

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

December 1, 1990

I. Introduction

A. A History of Bennington's Accreditation Status Since 1986

The report by the 1986 visiting team chaired by Richard P. Traina, President of Clark University, asked that Bennington submit yearly reports on applications, admissions, enrollments, and financial matters, and to prepare for a focused visit in the Fall of 1989. The requested yearly reports were submitted on December 29, 1987 and November 21, 1988.

Bennington prepared an institutional report during the summer of 1989, and in October, 1989, a team chaired by Kathryn McCarthy, Professor of Physics at Tufts University, conducted a focused visit. As a result of that report and visit, at its meeting on March 2, 1990 the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education:

- accepted the report submitted by the College;
- asked that the College continue to submit Annual Reports on Finance and Enrollment;
- confirmed the scheduling of the next comprehensive evaluation for Fall, 1993; and
- asked "that the self-study undertaken in advance of the evaluation give particular attention to the institution's success in achieving financial well-being, as measured in part by its ability to address long-standing concerns resulting from deferred maintenance."

B. Summary of 1989 Report, Visit, and Evaluation

1. The College's 1989 Report

Bennington's Report prepared for the visit in October described several significant institutional changes that had occurred since the previous (1986) focused visit, and responded to the request that we evaluate our success in addressing the College's "fiscal problems and the impact of those problems on the ability of the institution to offer high quality academic programs."

Elizabeth Coleman assumed the presidency of the College on July 1, 1987. She began immediately to introduce administrative changes and reorganization, new programs, and development initiatives. Within the first year, President Coleman appointed a new Vice President of Finance and Administration, Director of Development, Director of Student Affairs, and Director of Publications. Internal budgetary policies and procedures were simplified and rationalized, the Development staff was reorganized and augmented, non-academic programs for students were organized within a single College office, a systematic revitalization of all the College's major publications was begun, and the office coordinating the College's computing operations was expanded.

Several new programs were introduced to strengthen and to extend Bennington's commitment to its unique perspective on the liberal arts. Among the most significant of these programs were:

the Sunday Night Seminar program which brings members of the faculty into student residences for informal discussions of their work and interests; Bennington in New York which provides a setting in New York City for extending the cultural and intellectual life of the College; the Bennington Choreography Project intended to nurture the development of new creative projects in Dance and to train choreographers; the Hambleton/Nields/Mortimer Fellowships, which bring distinguished guests to the campus for a minimum of two days to offer a public lecture and to meet for informal discussions with small groups of faculty members and students; discussion groups on matters of general concern to the College community (e.g., women's issues, minority issues, and substance abuse; a new (and annually increasing) fund for Capital Equipment for Instruction; and an expanded Faculty Grant Program.

Significant development initiatives were also undertaken or completed between 1987 and 1989. The Keystone Campaign, which generated over \$2.7 million for operating expenses and over \$1 million dollars for endowment, was completed. In the fall of 1988, Bennington hired Ketchum, Inc. as consultants to lay the groundwork for a Capital Campaign and the Board of Trustees began working immediately to identify the resources needed for the Campaign. A systematic screening process was developed to identify major prospects for the Campaign, early plans were developed for various regional campaigns, the Development Office's data base was transferred from a service bureau in Boston to an in-house computer system, and publications were developed to support the Campaign. By the fall of 1989, the College had received written Campaign pledges of nearly \$5 million, exceeding by a substantial amount any previous comparable fundraising in Bennington's history.

In addition to these developments, and through the data it supplied on applications, enrollment, and finances, the College argued that financial matters had had no deleterious impact on the range or quality of its educational offerings. In addition, it described the trends it had observed and was anticipating in applications, enrollments, and fund-raising, and suggested the ways in which it intended "to sustain the improvements it has been able to achieve in the past years; develop new educational initiatives; maintain a steady increase in faculty salaries; increase the commitment to deferred maintenance; continue a slow, but steady growth in enrollment in order to effect increases in the range of the faculty; and complete a successful capital campaign to raise an endowment adequate to the College's needs."

2. CIHE's Visit (October, 1989) and Report (March, 1990)

The visiting team acknowledged the importance of the College's administrative changes and the quality of the work now being produced, in the working budget, new information systems, the budget formation process, public relations, and development. In addition, new optimism among many of the Faculty, new educational programs, and the examination of aspects of the

curriculum were described as "bright and convincing signs of a good future." At the same time, the team identified several areas of concern: the 1989 shortfall in admissions, sustaining or even increasing growth in the Annual Fund, deferred maintenance, the central importance of the Capital Campaign.

Similar appreciation of the College's efforts and concerns about the areas that continue to need attention were contained in the letter communicating the CIHE's March 2 action.

II. 1990 Report on Finances and Enrollment

This section includes a narrative discussion of Bennington's current financial and enrollment situation. References are made frequently to data contained in the CIHE Data Forms (see Appendix A) and to other data summarized in the additional tables provided (Appendix B).

A. Financial Report (see Appendix A: CIHE Data Forms I and II)

The report for Bennington's latest fiscal year, ended June 30, 1990, shows a continuation of the steady financial strengthening of the College which has occurred over the last several years. Within the context of balanced budgets in every year since 1986, the College has made progress in addressing its financial and facilities concerns. During this same period, it has added \$1.5 million to its endowment.

The achievement of balanced budgets has not been at the cost of attending to several longstanding, and continuing, matters. Salary policy, especially for faculty, remains an important focus of our attention. Since 1987, when a multi-year salary freeze was ended, all employees have received regular annual increments, with a 7% increase going to faculty in each year. Although faculty salaries are not at a level we find desirable, it is clear that we are nearer that goal than we have been in many years.

Two other matters of direct concern to the faculty merit comment. The size of the faculty has grown over the last several years, from 63 FTE in 1986-87 to 69.5 FTE for the current year. Furthermore, funds for faculty research and conference travel, which had been eliminated in earlier College budgets, are routinely budgeted (\$27,500 in 1990-91) and were awarded to 36 faculty this fiscal year.

Enrollment has remained relatively stable over the last several years. Although our comprehensive fee of \$21,550 for 1990-91 puts us among the most expensive colleges in the country, instead of being separated by \$1,000 or more from any other college, we are now clustered with several others. Despite our charges, we continue to attract students at all income levels, and we provide financial aid to approximately one-half of our students. The aid budget has held steady the last several years at approximately 25% of charges (1990-91 projection: 24.7%; 1989-90: 24.5%; 1988-89: 24.9%).

We have directed substantial attention to campus facilities needs. In each of the last several years we have spent \$250,000 for a variety of deferred maintenance projects which includes such things as new roofs for the Visual and Performing Arts complex, substantial electrical system upgrades, and refurbishment of most of the living room in student houses. We are also continuing to budget funds (\$70,000 in 1990-91) for instructional equipment encompassing such projects as the rebuilding of the College's grand pianos, the acquisition of new scientific equipment, and the rebuilding of ceramic kilns.

The single most significant financial accomplishment of last year was the refinancing of the 1985 bond issue, converting a variable note obligation to an attractive, fixed rate with no extension of the maturity. This refinancing makes all of the College's long-term debt fixed, thus protecting the budget from any future upward movement of rates.

B. Student Admissions Data

Our experience this past year in Admissions has been mixed. We had the largest number of inquiries in our history (9,245), and we experienced an 8% increase in the number of applications (to 592). As a result, however, of the demographic pressures generally, and especially in the Northeast, we faced much greater competition than we have in the past and our yield ratio decreased. Hence, though bucking the trend toward fewer applications experienced by many institutions, we were very much part of the trend toward smaller entering classes. We opened the Fall Term with 166 students, fewer than we had hoped to enroll.

We know we face significant challenges in Admissions. Nonetheless, we have in fact strengthened our standards for admission. We have moved from a rolling acceptance date to a fixed date. In conjunction with the difficult demographic forces we face, these changes make the challenge even greater. The quality of the current entering class, and the quality of our applicant pool, indicates that better students are coming our way. Reactions from faculty members this year to the Freshman class confirm our impression that this is an exceptionally strong class.

Initial data for next year are encouraging. Inquiries are running 20% ahead of the same time last year. Our student search brochure, mailed in early April to 35,000 students, has had a return of over 10%.

Our combined catalog/viewbook, with a new and unusual format was ready in August, 1990 for the current admissions cycle (two copies are enclosed with this report). We are mailing it to selected alumni as well as students and guidance counselors to emphasize the importance of alumni in the admissions process. (see Appendix B: Letter from Elizabeth Coleman, which accompanied the copies sent to alumni).

In addition to the usual high school visits and college fairs, the Admissions Office is working closely with the

Development and Alumni Offices and the President's Office to host receptions for guidance counselors and prospective students and their parents. We intend to increase the number of students identified as potential Bennington Summer Scholars and will coordinate joint recruiting efforts with the July Program office.

The computer system in the Admissions Office is currently being evaluated, and there is likely to be a major upgrade early next year. The Board of Trustees has established an Ad Hoc Committee on Admissions which is working closely with the College to evaluate current programs and consider new ones.

C. Student Enrollment Data

As the accompanying tables (Appendix A: CIHE DATA FORM IV and Appendix B: Table I, Bennington College Enrollment History) indicate, average annualized enrollment at Bennington grew from 526.5 in 1985-86 to 576 in 1988-89, an increase of 9.4%. The last two years have shown slight decreases in annualized enrollment: to 554 in 1989-90 (a decrease from the previous year of 3.8%), and an additional decrease to (a projected) 547 in 1990-91 (a decrease from the previous year of 1.3%).

These decreases are small, but significant. Our earlier plans had called for a slow, but steady increase in enrollment toward an annualized figure of 600. The experience of the past two years, as well as the demographic trends, require that we re-think our projections for undergraduate enrollment for the next five years (see Appendix A: CIHE DATA FORM V). We are also considering how we might develop other programs (see Section IV below).

Internal trends in several areas continue to be promising. There has been a decrease in withdrawals over the past several years. Also of note is an increase over the same period in the percentage of students taking leaves of absence (officially approved absence of one term or one year with guarantee of re-admission).

The Office of Student Affairs and Dean of Studies Office are currently collaborating on a study of attrition meant to determine in how many cases we are losing students we should be keeping.

D. Projected Financial, Tuition, and Enrollment Data

The next several years will present Bennington with significant challenges as we attempt to maintain enrollment in the face of demographic decline. Our projections show no growth in enrollment during the next three years.

Our response to this situation will combine several strategies: administrative cuts, the stabilization of the faculty at its current size, an attempt to tap new sources of revenue, and reliance on a portion of Capital Campaign gifts for operating purposes. We are in the process of determining what weight will be given to each.

Some administrative cuts, principally in personnel through attrition, have already been realized. Although further reduction in administrative expenses, in personnel and otherwise, will undoubtedly become necessary, there are no easy targets for this action. While we hope to exempt the academic divisions from major significant cuts, there will be no further growth in faculty size during this period.

We are exploring the feasibility of obtaining new sources of revenue. Promising areas include expanded and new programs in graduate education, degree completion programs, and the adult education programs during the winter.

The imminent Capital Campaign, scheduled to be announced next January, is a bright spot on the College's financial horizon (see more detail immediately below). While the bulk of the funds raised, and to be raised, will go toward an unprecedented increase in Bennington's endowment and the construction of a new library, there will be some allocation of funds to the operating budget. We will make every effort to keep that sum at the lowest level possible.

III. Update on Capital Campaign

Though the College has yet to announce its Capital Campaign publicly, significant progress has been made on a number of fronts. The College's Board of Trustees has endorsed a goal of \$30 million. New gifts and pledges for 1989-90 total \$2.1 million; two positions have been filled in the Development Office, one which will focus on the planning and implementation of regional campaigns, the other on writing for the Campaign.

Written gifts and pledges to the Campaign now total over \$10 million, and a public announcement is scheduled for January, 1991. Campaign projections call for new pledges totalling \$5 million every 18 months thereafter. We anticipate reaching the \$25 million level by June, 1995, with an additional \$5 million to be raised by 1997 for the library. Campaign progress and projections are described in Appendix B (Tables II-IV).

In March, 1990 the College received a Presidential Discretionary Grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation of \$150,000, requiring a three-to-one match. This October the College was awarded a Presidential Discretionary Fund from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation of \$250,000, also to be matched on a three-to-one basis. Booth Ferris has just granted the College \$50,000 for the purchase of science equipment, and a number of other foundation initiatives are in process.

The 1989-90 fiscal year was the best fundraising year in the College's history, the total amount raised surpassing the previous year's total by 10%. Gifts totalled \$2.454 million, and alumni participation in the Annual Fund rose to 34%. Fifty-one percent of the gift support represented commitments to the Capital Campaign. Though the Annual Fund fell short of its goal by approximately \$35,000, we can trace the shortfall to the loss of two major gifts (one at \$10,000 and another at \$15,000), and a

decision by the College to opt for \$30,000 in IBM equipment in place of \$10,000 in matching gift money. The Annual Fund goal for the current year is \$1.025 million. The volunteer leadership and the staff are determined to break the \$1 million level in this, the year in which the Campaign is announced publicly. The early results are 25% ahead of last year.

The schedule of regional campaigns (see Appendix B) indicates that three campaigns will be launched in the spring of 1991. A full scale major gifts effort will be in effect during the course of the Campaign, soliciting gifts of \$50,000 or more. Regional campaign activity will focus on prospects for gifts in the range of \$10,000 to \$50,000.

A Campaign Newsletter to announce the Campaign, its goals, needs, and other milestones, will be mailed to the entire Bennington constituency following the announcement of the Campaign. The publication will be produced three to four times a year in order to update all those connected with the Campaign, and will be augmented by articles in the College magazine (the Quadrille) and an insiders' report (see Appendix B, President's Campaign Newsletter.)

IV. Summary

This year the College has hosted an extraordinary array of visitors. Among those to have presented lectures, seminars, workshops, and performances during the current term are Nadine Gordimer, James Merrill, Max Kampelman, David Grene, Lynn Margulis, and the St. Petersburg Salon Theater. This coming Spring Term, we are anticipating visits from Helen Frankenthaler, Zoe Caldwell, Judith Jamison, and Robert Dahl. In addition to the College's regular schedule of events, and its curriculum, these visits make clear Bennington's continuing commitment and ability to provide a vibrant and distinguished setting for a serious liberal arts education.

There have been several extremely encouraging signs over the past year, primary among them the development of the Capital Campaign and the award of prestigious foundation grants. Though we have made significant strides in developing the materials (e.g., the enclosed Catalog) and the strategies for stabilizing our enrollment, we know we face significant challenges in ensuring that we do so while maintaining the quality of our student body. Collaborations between the Admissions Office and the Development, Alumni, and President's Offices, the Faculty Committee on Admissions and Financial Aid, and the Board Ad Hoc Committee on Admissions will help us to identify those prospective students of traditional and non-traditional college age most likely to benefit from Bennington's unique perspective on liberal arts education.

Appendices

Appendix A: CIHE Data Forms

Appendix B: Letter from Elizabeth Coleman, Fall, 1990 (sent with
1,000 catalogs)
Table I, Bennington College Enrollment History
Tables II-IV, Capital Campaign Information
Letter from Elizabeth Coleman: Progress Report on
the Capital Campaign, Spring, 1990

Appendix C: Audited Financial Statements, June 30, 1990 and 1989
and Management Letter from KPMG Peat Marwick,
October 9, 1990 (four copies of each)