

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

MEMORANDUM TO: Board of Trustees, Bennington College

FROM: Steering Committee: Elizabeth Coleman  
for Ronald Cohen  
Terry Creach  
Mansour Farhang  
Kenneth Kensinger  
Daniel Michaelson  
William Morgan  
Neil Rappaport  
Barbara Roan  
Susan Sgorbati  
Allen Shawn



DATE: June 1, 1992

RE: Faculty Reduction Recommendations

\*\*\*\*\*

Pursuant to the Board's mandate of April 7, 1992, President Coleman convened a Steering Committee comprised of the members of the Faculty Personnel Committee and the Faculty Personnel Review Committee, the Academic Deans, and the Vice President of Finance to recommend a College-wide reduction in the size of the Faculty. In our initial meetings, the inherent tension between the charges of the two personnel committees - the FPC is obliged to give primacy to the concerns about the institution, while FPRC upholds the rights of individual faculty members interacting with institutional authority - resolved itself in our compliance with the accompanying general guidelines for retrenchment at Bennington College. Their basic configuration represents an amalgamation of AAUP guidelines with more specific and idiosyncratic reflections of the College's reality. We agreed to maintain a dynamic sense of the points at which FPRC might withdraw from the deliberations in order to maintain its impartiality for a subsequent grievance procedure: whenever Steering Committee discussions moved toward matters upon which an individual grievance might be based, FPRC would sound an alert by offering to remove itself.

The Steering Committee quickly realized that the tension between institutional and individual values and rights was precisely the dilemma of our mandated responsibility: assigning faculty cuts which did the least harm to the College's educational integrity, while maintaining the academic and contractual rights of individual faculty members. We recognized the extreme difficulty of discussing the College's curriculum without raising issues pertaining to individual faculty performance. From the same tension between institution and individual arose the principle of convergence which guided the Committee's work and deliberations throughout the process. Stated simply, we sought out - and, at times, sought to create - faculty positions where limited curricular harm coincided with "natural attrition" and existing vacancies.

The process of establishing eight such convergences was by no means simple. During the first weeks after the Board's mandate, the Steering Committee met with various College-wide constituencies - the Faculty, Academic Council, SEPC, individuals - to elicit both formal and informal guidance for the establishment of curricular criteria. We also began discussing the various data pertaining to course offerings, enrollments, and distribution of faculty resources in the light of the emerging criteria. At the same time, we deliberated on several alternatives proposed by individual faculty members, proposals which suggested less permanent approaches than discontinuation for half of the eight reductions - through a College-wide voluntary leave program. While appealing from the standpoint of avoiding the permanent elimination of positions, these suggestions foundered on the inherent randomness of such an approach from the standpoint of curriculum and year-to-year scheduling, and were thus held in abeyance pending our extensive analysis of the overall College program.

The series of discussions following this first phase of evolving criteria and data-gathering moved directly to the intensive discussion of specific divisions and disciplines. We became aware that the mix of criteria was very fluid, arising in very different articulations as we examined particular areas of the College's educational program. Because small divisions like Dance and Drama could not endure extensive reductions without sacrificing their programmatic integrity, large divisions would have to bear a greater burden of retrenchment. Large divisions' programmatic integrity often was strongly associated with the presence of more than one practitioner in a discipline, while, for medium and small divisions, reductions in faculty resources would often necessitate the discontinuation of a discipline. Some divisions had many retirements in the near future, providing the prospect of an internal accommodation to reduced resources. Other divisions had little or no such curricular maneuvering room. As we examined particular disciplines, our various educational ideals - concentrated by discussions with Academic Council and SEPC - flowed into the mix of criteria. We contended with issues of presumptive tenure and contractual obligations, as well.

Our specific decisions similarly emerged gradually. Individual members of the Steering Committee continued to meet with individual faculty members and, in one instance, with a division, seeking to discover voluntary individual decisions which could provide potential areas of convergence. Our internal



method was a reiterative polling, meeting after meeting, of the committee membership, each of us defending a list of reductions, each pushing the others toward the required eight.

#### DANCE DIVISION

The Dance Division (6  $\frac{1}{8}$  faculty) provided the first definite reduction of one position through a combination of voluntary reductions of  $\frac{1}{4}$  position each by Tony Carruthers, Martha Wittman, and Susan Sgorbati with the discontinuation of a support staff position in Audio/Video, which the Division had been considering for some time. In the new definition of Tony Carruthers' position, many of the functions of the discontinued support staff will be incorporated into a curricular offering in Video. This leaves a total of 5  $\frac{1}{8}$ .

#### DRAMA DIVISION

The Drama Division (5  $\frac{5}{8}$  faculty) was exempt from faculty reductions due to the strong convergence of large enrollments with a very small number of faculty positions. The Steering Committee discussed a possible reduction of one-half a position in Acting, since there was a possibility of a voluntary reduction, but concluded that if such a vacancy occurred, it would have to be replaced. This leaves a total of 5  $\frac{5}{8}$ .

#### VISUAL ARTS

The Visual Arts Division (10 faculty) presented the dual problem of vigorous enrollments and a proliferation of one-person disciplines, so extensive cuts would eventuate in the elimination of ongoing activities and the curtailment of the major in Visual Arts. The growth of the Division's MFA program further argued for limiting reductions. At the same time, the fragmentation of positions in the Art Division seemed to indicate that bits and pieces of positions might be discontinued without significant educational harm. Since present vacancies in Sculpture (1), Art History ( $\frac{3}{4}$ ), Photography ( $\frac{1}{4}$ ), and Architecture ( $\frac{1}{4}$ ) provide considerable maneuvering room without discussing individual faculty members, the Art Division will determine the approach to reducing its faculty by one-half position in the forthcoming weeks. This leaves a total of 9  $\frac{1}{2}$ .

#### NATURAL SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS

Analysis of enrollment patterns and equity suggested that the Natural Sciences and Mathematics Division (8 faculty) should be reduced by one position, though the Steering Committee was deeply concerned about the impact of any cut on the Division's programmatic integrity on both the undergraduate and post-baccalaureate level. We raised questions about the need for three biologists, concluding again that the Division's original arguments remained persuasive. Rein van der Linde's intention to retire by Fall, 1994 afforded a vacancy in Mathematics. Informal discussions with members of the Division and the Steering Committee's own deliberations led to a sense that the curricular gap left by the discontinuation of one of the two positions in Mathematics could be addressed in the coming years. While some members of the Division are



capable of offering introductory level Mathematics courses, that is a compromised solution both for science and for mathematics. The Division, while committed to fulfilling the mandate of one cut, is still wrestling with finding the optimal resolution. This leaves a total of 7.

#### MUSIC DIVISION

In the Music Division (9 3/4 faculty), the Steering Committee's awareness of the prior reduction caused by Gunnar Schonbeck's retirement was an additional element in our deliberations. The general enrollment data urged the eventual cut of one position, while our desire to maintain the Division's commitment to the individual student-musician's relationship with individual faculty-musician argued against any further cuts. We debated whether to follow the advice of the Music Division's SEPC representatives to reduce the commitment in Composition or to locate the reductions in Instrumental teaching, concluding that the deepest creative ideals of the Music Division would be best served by discontinuing 1/2 position on the Instrumental side, in Piano and Voice, available as a result of retirements by Willie Finckel and Frank Baker respectively. This leaves a total of 8 3/4.

#### SOCIAL SCIENCE

The most contentious and passionate discussions arose over the reductions in the Division of Social Sciences (14 faculty). Before arriving at a decision to eliminate two-and-one-half positions, the Steering Committee considered the complete elimination of the teaching of Economics and the reduction of a range of Social Science disciplines to one person. We were initially confronted in the Social Sciences with the most extensive landscape of natural attrition: two positions in both History and Psychology and a possible position in Anthropology would become available during the next several years. We were also cognizant of an overall pattern of diminished enrollments as well as concentrations of quite small enrollments in specific areas.

The first decision to reduce the commitment in Psychology was a more or less obvious one: though enrollments are relatively vigorous, it was difficult to argue for three positions in Psychology at a time when other disciplines were reduced to single faculty members; moreover, during Ron Cohen's service as Dean of the Faculty, the Psychology discipline had been sustained by fewer than three faculty positions. The second reduction of one position in History was, by far, the most difficult to rationalize. Though enrollments in History have not been particularly strong in recent years, there was a conviction in the Steering Committee that the teaching of History was essential to the liberal arts ideal and that History had the special potential of serving as a truly synthesizing force in the College's educational program. To avoid the discontinuation of either History position, we examined other disciplines in the Division, placing special emphasis on Economics, where enrollments were small and the recent history of unreplaced faculty leaves suggested that the discipline could be sustained by one faculty member. Here our conclusion was strongly influenced by the fact that two tenured faculty members occupied the positions in Economics. After consulting with Michael Rock and Andrew Pienkos about their plans for the near future, the Committee understood that no voluntary convergence would be developed. The proposal to eliminate Economics



founded on our acceptance of its current geo-political significance, as well as our awareness of its connections to other Divisional disciplines. Finally, and regretfully, we decided to avail ourselves of the natural attrition in History by reducing the Division's resources in that area by one position.

We will urge the Division of Social Sciences to address this profound curricular issue as forthcoming vacancies occur. We believe the remaining half-time position in Anthropology should be dynamically allocated between the two most affected disciplines--history and psychology. In filling this position a strong preference was stated for hiring a person full time for a semester rather than one-half time for a year. This leaves a total of 11 1/2.

#### LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE

Our decision to reduce the size of the Division of Languages and Literature (15 faculty) by two positions was based primarily on its size and its curricular homogeneity relative to other divisions. One position was achieved by the discontinuation of the vacancy created by Claude Fredericks' retirement. Though we were troubled by the loss of resources in classical literature and languages, other faculty resources in this area are available. The division invited Neil Rappaport to provide insight into the Steering Committee's thinking and procedures and subsequently presented the Steering Committee with a proposal to accomplish the mandated two position reduction through a combination of permanent individual voluntary reductions and a rotating leave program. The latter proposal was sufficiently vague as to give rise to scheduling and curricular problems: it effectively instituted a reduction in faculty salaries--a strategy rejected by the Board--and it did not provide for the sort of permanent reductions which constituted our mandate. At the same time, the Steering Committee was informed of Phebe Chao and Sandra Dunn's interest in moving from a full-time to a half-time status in the College. After assuring ourselves that both individuals were acting voluntarily during this resolution, we discussed the discontinuation of the vacated partial positions, concluding that the loss would be tolerable. We were, nonetheless, acutely aware of the implication that the reduction in the Spanish program would inhibit the development of an abroad program as well as the growth of the discipline on campus; we were also cognizant of the sacrifice of Phebe Chao's extensive thesis tutorial work with Senior Literature majors, in addition to her course offerings. This leaves a total of 13.

The Steering Committee arrived at this series of recommendations without ever reaching the point at which the FPRC's grievance role came into conflict with the committee's procedures, though there were at least several moments when FPRC members signalled that the discussion was moving dangerously into inadmissible areas. In each such instance, we found another line of discourse through which we could proceed. Since the Steering Committee never took any coercive action vis-a-vis individual faculty nor engaged in any deliberations which pertained to individual's performance, political activities, character or other impermissible concerns, it was not necessary for the members of FPRC to withdraw nor for grievance procedures to be undertaken.

The task ahead for the Faculty is profoundly challenging. This reduction of eight positions has an inevitably negative impact on the College's educational program. The Steering Committee's ability to maintain collegial morale through its application of the principle of convergence may be a mitigating factor, but new approaches to old educational problems must be undertaken in the context of constrained resources. The gaps in the educational program must be addressed through a commitment to curricular development in which, instead of creating new positions, the individual resources of present and new faculty members must be more fully mobilized.



## APPENDIX

### General Guidelines

- I. Steering Committee members will avoid discussing individual faculty members' performance, character, personality, or other impermissible concerns
- II. The President, the Dean of the Faculty, and the Vice President of Finance endeavor to negotiate retirement arrangements with all faculty members volunteering to retire or reaching mandatory retirement; all eligible faculty members should be routinely contacted and all possible incentives to a voluntary action should be offered
- III. The Steering Committee will collaborate with the Academic Council in the identification of curricular criteria for faculty reductions
- IV. SEPC and other organs of student governance will also contribute curricular plans vis-a-vis the reduced faculty size
- V. With curricular concerns as the essential guiding factor, the Steering Committee will decide which natural vacancies in the faculty (retirements, voluntary reductions, and vacant positions) will be discontinued
- VI. Discussion of alternative approaches to the remaining reductions (with FPRC present) which do not have an impact on individual faculty members will be undertaken
- VII. All Steering Committee discussions pertaining to individual faculty members will be undertaken by the FPC members of the Steering Committee in chambers, with the President ex-officio as a non-voting member
  - A. To the fullest extent possible the FPC will be governed by the normal rules of discourse, evidence, and decision-making which prevail in faculty reviews, including, but not limited to, confidentiality, access to personnel files, authority to interview any member of the faculty in the course of its deliberation of an individual position, disclosure of conflicts of interest by individual FPC members, and scrupulous avoidance of impermissible standards; proper areas for consideration of an individual faculty member include "competence in his/her field, professional activity, and teaching ability; responsiveness to student needs and interests, and contribution to working committees and other aspects of community life..." (Faculty Handbook, 9.42, page 37)

- B. The FPC will utilize relevant evidence from the most recent personnel consideration of an individual faculty member (last FPC review or material gathered during the candidacy of individuals never previously reviewed by FPC), including interviewing former FPC members who may have served during an individual's last review
  - C. It is understood that FPC may have to apply these standards to the difficult task of judging the relative value of one individual faculty member measured against the qualities of another
- VIII. Termination of continuous tenure contracts, or of probationary contracts before the end of the term, may only be recommended with the provision that the Board formally declare a state of financial exigency and postpone the relevant personnel decision(s) until due process has been accorded to affected faculty members

#### FPRC's Steering Committee Role

- I. Full participation in establishing procedures and criteria by which the Board's mandate is to be carried out
- II. Participation in data-gathering process limited to areas not pertaining to individual faculty positions i.e. overall curricular ideals, large patterns of enrollment, etc.; special emphasis should be given by FPRC members to concerns of colleagues about issues relating to individual faculty rights
- III. Participation in the decision-making process should continue only so long as faculty positions are available through natural or voluntary attrition, and only so long as the discussions do not pertain to individual faculty members, "classes" of faculty members, or to other content which might be the subject of a grievance from an individual faculty member; FPRC participation in the decision-making process includes voting rights only in matters of general principle
- IV. Monitor divisional discussions mandated by the Steering Committee to ensure that impermissible considerations relating to individual faculty members are excluded from the deliberations
- V. Availability to aggrieved faculty members at two stages in the process:
  - A. In the preliminary stage, when faculty members near retirement age are negotiating with the Administration, FPRC should be prepared to hear grievances under the rubric of matters "concerning salary, assignment of teaching duties, ... or on points of personal privilege" (Faculty Handbook, 1.33); such grievances should be



- e. If an individual faculty member's grievance is upheld by FPRC, it reports its findings to the Steering Committee, which, after correcting the violation, reconsiders its decision
- C. If the Steering Committee recommends "the termination of an appointment with continuous tenure, or of a probationary or special appointment before the end of the specified term," FPRC conducts hearings, with the faculty members on the Steering Committee participating, on the existence of financial exigency
  - 1. AAUP: the burden of proof lies with the Administration.
  - 2. Steering Committee investigation of the grievance can include access to College budgetary information at as high a level of detail as possible; the Faculty Budget Committee and the Vice President of Finance would normally be asked to testify about the College's economic state
  - 3. In the event the Administration fails to prove financial exigency, the Steering Committee will report its finding to the Board of Trustees with a recommendation of austerity measures sufficient to maintain the College's financial balance
- D. Once grievances are resolved, the FPRC joins the full Steering Committee in a formal vote endorsing the package of decisions.