

Report from Bennington College
to the New England Association of Schools and Colleges

December 1, 1988

Introduction

Over the past year, Bennington College has continued to improve its financial and enrollment picture. As the accompanying data indicate, we are in the midst of our fourth consecutive balanced operating budget, our applications have continued to increase, and our enrollment has shown steady, though moderate, growth. At the same time, the College has been able to reorganize three important administrative offices (Development, Student Affairs, and Admissions), to develop new educational programs, and to lay the groundwork for significantly increased arenas for fund-raising and a capital campaign.

After a discussion of the accompanying data on finances and enrollment (following immediately in Sections I and II), attention will be directed to recent developments in these other areas. Such developments provide the context from which any evaluation of the College's last three years of stability and continued improvement, and the prospects for continued improvement over the next five years, must proceed.

I. Annual Budgets and Financial Management

CIHE Data Forms I, II, V

The College has now experienced three consecutive years of balanced operating budgets. As was the case during the last two of these years, significant salary increases for employees (7% for the faculty and 5% for

others) have been incorporated in the balanced budget. Overall planning for the future requires a continuation of both trends, the first because it is essential to the College's fiscal integrity, the second because it is essential to its educational integrity. Another indication of increased overall stability is the steady decrease in our total outstanding indebtedness, a decrease of almost one-third over the past four years and almost 11% in the past year alone.

Successful fund-raising remains a priority. The successful completion of the Keystone Campaign, designed to provide essential bridging capital, leads us to focus our attention now on sustaining annual fund-raising while we embark on a major capital campaign. This campaign is in the early stages of development, and the results to date are encouraging. They promise an order of fund-raising never before accomplished in Bennington's history. The "Nucleus Fund" phase of the capital campaign, designed to generate \$15-\$20 million in endowment, is effectively under way.

The College has begun to achieve a financial stability that will enable it to address systematically several of its most important needs. Included in the guidelines we have developed are plans for a major expansion of our library, significant increases in faculty salaries (projections for the near-term future are based on an attempt to make our faculty salaries competitive with comparable institutions), an increased instructional budget for capital equipment, increases in the budget for deferred maintenance, expansion of resources for faculty grants and development, and continuing improvements in the programming capabilities of our Student Services Office.

II. Applications and Enrollment

CIHE Forms III, IV

Continuing improvement in both applications and enrollment are reflected dramatically in the figures reported. Information contained in the CIHE Report Forms provides details on the College's improving application and enrollment picture. The number of applications has increased steadily since 1984; between that year and the present, applications have increased over 56%. Our yearly report to NEASC submitted on January 1, 1988 anticipated a continuing increase for this and the next four years; our increase this past year has been over 11%. All the indications we have suggest that this is the strongest first-year class in the past five years. Though we are cautious in our interpretations of them, average standardized test scores have risen. More importantly, reports from faculty members in all academic divisions suggest a greater seriousness of purpose and motivation among first-year students. Obviously, a larger applicant pool gives us greater control over the quality of our entering classes; we also believe that our revised and more focused orientation program for new students and student leaders has contributed to a more stable transition and adjustment to the College.

We have also been able to sustain the modest increase in enrollment begun in 1985; undergraduate enrollment over that period has increased 8.7%. Most encouraging is that a good portion of the increase has occurred primarily as a result of a decrease in our attrition rate. Although we cannot be sure, we must note that decreased attrition has occurred during the years we have reinforced the structure and capabilities of our Student Affairs office and on-campus programming (on which more below) and have increased (though modestly) the size of our faculty.

III. Other Developments

Several other developments over the past year also demonstrate the renewed vitality of the College. Some of these developments involve administrative reorganization, some involve new programs; all demonstrate the College's increasing ability to address the issues it faces creatively and successfully.

A. Administrative Improvements. Three administrative offices have experienced significant reorganization. After a year in which major positions were filled on a temporary basis, the Development Office is now staffed by experienced professionals. In addition, the College has contracted with the highly respected firm of Ketchum, Inc. as consultants for the Capital Campaign, and work on the specific shape, mission, and scope of the Campaign has begun. All College functions concerning the non-academic life of students (Student Services Office, Health and Psychological Counseling Offices) as well as the Offices of Admissions and Financial Aid have been consolidated under the Office of Student Affairs. The Director of Student Affairs meets regularly with student leaders, the heads of all offices under her authority, and the Dean of Studies and Dean of Faculty, to coordinate non-academic areas of student life and to ensure an integration of these areas with academic life. Finally, a newly hired, highly experienced and capable Director of Admissions has reorganized travel schedules and functions in the Admissions Office. She has also worked closely with the Director of Publications (and many others) to produce an entirely new, and, we believe, striking and exceptional set of admissions publications (Catalog, Viewbook, Travel Piece, etc.). A restructured Psychological Services office has shifted its focus from long-term

treatment to prevention, education and intervention; it has also begun groups focusing on substance abuse, eating disorders, and learning disabilities.

B. New Educational Programs. Several new educational programs have begun or have reached a maturity essential to their continued excellence. This past year the College began a modest program in Chinese Language and Literature. Though currently funded only for three years, the program has already proved to be highly successful with students, other members of the faculty, and the wider Bennington community.

A program of informal lectures and discussions by members of the faculty, the Sunday Night Seminars, was introduced late last year. It provides an additional opportunity for students and faculty members to meet to discuss common interests in informal settings, and it has begun to transform the student houses (dormitories) into settings for learning and living.

Illustrative of the development of new programs, this past summer the College initiated The Bennington Choreography Project, the aim of which is to develop choreographers. While dance is widely taught in the United States, choreography is not. This Project featured a resident company which choreographed new works of its own, a faculty drawn from inside and outside the College, and choreographic workshops at which students from around the country immersed themselves in the choreographic process for two weeks in August. The resident company this summer was the Urban Bushwomen of New York, a relatively young troupe (founded in 1984) of seven black women which has had critical and popular success in the U.S. and abroad.

Other new programs include "Bennington in New York"--established in 1987 by President Elizabeth Coleman and Trustee Susan Borden. Based at the Twining Gallery in the Soho district of New York, Director Judith Glassman works in

concert with Bennington College faculty members and staff to present programs to the larger Bennington community and to the general public. To date, programs have included "Poems and Songs by (Bennington alumna) Elizabeth Swados," "The Making of a Political Candidate," "Cabin Fever" (a "comedy of menace" by playwright and Bennington alumna Joan Schenkar), and "The Factory Series" of dance concerts. This Dance series was also presented to audiences in various Vermont and New York State locations in the Spring of 1988.

C. New Initiatives in Development. As anticipated in last year's report, the budget for Faculty Grants was significantly expanded this year. For the first time in five years, the College is now able to provide significant levels of support for faculty research and faculty development. The budget for next year is likely to be increased, and likely to include a separate fund to support faculty attendance at professional conferences and workshops.

Again as anticipated in last year's report, the College introduced a program, and a budget, for capital equipment for instruction. In conjunction with the Faculty Budget Committee, the Dean of Faculty has approved several projects: to repair and rebuild the College's ceramics kilns, to initiate a multi-year program of refurbishment and replacement of the College's pianos, to purchase video equipment for the College as a whole and for the Foreign Language program in particular, and to improve the audio systems in the College's theatres. We anticipate an increased budget for such improvements next year.

The College has submitted two major Challenge Grant proposals, one to the National Endowment for the Humanities, the other to the National Endowment for the Arts. These proposals are intended to provide significant funds in their own right, but also to provide leverage and motivation for the College's

Capital Campaign. We do not know whether either proposal will be successful, of course, but their submission reflects an increased awareness, and capability, at Bennington to integrate fund-raising focused on its "extended family" with sources of support in the government, corporate, and foundation arenas. The creation of a position in the Development Office to coordinate these efforts, and a position to coordinate planned giving, illustrates the College's commitment to and understanding of its needs and how they will be met in the future.