developments. More study of very recent events in each field, literature, sociology, anthropology, art history, need courses on recent work (recent meaning, including this year).

* Obviously, this conflicts with the fact that the curriculum is determined the previous spring. Yet it does seem that, as an indication of the interests of the entering class, the suggested could be used in the planning of courses.

Students are establishing free universities when they feel demand for such courses and the faculties will not meet their demands with new, credit-bearing courses. The free universities are extra-curricular, extra-university and often open to the community as well as students. This type of experiment can occur within the Bennington structure, not as an adjunct to it; the Bennington philosophy encompasses this type of study, creating courses where the need develops.

There should be no specific divisional requirements. If we recognize all departments as equal and equally important educationally, then no one area can be required study for every student. Students should be encouraged to study in many different fields. Too many requirements can lead to dilletantism, to breadth at the expense of depth. Of course, the opposite can occur; at University of Rochester, for instance, science students often have so many science requirements that they study nothing else for their junior and senior years.

A General studies major should be available to those students who have the ability to take full advantage of such a program. It would necessarily be a rigorous major, and should still demand a senior project. Perhaps three courses a term would be more suitable for a G.S. major, to allow more time and concentration for each course.

Black studies: every school visited asked what facilities we have for black studies. If Bennington expects to attract more black students, as we think it must, then expansion in this area is a necessity. Also a greater diversity of students will be attracted by a program that is concerned with today's problems. Though black students seldom attended our meetings, when they did (University of Rochester a prime example) they said that a black student would have a difficult time justifying attendance at Bennington as it now works.

Interdepartmental Cooperation --

Interdepartmental courses should be established for the fuller use of student interest, faculty ability, facilities and talents. Such course development is natural within the Bennington philosophy. Rigid departmental divisions are unnatural and suggestive of faculty self-interest. Most students are interested in furthering interdivisional courses and majors, and are anxious to set them up. Double majors and interdepartmental majors should be more available for the same reasons. There seems to be student need and desire for this.

Now, students are discouraged from these majors by being forbidden access to decision-making meetings. Also, students should know the reasons of acceptance or rejection of such a plan; the minutes of all relevant meetings should be made available.

Grades -- Here Bennington has the responsibility to lead in essential educational progress. Complete elimination of grades is imperative both functionally and philosophically in order to move all education toward more effective and realistic evaluation of students. It is not and must not be the role of Bennington to make concessions to existing archaic institutions. Grades are hypocritical to the Bennington ideal, anachronistic in the Bennington context, and detrimental to the pursuit of liberal education.

Bennington's prime function must not be as a preparatory school for graduate school. The Bennington experience must have validity in and of itself whether or not individuals go on to graduate schools. Students everywhere, in so-called liberal arts programs, feel that they are being vocationally trained. There is little feeling that the college should teach the student to teach himself, should be one of the first steps toward a whole life of education. Graduate schools exert unnecessary pressure on all students. Bennington need not concede to this pressure and will do its students, and eventually all students, a great service in emphasizing the respectability and necessity of training to think and to teach oneself. Grades often provide false motivation and become a substitute for self-motivation.

Obviously, problems will arise at first when students with no "secret grades" apply to graduate schools. However, we feel that students should be willing to take the risk of offering no grades, and should expect their comments and work to speak more completely than grade evaluations. Though some schools are instituting pass-fail systems, they are still very cautious. For example, Yale has a system of pass-terms, like high-pass average-pass, that can be easily reinterpreted to grades. Such a system is no solution.

Faculty -- We feel that the faculty is one of Bennington's strongest points. We acknowledge their extraordinary dedication especially in comparison with faculties at other schools. Whereas faculty elsewhere are often concerned with private research to the complete exclusion of the students' interests, Bennington's faculty combines dedication to education and to individual professional aims. Unfortunately their willingness for involvement is often abused.

When faculty are hired it is often without their full understanding of the philosophical and procedural demands of Bennington. Each prospective faculty member should know what will be expected of him by fellow faculty members, administration, and students. Once hired they should be willing to work in conjunction with the ideals of Bennington.

It would be helpful for prospective faculty members to speak to more students. The system for student participation in faculty hiring and firing should be clarified and made more viable to students. Many students, University of Chicago being a most obvious example, are demanding this participation. Stonybrook currently is faced with losing many of its best faculty members because they have not found the student body and atmosphere they were promised. It is essential that a prospective faculty member understand the community he is entering.

We hope that Bennington's faculty will resist pressures in the direction of seeking security through tenure. Such worry leads to conservatism that Bennington cannot afford. We see these trends now.

Admissions -- Bennington has never been a proponent of the status quo. However, unconsciously, through admissions procedure, it has been just that. We agree with John C. Hoy's statement that: "If higher education is to continue to contribute to social mobility rather than social stratification, a revolution in policies governing college admissions and the distribution of financial aid to students is required." (Saturday Review, February 15, a good article). Some preselection naturally exists in a system that has any admission requirements. However, this preselection should be on a philosophical and educational basis, not socio-economic, racial, ethnic, regional or sexual bases.

Many colleges provide transitional programs to prepare students from inferior school systems for higher education. By expanding the summer program for Vermont students to include students from other areas, (specifically urban,) Bennington would not only help those students but would also provide itself with a potentially more diverse group of applicants.

Bennington should increase contact with high school counselors so that they can intelligently recommend Bennington to their students. Bennington alumnae could be used more effectively as liaisons with local school systems. More schools should find out about Bennington, especially schools outside of New England and in poorer and industrial areas.

It would help applicants tremendously to meet Bennington students. Meetings could be arranged over NRT in areas distant from Vermont.

- NRT Tours -- In the future this tour should be continued and expanded, with these modifications:
Expand territory geographically and economically, i.e. include private and public schools, wealthier, poorer, urban, rural, larger and smaller.
- Increase scope to include progressive schools, especially those often compared to Bennington; i.e., Goddard, Reed, Sarah Lawrence. Include women's schools and black schools.
- Greater numbers of students should be reached at each school -- just contacting newspaper workers and student leaders gives biased view.
- Efforts should be made to meet with more faculty and administrators. This might encourage later dialogue on the campus between the students and others.
- If possible more time should be spent at each school. This would be easier if less time were spent doing public relations work, prospective students' teas, and alumnae meetings. Separate tours might be established for these purposes.
- Every year at least one Bennington-sponsored tour should go out, what ever its nature.
- Girls spending NRT in different areas should be asked to do some research on schools in their area and/or do some prospective student work where necessary.
- Alumnae -- It would be most valuable for students to have some contact with alumnae. Most alumnae are not interested in preserving Bennington as it was when they attended it, but are interested in the continuation of its experimental nature.
- The alumnae experiences after leaving Bennington would help present students in shaping their own lives, in correlating their experiences at Bennington to their lives afterward. Programs like last spring's Femininity and Masculinity Conference would benefit from the presence of alumnae.
- While on campus students should face the fact that when they leave school they will be alumnae; if they recognize this perhaps they would be more willing to continue contact with the school after leaving. We have seen (and experienced, through totally unattended alumnae meetings) that especially in their first few years after graduation the alumnae are terribly apathetic and unhelpful. This is when they could most help students.

If the school expects anything from alumnae at all, be it interest, money or anything else, it must offer them closer contact with the school.

Bennington has shied away from the crimping effects of strong alumnae, understandably; in schools like Notre Dame, the alumnae can control all aspects of the college through their financial aid. The alumnae of Bennington would probably not cripple the school and its progress, but rather make suggestions for change and be a source of dynamic and well-informed concern.

General Suggestions --

Risk: Bennington is in a better position than other schools in the U. S. to effect rapid, radical, and necessary change. At its inception, Bennington was designed to function as an educational experiment and as a forerunner in reform. Since that time, a complacency, a timidity and even conservatism have set in, stifling and impeding instrumentation of dynamic concepts. We have seen this conservative attitude on other campuses eliminating the options for progress; we see a growing reluctance at Bennington to take risks which, if continued, will reduce Bennington to paralyzing rigidity. Bennington alumnae are startled and disappointed to find this stagnation; they feel, in accordance with the Bennington philosophy, that change is essential to education. Many students leave Bennington frustrated by the cautious approach to new ideas. Thus we lose an exciting element in the student body.

Bennington must submit itself to greater public scrutiny and criticism. This implies not only publicity, but communication with other schools, both progressive and traditional. We propose student exchange and faculty exchange with other schools. Sarah Lawrence, Vassar, Haverford, Williams, Wheaton, Trinity, and many other schools have already affected such exchanges. Seeing what is done at other schools can only add greater perspective to the Bennington Students' view of education. For the three of us, this trip provided the opportunity to question Bennington with a different perspective, taking fewer things for granted, and to question the role Bennington plays in each of our lives. We agree that the tour, more than any other aspect of Bennington, had affected us as individuals. Other students would certainly benefit from a similar exchange of perspectives.

In the past Bennington has provided opportunity for women to assume the position of leaders and organizers. At some colleges we visited, i.e. American University, Ohio Wesleyan, women are forced into a submissive position. Unfortunately, with some encouragement many women tend to assume this role; the question is open as to whether this happened at Bennington. A conscious effort must be made not to allow or expect men to occupy all

dominant positions, especially in the case of male students. At present almost all major positions at Bennington are occupied by men (i.e., president, deans, faculty). Where women were more vocal, (University of Chicago, Pennsylvania University), they were worried about the role of women today and were fighting established double standards.

There must be continued openings for discussion among students, faculty, and administrators. This was encouraged by a self-study and must be continued. At practically all schools we visited, notably Notre Dame, Villanova and Ohio Wesleyan, there was a serious lack of dialogue leading to disillusionment and discouragement. The three constituencies fail to recognize their common goals; they concentrate on their differences. One reason for this factioning is a lack of trust. Not only can the students, faculty, and administration find no common premise of respect, but there is great suspicion among students. Strengths of various departments and schools within the universities further divide students and contribute to this poor communication. There is a tendency toward this at Bennington now, with growing division between the departments and more closed meetings. Meetings should be open. Should there be necessity for a closed meeting, reasons should be given. Bennington is still a very small school by any standard and need not take upon itself consciously or not the problems of a large university.

We realize that none of the proposals in this report are startling or original. They were brought up during Self-Study, but have since been neglected and forgotten. This is due to a fearful and stodgy attachment to the status quo, and the delusion that Bennington's success as an experiment is complete. We believe that its primary justification has been its ability to change without trauma. A great effort of energy and imagination will be required.

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