

The Functioning of the College Program

-- R. D. Leigh

President Leigh outlined his discussion of the functioning of the College plan into the following parts: the counselor system, attendance and obligations, use of the winter period, description of work of the Junior Division, problem of passing from the first two years to the last two years, granting of the degree, and non-resident study.

1. Counselor System: "Your automatic choice of a counselor by choosing the trial major work is because you are likely to have more and regular contact with the person teaching you your trial major subject. The counselor's work, however, is not limited to the intellectual side of the student's college life. The counselor is changed when a student changes her trial major. It is also possible to change the counselor without changing the trial major. In either case the student wishing to make the change should apply to a member of the Personnel Committee: Mrs. Barbee-Lee, Mrs. Garrett, Miss Steger, or Mr. Leigh, which will make the decision regarding such transfer.

The counselor system can never be 100% perfect; it must be promoted, however, by efforts on the part of both faculty and students.

2. Attendance and Obligations: "We are operating on the plan that there are no general obligations to attend classes. The matter is left to the individual instructor to arrange with his or her students. As a matter of right, any instructor at any time can require any student to attend any group meeting or individual conference. As a matter of fact such attendance becomes obvious and need not be insisted upon. With our work organized as it is, little has to be said about the need of going to classes. The need gradually becomes evident to the students as they see class attendance as a necessary part of carrying on their year's work. Individual class absences from time to time create no problem other than that of the student in losing track of work. Large numbers of simultaneous absences in any class group at weekends, before vacations and immediately following vacations, create a problem. Such absences mean that the class has to be abandoned with consequent loss of progress for both those who are absent and those who attend. Consequently the faculty and the representatives of the students have agreed to hold classes up to the stated hour of the closing of the College and immediately after the hour of opening of the College after vacations.

It is obvious that there has to be a last class and a first class and that group absences result in chipping off of classes at both ends. Individual absences previously arranged with the counselor and instructor of the class, and not occurring in such large numbers that the class has to be abandoned, can be planned



for at these periods as at any other time of the College year.

Aside from classes, the student has the obligation to meet appointments and individual conferences and other kinds of obligations connected with normal working relationships in or outside of the College community. Due to the bad bringing up of some of the students in any college group, the matter of these obligations will have to be insisted upon by members of the faculty. Failure to meet them will necessarily become a part of the student's record which is to be judged in connection with her promotion and retention in the College.

3. The Winter Period: "The two objectives of the winter period are: first, that it gives a time early in the college career to work by oneself, and second, that there are advantages in metropolitan life directly connected with a student's education which the students who can arrange it should have. Each girl makes an arrangement for work to be reported upon with her counselor.

4. Junior Division: "Ordinarily the work of the Junior Division will continue through two years only, and there will be very few students who will not have completed the period of exploration within this time. Your immediate objective and your responsibility are to find the field of work that you think of as most significant for you in the curriculum. During the two years of exploration the faculty is to see how able you are in this field, watching and recording your performance in this and other aspects of your college life. At the end of two years you are to be ready to make your trial major your major. There will be a number of students who will go into their major work at the end of the first year. On the other hand, there will be some who will not be allowed to continue work at Bennington after the first year. Since the work at the College, in the light of the range of human possibilities, is specialized and requires a special kind of ability, such elimination from the College should not carry with it any idea of failure but rather of re-direction. It probably would mean that no student would be wise in going to another liberal arts college, but she might very wisely carry on another type of training fitted to her abilities as indicated by her year's work at Bennington.

The exploration will be carried on for most students for the two years; after which a choice will be made by the student and the faculty regarding promotion to the Senior Division.

5. Problem of Passing from Junior Division to Senior Division: "We have frequent confidential reports from all instructors to the counselor telling him or her how each student is progressing. The faculty is unanimous in saying that we are not having grades. The two incentives for your work are: first, doing the thing because it is worth doing, and second, making good in your work with the persons who are serving as your instructors. This is really proving yourself for promotion to the Senior Division. Promotion will be on the same sort of basis as that used by an employer who promotes an employee--on the basis of work accomplished over a



considerable period of time. There is no actual division between the work you do with books and other activities. For instance, in the field of dramatics, activity is part of the curriculum. At the end of two years a group decision on the part of the instructors of the Division in which you wish to major will be made. This decision will depend largely upon their judgment of your ability. It will also take into account your demonstrated work habits.

6. Senior Division: "The work of the Senior Division will be in the major field. It will include not only study in a particular subject, but in the related subjects. You will not be prevented, on the other hand, from carrying on what might be called side-interests outside of your major field. A student, may, for instance, major in fine arts and continue her work in music during the four years.

Non-resident Work: For students whose work during a part of the Senior Division period can be carried on better in other places there will be arrangements for study to be done not in residence in addition to the winter field period. Activity elsewhere will be supervised and judged by members of the Bennington faculty and will contribute directly toward the major study.

7. Granting of the Degree: "The granting of the degree in American colleges has come to mean the awarding of a general certificate at the end of the college work. It does not mean the same thing in one college that it does in another because the requirements for graduation vary greatly from institution to institution. Most frequently at the present time it means having received more or less satisfactory grades in thirty to thirty-two semester courses.

"Bennington College will give the Bachelor of Arts degree. It seems necessary to do this although degrees tend to interfere with education. The education which we hope will be obtained is a matter of individual gains which cannot in many cases be measured. We, therefore, define the degree in terms of years partially, but mainly in the form of expertness in a major field. This expertness not only will include many things learned in what at other places would be called extra-curricular activity, but an amateur knowledge of and interest in all of the things that are being done here. The College degree will become something definite which should command respect for every Bennington graduate. Expertness fundamentally represents a standard worth emphasizing as a minimum for college graduation and a minimum which is directly in line with that of the advanced work of the best colleges. This expertness is the kind of standard which graduate and professional schools wish to see promoted.

"But the degree standing for this particular part of the College cannot in any sense represent the total objective of our educational plan. Health is a basic objective, but we do not propose to set up a definite accomplishment in this field as a requirement for graduation. It will be promoted as something which is justified as a thing in itself. The promotion of such desirable



attitudes as are represented by the fact that the College is a democratic and free place, we consider important; so also the promotion of emotional maturity and the development of individual and social responsibility. These are certainly as important and more important than the attainment of expertness in a major intellectual or artistic field. Our efforts and our expenditure of money will be devoted to them through the whole College course. They will, no doubt, become evident to others as part of the training at Bennington. But they will not be measured by the granting of a degree.

Likewise concentration of education upon a major field will not prevent each student's gaining during her four-year period, an intelligent amateur's knowledge of each of the four major fields. It is safe to predict that the girl who graduates from Bennington will have an intelligent acquaintance with art and music, with literature, with the social studies and with science. We shall seek fundamental values and human purposes leading to something that may properly be called a working religion or philosophy of life. This certainly, although of supreme importance, cannot in any sense be measured by the requirements for a degree.