

**Report on a Comprehensive Evaluation
of
Bennington College
Bennington, Vermont**

by

**An Evaluation Team Representing
The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
of
The New England Association of Schools and Colleges**

Prepared after study of the institution's
self-evaluation report and a visit to the campus
on November 7-10, 1999

Members of the Visiting Team

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This report represents the views of the evaluation team as interpreted by the chair. Its content is based on the team's evaluation of the institution with respect to the Commission's criteria for accreditation. The report is prepared both as an educational service to the institution and to assist the Commission in making a decision about the institution's accreditation status.

COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

PREFACE PAGE: BENNINGTON COLLEGE

1. *HISTORY:* Year chartered or authorized 1925 Year first degrees awarded 1936

2. *TYPE OF CONTROL* (CHECK OR FILL-IN):

State <u>PUBLIC</u> City _____ Other Specify _____	Nonprofit <u>X</u> Religious group (name) _____ Other (specify) _____
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3. *DEGREE LEVEL* (CHECK ALL APPROPRIATE CATEGORIES):

Associate _____ Baccalaureate X Master's X Professional _____ Doctoral _____

4. *ENROLLMENT IN DEGREE PROGRAMS* (FOR FALL SEMESTER OF THE MOST CURRENT YEAR):

	<u>FULL-TIME</u>	<u>PART-TIME</u>	<u>FTE</u>
Associate	<u>N/A</u>	<u>N/A</u>	<u>N/A</u>
Baccalaureate	<u>447</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>447.0</u>
Graduate	<u>116</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>116.5</u>

5. *CURRENT FACULTY:*

Full-time 55* Part-time 18 FTE 66.25

6. *CURRENT FUND DATA FOR MOST RECENTLY COMPLETED FISCAL YEAR*

(SPECIFY YEAR) 6/30/99 :

EXPENDITURES

Instruction	<u>8,339,689</u>
General	<u>5,498,336</u>
Auxiliary Enterprises	<u>1,373,881</u>
Other	<u>343,042</u>

TOTAL: 15,554,948

REVENUES

Tuition (NET)	<u>8,796,174</u>
Gov't Appropriations	<u>417,600</u>
Gifts/Grants/Endowment	<u>5,923,845</u>
Auxiliary Enterprises	<u>1,380,755</u>
Other	<u>1,380,755</u>

16,518,374

7. *OFF-CAMPUS LOCATIONS:*

Total NONE In-state _____ Out-of-state _____

8. *ACCREDITATION HISTORY:*

Candidacy: None Initial Accreditation: Dec., 1935 Last Comprehensive Eval: Spring, 1994
 Last Commission Action: Information accepted as fulfilling the Commission's request.
 Last Action Taken on: April 22, 1999

9. *OTHER CHARACTERISTICS:*

* including faculty in the Regional Center for Languages and Cultures

Introduction and Overview

At Bennington College, events are measured from the date of the *Symposium Report* of the Bennington Trustees, issued in June, 1994. That report represented a dramatic and courageous attempt on the part of the President and the Trustees to acknowledge the serious financial and educational crisis that the college faced, to rediscover the college's core values, and to take the bold and difficult steps that they believed to be necessary to set the college on course again.

This visiting team arrived on campus just over five years after the publication of the *Symposium Report*. Our visit comes three years after the last (focused) visit to the college by a NEASC team, which occurred in April, 1996. That team described its visit as similar to "arriving in a town a couple of years after a major earthquake. Recollection of the shock, and of the after-shocks, has begun to fade, but the features of the landscape bear little resemblance to those described by previous visitors." The college was still in crisis, but the team found everywhere the determination to rebuild and prosper.

Our team finds a Bennington that has been pulled back from the brink. The events surrounding the *Symposium Report*, although still referred to almost continually, have assumed a new position as historical marker rather than descriptor of an ominous, hovering cloud. Everywhere in the college we find a new vigor, a new confidence, and an eagerness to look to the future. Enrollments are climbing. Students and faculty members are participating with enthusiasm and commitment in a new process that will structure the students' educational experiences. Fundraising has been markedly successful. New administrative structures are in place designed to move the college into the future in efficient and effective ways. Plans are underway to build three new dormitories next year. In very real ways the bold steps called for in the *Symposium Report* have paid off; the college can and should feel immense pride and sense of accomplishment in the progress it has made in the last five years. We have found a stronger, more vibrant Bennington than has been the case for many years.

That said, the college leadership is quick to acknowledge, and the team believes strongly, that Bennington is still far from being in a "business as usual" mode. The college's financial situation is still cause for serious concern; its very future depends fundamentally upon its continuing ability to meet ambitious enrollment projections, its ability to increase still further its fundraising, and its ability to continue to apply stringent budgetary constraints in the face of ongoing needs for "catch-up" expenditures. The college is essentially "betting the farm" on enrollments, even to the extent of assuming large increased debt for the projected new dormitories, and it does not have much latitude in its requirement to meet its projected increases.

So we find a college that is in a much improved but still vulnerable position. As well, we find a college in which the structures and processes of decision-making, planning, and budgeting are in many instances those of an institution in crisis. Examples of this include a concentration of decision making in the President's Office and a planning process closely linked to recent and current financial constraints. These modes of operation may be argued to be necessary for an institution in crisis, and they seem to have served Bennington well over the past several years. Now, however, with the college's position beginning to strengthen, it will be important for increased attention to be given to opportunities for responsibly shared governance, and to the development of planning processes and structures that are more proactive and systematically comprehensive, and that gather and use carefully collected institutional data to inform decision making.

As we progress through this report using the structure of the Standards for Accreditation, we will attempt to elaborate on the statements made in the preceding paragraphs and on the major challenges that we believe that college faces at this pivotal point in its history.

We found that Bennington's Self-Study prepared us well for our visit and for the observations that we made while at the college. Produced on the basis of widespread participation from all constituencies, it will also serve the institution as an extraordinarily useful guide for planning and decision-making over the next few years. In addition, we found upon our arrival a team room containing beautifully organized binders holding information related to each Standard. Finally, we found a community -- trustees, president, senior administrators, faculty, staff, and students -- knowledgeable about our reasons for being there and determined to make our visit as productive and enjoyable as it could be. We are especially grateful for the degree to which so many people worked to help us locate information and answer questions. We extend our thanks to the college for its sensitivity to our needs and for making our work such a pleasure. We offer the following report in the spirit of collegiality, as the observations of peers to be considered and acted upon within the frameworks of the college's ongoing planning processes.

Standard 1: Mission and Purposes

One of Bennington's great strengths is the clarity of its mission, and the degree to which the mission is understood and used as a guiding principle by the entire community. Everywhere we went, the team found students, faculty members, and administrators who were eager to articulate the core concept of faculty members as teacher/practitioners committed to working with students while actively contributing to their fields. We found a commitment to a liberal arts education crafted individually by each student to meet his or her needs and interests, supported by dedicated faculty members. We found a pride in the multidisciplinary aspects of a Bennington

education, and in the ability of students and faculty members to link very different disciplines into coherent areas of study.

The college's mission and purposes, articulated by the first President in the form of a *Commencement Statement*, has been read at every commencement since the first, in 1936. In addition, the *Symposium Report*, adopted and issued in June, 1994, presents a set of First Principles that complements the *Commencement Statement*. The *Commencement Statement* and the First Principles define a strong and unique identity for the college that is appropriate to an institution of higher education.

Standard 2: Planning and Evaluation

Long-Rang Strategic Planning

Bennington undertook its most recent major formal planning enterprise in 1993, after the college encountered serious enrollment and revenue declines in the preceding years. The planning process provided a means to examine fundamental beliefs and critical operations, as well as to focus upon goals for enrollment and financial equilibrium. The planning process included consultation with every segment of the community as an initial step, and culminated in the production of the *Symposium Report* by the President and the Trustees in 1994. The Board has now mandated a review of the success of the actions called for in the *Report*, which will take place during 1999-2000. We think this enormous and ongoing planning effort has served the college well, and we applaud Bennington's ability to make hard decisions, to implement significant change and in every way to build upon its strengths and distinctiveness in the marketplace.

As a result of the planning initiated at the time of the Symposium, the college has reexamined and reaffirmed its core mission and values and has taken steps to create an educational process that strongly supports them. Steps in this process have been ongoing. In 1997-98 a major planning process resulted in what the college has termed a "radical redesign of student academic planning." The details of this redesign, called the *Plan Process*, will be discussed under Standard 4. The *Plan Process* provides a way for each student to craft his or her own Bennington education, supported and guided in formal as well as informal ways by faculty advisors, individually constituted committees, and the Office of the Dean.

While we think that the *Plan Process* shows much promise, the broader areas of academic planning, including planning for the overall shape of the curriculum, the number and areas of expertise of the faculty, and projected future directions, are still in early stages of development. These will be discussed under Standards 3 and 4 as well.

More recently, the college has completed a Campus Master Plan and a Comprehensive Facilities Plan which will guide decisions in years ahead on key investments in physical plant. A new, sophisticated, development effort is just being launched to plan strategically for fundraising.

Ongoing Planning and Evaluation

While some components of planning are in place, as indicated above, the team found little evidence of a strong, integrated planning effort at the level of administrative departments, and little evidence that ongoing financial planning and budgeting are based upon strategic or programmatic priorities. In the team's view, Bennington is still struggling to free itself from both the serious financial constraints and the mind set that accompany financial crisis. In crisis, as the Self-Study acknowledges, the institution has been intent upon responding to urgent problems on essentially an *ad hoc* basis. The mode is reactive rather than proactive, event-driven rather than data-driven. Perhaps as a consequence of many years in crisis mode, Bennington has not established ongoing comprehensive systems for monitoring its own activities. It has not established what the Commission often calls a "culture of institutional effectiveness."

In recent years the college has begun to address this problem. An institutional research committee has been formed, and an outside consultant engaged to help the college map out a strategy for building a set of basic data bases. A new integrated administrative computing system is coming on-line. The team was pleased to see this progress, but the college, as it acknowledges, has a long way to go.

We urge the college to move ahead now to strengthen its coordinated approach to institutional research by identifying key data elements, annual reports, and other materials expected of each area on campus. We urge the senior administrative team to focus on integrating planning across administrative departments, and linking planning to budget in a way that clarifies institutional budget priorities.

The systematic collection and use of appropriate internal and strategic data to monitor institutional quality, to inform decision making and planning, and to benchmark the college's progress, will signify Bennington's departure from crisis mode. More critically important, it can prevent the college from finding itself again in the kind of crisis that required the drastic actions called for in the *Symposium Report*.

Standard Three: Organization and Governance

The organization and governance of the college are generally appropriate to its mission and have served to support effective decision making through the college's crisis years and into the current energetic and promising period. Faculty and staff are aware of their varying governing roles, as codified in the *Staff/Administration*

Handbook and the *Faculty Notebook*. Given the small size of the college, constant interactions among constituencies inevitably encourage informal dialogue and debate, which is effectively channeled by the governing structures into a strong sense of collaboration in a community enterprise. Although the interpretation of decision making responsibilities is never without ambiguity, the sense of participation in substantive educational thinking pervades the institution, and there is widespread pride in the steady success of the college in maintaining and strengthening its identity through the deep challenges of the recent past. The NEASC interim report of April 1996 remarked on the strong sense of “ownership” shared by students, faculty, administration and trustees, and we confirm that the passion of the community has not diminished. Evidence of strong belief in the value of Bennington’s special vision of liberal education pervaded our interviews with all constituencies.

Trustees and Administration

The Board of Trustees is well informed and deeply engaged in the work of the college. Its structure and responsibilities are clearly set out in its by-laws. The Board currently consists of 23 voting members, including the President and Vice President of Finance and Administration, who serve *ex officio*. The Board’s executive committee and five standing committees regularly take up tasks and projects crucial to the health of the college, and the Board’s quarterly meetings deal with a substantive agenda. Minutes of recent Board meetings show a very high degree of engagement and oversight. Passionate commitment to the mission of the college was evident in our meeting with Board members. It is clear that the Board is the guardian of the college’s continuity with its founding principles and shares the educational values that animate the Bennington community. We commend the Board for its careful and imaginative leadership, which has been key to the current strengthening of the college’s financial position and its confidence in a shared vision of the future. The Board is currently engaged in a systematic review of the implementation and success of the *Symposium Report*. The faculty has been invited to contribute its views, and the Board intends to submit its report to the community at the end of the current academic year.

The Board works in tandem with the President, who, along with other senior administrators, openly and articulately reinforces the college’s values and guides an evolving agenda of positive changes in academic and student life. The Dean of the College occupies a pivotal position linking administration and faculty, so that, in principle, a centralized governance structure reaches into and can communicate continuously with faculty governance committees and with the Bennington’s unique educational process. In the *Plan Process*, educational plans developed by each student, working with advisors and faculty, receive final approval in the Dean’s Office. After a period of widespread turnover of staff in administrative offices, the college seems now to have achieved a level of stability that encourages long-term cooperation. Student views are taken seriously, and structures exist for their participation in governance.

Our interviews indicated that the governance structure is working effectively. At the same time, both faculty and administration express a desire for clarification and improvement at the major stress points where administrative authority and faculty governance intersect.

Faculty Governance

Three committees are central to faculty governance: the Academic Policies Committee (APC), the Faculty Review Committee (FRC) and the Faculty Grievance Committee (FGC). The FRC has the crucial and weighty responsibility of recommending renewal or non-renewal of faculty appointments; it is not empowered to recommend lengths of contracts or salaries. The FGC hears grievances concerning the process of FRC review and alleged violations of the college's Principles of Academic Freedom. The fundamental changes that the college has made in the nature of faculty appointments place extraordinary responsibility on these committees, and we commend them for the care and collegiality that they have brought to their work. Despite inevitable tensions and some questioning from faculty regarding their appropriate purview, these committees continue to validate the 1996 NEASC visiting team's view that they are "instrumental in the elimination of faculty distrust, and in instilling the institution with a new sense of optimism, collegiality, and cooperation."

Our interviews and meetings revealed a more problematic picture regarding the Academic Policies Committee. A lesser issue is the appropriate distribution of responsibility between the two sub-committees of the APC. The greater issue concerns the curriculum and faculty positions. At a college where mission and practice are very tightly integrated, the questions at the heart of the enterprise converge at this central administration/faculty committee. How will the committee move beyond approval of credit hours, approval of individual new courses and recommendations regarding leaves and sabbaticals? What, if anything, will replace the divisional grouping of faculty? How will the continuity and overall design of a four-year curriculum be shaped and monitored? What faculty replacement or new positions are required to make the curriculum available to students? How will new faculty receive good mentoring? What, in effect, will the actual responsibility of the APC come to be? The committee understands that these questions loom on its near horizon, but has just begun to assume a more proactive response. Fortunately, the reservoir of good will and impressive engagement of the committee's members augers well for creative, Bennington-style, answers to these questions, which, after all, challenge all liberal arts colleges in contemporary America.

Standard 4: Programs and Instruction

The level of passion and participation of Bennington students is remarkable. Late into the night a visitor is struck by the glow emanating from VAPA, the center for the visual and performing arts, illuminating the quiet countryside. Inside this fabulous

building, all night long, performances are being mounted, sets are being built, lighting is being designed, construction of many kinds is occurring in the shops, visual work is being created and hung, ideas and scripts are being thought about and written. Students seem not to separate work and play, learning and recreation.

The Plan Process

Academic programs and instruction at Bennington are uniquely student centered. The broad objective is to reveal and clarify each student's individual passions for learning and to educate those passions. The College has no "departments" or "majors". Instead of choosing among preidentified fields of concentration, each student is expected to develop his or her own unique plan of study; there are as many programs as there are students. The means by which each student's program is structured, called the *Plan Process*, was revised in 1998-99, and is described in detail in the Self-Study. With the supervision and support of an advisor students are required to draft a plan during their first year. They are expected to produce a document that specifies what courses they intend to take and to provide an educational rationale for their choices. The exercise is repeated under supervision of an advisory committee in the sophomore year, when, presumably, students have explored some of their interests and developed a clearer vision of their educational objectives. Advisors and faculty on the plan committee are expected to monitor the students' work, making sure that it accords with and fulfills the objectives articulated in their plans.

While each student's plan is different, all academic programs take place within a common overall structure that includes:

"...a freshman year of grounding and exploration that does not ask students to defer pursuing their own interests, but does insist that they engage the diversity of intellectual and imaginative life; a sophomore and junior year of increasing immersion and field work; and a senior year that faces outward, exploring and deepening the relationship between one's own work and the work and lives of others that are quite different from one's own." (*Symposium Report*).

Formulating and refining a plan of study seems to be an unusually effective way of empowering the student and developing responsibility for his/her own education. The passionate engagement and commitment to producing creative work that we have remarked upon above exists throughout the student body at Bennington.

Instruction

Faculty members are expected to teach what they love to teach. The expressed ideal is that all liberal learning be taught as a performing art by teacher-practitioners who teach "...what keeps them awake at night." Classes are small and courses are often interdisciplinary. There are few prerequisites and no large lecture courses. In the absence of scheduled courses that match their interests, students may request tutorials

in subject areas that interest them. (Apparently such requests are generally granted.) Each student is expected to complete a minimum of three 7-week Field Work Term internships to augment his/her formal education with more practical experience. In summary, each Bennington student designs and fulfills his or her own educational program under advisors and teachers in a quasi-apprenticeship model.

Shaping the Curriculum

Since Bennington does not require any particular set of courses or, apparently, any particular set of competencies, it is essentially impossible to characterize a Bennington education in terms of the traditional markers: a disciplinary major, a certain range of breadth in a student's curriculum (e.g. science, humanities, social sciences, arts), or a certain set of competencies (e.g. writing, quantitative skills, group work, speaking, and so on). Indeed, it is at the core of the college's mission not to specify any of the above expectations. One gains an understanding of a Bennington education by reading the completed Plans of each of its graduates. These Plans articulate the outcomes of a Bennington education, one student at a time. The college has not attempted to produce and, indeed, resists producing, any summary of how students distribute themselves, where they concentrate, or what skills they must acquire. Doing so would presumably imply expectations regarding the shape of a student's education that are antithetical to the mission.

Since the faculty is small, each member is expected to offer a fair variety of courses to stretch the curriculum; though some continuity is expected (e.g. calculus), repeating the same four-to-six courses each year is not considered adequate. One result of the constant infusion of new or different courses is a vibrant, changing, curriculum that represents the latest thinking and passions of the faculty. Another, less positive, result is that neither students nor their advisors can look ahead more than a semester or at best a year in planning the students' courses of study. The catalog can only present what is being taught this year, with the expectation that major changes will occur next year. A major challenge for the college is how to provide opportunities for serious academic planning and for the monitoring of educational outcomes without sacrificing the individuality and spontaneity of the Bennington education.

Bennington has devised a highly innovative solution to the problem of language teaching in a small institution. The Regional Center for Language and Cultures, a Bennington institution that is separate from its core faculty, offers language and cultural education in six languages, including Japanese and Chinese, for students from grades K through 16. By sharing the costs of instruction with public schools throughout the region, Bennington is able to fund a much larger range of courses for its own students than would otherwise be possible. Might it be possible to extend curricular coverage by similar partnerships in other subject areas?

Even assuming a high level of flexibility with respect to course offerings, Bennington cannot hope to offer more than minimal coverage in some fields. While offerings are

rich in the arts, there is only one faculty member each in mathematics, philosophy, anthropology, physics and political science, two in biology and history and none in economics and sociology. It is not clear how the balance of interests among faculty members will change as finances improve and/or vacancies occur. What disciplines and subject areas will be emphasized as new appointments become possible? The governance issues related to these decisions are discussed under Standard 3.

The sciences would appear to offer particular challenges, since the college offers both an undergraduate concentration and a post-baccalaureate year aimed at preparing students for admission to medical school. Questions arise whether Bennington can offer students with interests in science a realistic picture of modern science as practiced in the mainstream of the disciplines. Does the practitioner-apprentice model serve as well in the sciences and, indeed, the social sciences as it does in the performing arts? Can chemists be expected to remain active in a competitive research field while carrying Bennington teaching loads and conforming with the Bennington calendar? Can Bennington continue to attract excellent teacher-scholars in subject areas where they will have no Bennington colleagues?

One way in which the college might enrich the education of students, particularly in under-represented fields, is through the judicious use of new technology. We encourage the faculty to move forward, as it has begun to do, in this area.

Graduate Education

As reviewed in the Self-Study, Bennington offers four Master's programs and one postbaccalaureate program. With the exception of the M.F.A. in writing, all are very small. The relatively new M.A.T. program permits undergraduates to combine a bachelor's and master's degree in a coordinated 5-year program, and offers a particularly interesting approach to the education of prospective teachers.

All graduate programs are carefully tailored to the needs and goals of individual students, combining use of the undergraduate curriculum with additional expectations regarding preparation and practice. In fields such as creative writing and the arts, this "Bennington" approach seems to be unusually strong. As indicated above, we have some reservations about the degree to which the postbaccalaureate pre-medical year can prepare students in the current, high-tech based, foundations of modern science. We would be encouraged by the availability of research delineating the outcomes of this program in terms of subsequent medical school admissions and success.

Admissions and Financial Aid

Bennington has continued to show gains in recruitment and retention as well as reducing the discount rate. Undergraduate freshmen enrollment has grown from 119 new first year students in 1997 to 142 in 1999, a 33% increase. The applicant pool has

fluctuated with total applications between 520 to 551. The admit-to-deposit yield has increased to 32% with projections indicating an increase to 38.9% in 2001, an enormous increase to achieve for any college. Transfer enrollment has increased during this same time period. The college's equilibrium plan aimed at a ratio of financial aid dollars to tuition dollars of 36% has been met and sustained.

While much has been achieved, the vulnerability of enrollment remains a concern. Several admission ratios are favorable, yet the need to "increase the demand curve" (applicant pool) remains a critical challenge for the college. The benchmarks outlined by the college in these important revenue streams are aggressive and appropriate in view of the college's needs.

The Admissions Office has undergone considerable staffing changes in the past three years and now has a new team in place. The team members are new to the college and new to the profession of college admissions. The new structure and staffing provide interesting opportunities for the college to implement fresh and exciting marketing initiatives. At the same time, it will be especially important to assure that staff members are trained in the fundamentals of admissions and in sophisticated techniques of enrollment management. It will be important, as well, that the office begin to develop a formal admissions-marketing plan, and that it be expected to submit this plan each year as part of an annual report.

The new structure of linking the processes of admissions and retention by having the Admissions Office oversee the advising of first year students offers both opportunities and challenges. The link seems a natural one, especially since the process includes the extensive use of "conversations" between students and prospective students that could easily continue in the first year. At the same time, it is not clear how the oversight of the first year will coordinate with the *Plan Process*, where intense academic advising is located. The linkage also demands two very different areas of expertise from the Admissions Office staff: marketing and advising. Will the advising role direct energy away from the critically important marketing role? The visiting team did not see evidence of how this new system is working. The retention effort as a whole seems to lack ownership. This new structure will demand considerable attention over the next few years.

Increased coordination between Admissions and Financial Aid will be critical to the success of the enrollment management effort. Bennington's enrollment effort will benefit from strengthening the strategic use of financial aid. A review of specific financial aid policies should be examined during this discussion.

More generally, the college needs to facilitate the coordination of enrollment-related offices and information so integrated decision-making for admissions, financial aid, and retention can be placed on a strong and systematized basis. This coordination would include the development of student information systems for research and planning.

Standard 5: Faculty

The Bennington faculty consists of approximately 42 full-time members (at Bennington, members who teach full-time for only one term are considered to be full-time) and approximately eight part-time members, plus 10 faculty members in the Regional Center for Languages and Cultures, and several instructors in fields such as music, hired on an hourly basis. While not large, the size of the faculty is sufficient to produce a student-faculty ratio of less than 10:1. The distribution of faculty members across disciplines is extremely uneven but is generally in keeping with the particular academic strengths that lie at the heart of the Bennington education. Questions related to how faculty appointments are allocated to curricular areas are discussed under Standard 4.

Faculty members hold no rank, no tenure, and belong to no departments. They hold appointments ranging in duration from one year to seven years and receive an individualized compensation package, all determined by the Dean and the President. Compensation levels require constant attention; in the Self-Study the college indicates that a compensation committee at the board level will be formed in the near future. The committee will work with the President, Vice President, and Dean to review compensation practices with the goal of ensuring that Bennington will be able to retain a first-rate faculty. The professional work of each faculty member is subject to peer review by a faculty committee, the Faculty Review Committee (FRC) as described in Standard 3.

Historically, the faculty of Bennington College has been one that has been noted for its individual accomplishments in a teaching model that is perhaps best described as apprentice/tutor, where a student studies with a recognized master practitioner, and that practitioner has the advantage of continuing his or her practice while teaching. Today, the primary roles of the faculty continue to be delineated as **teaching, practice, and academic advising**, although all areas are seen as being interwoven as--at Bennington--contextuality is prerequisite to clarity.

Teaching: Each faculty member teaches at least two courses per term, and often three. In addition, he or she is expected to provide tutorials for interested students. All faculty members regularly teach both entering and advanced students. Faculty members develop their own courses each semester. They are expected to offer new courses regularly, thereby keeping the curriculum enriched with current interests and directions. They receive regular feedback from students at least twice during the semester.

Bennington's practitioner/teacher mode allows for the advantage of a student's access to a faculty member who has made or is making considerable accomplishments in his or her field. This accessibility is a privileged space, made so by the unusual

opportunity for both the teacher and the student, and the success of this relationship depends on a definite reciprocity and mutual accountability. To lessen the dangers of solipsistic presumption and the transference of this to the student, it is critical that an appropriate level of detachment be employed. The team suggests that it might be useful for the college to routinely bring faculty members together, perhaps with professional facilitation, to focus on issues of pedagogy and to share and develop their expertise as teachers. This is an area of faculty development that seems not to have been adopted at Bennington.

Practice: Practice, or professional engagement, at Bennington “must be explicitly demonstrated, shared with colleagues and students, and evaluated by outside peers.” (Academic Dean’s study, 1994). Team members’ conversations with many faculty members lead us to conclude that there is widespread understanding of the meaning of “practice” and an equally widespread commitment to this type of professional engagement. Indeed, the college makes it as easy as possible for faculty members to be practitioners; many members are on campus only two or three days a week, dividing their time between, say, Bennington and New York. Some members teach only during one term. As well, the college makes available opportunities for sabbatical and unpaid leaves, and provides modest support for faculty development in the areas of research and practice.

Advising: Every faculty member is expected to engage in “regular, serious academic advising” designed to guide each student to the highest quality education that the student can attain. Advising takes place with students at every level, and occurs both individually and in committees. As described under Standard 4, advising lies at the very heart of the Bennington education, and requires a great deal of time and expertise on the part of every faculty member.

During the team visit some students and faculty members expressed a wish for increased intellectual rigor among the students. Some saw a source of this rigor in the presence of faculty members who have entered Bennington from more traditional academic settings and who are perhaps more familiar with current methods of evaluation and critical inquiry. Some saw the need for higher standards, however those might be defined, for student accomplishment.

With the introduction of the *Plan Process*, faculty members have been given some orientation and training designed to help them become effective advisors within this pedagogically central structure. It is also in the area of advising that faculty members have the greatest opportunities to work with other members on behalf of the students’ education. We encourage the college to continue to offer regular programs to develop advising skills among faculty members and to connect them with the educational vision of the college.

With a new emphasis on critical modes of inquiry, the Bennington faculty might continue its impressive work, vis-a-vis student plans and other personal pedagogical

methods, to foster among the students an awareness of the more complex issues of artistic vs. intellectual development. The mutual benefit here might be greater focus for the student and greater access for the practitioner/teacher as he or she continues his or her work in art or science. There would thus be a more sophisticated meditation on pedagogy in the whole college community.

Participation in Governance and Building Community: Despite critical views held by some, the overall attitude of the Bennington faculty is one of commitment to a unique institution with students who are highly self-motivated as learners and singular in many ways. With the elimination of departments and department chairs, there is, however, an indistinct quality underlying the faculty's mood that is a predictable outcome of the concentration of decision making in the administration. As discussed under Standard 3, there is considerable lack of clarity regarding the faculty's role in governance, and some faculty members perceive a reluctance on the part of the senior administration to acknowledge faculty contributions and move toward a model of shared governance. One faculty member expressed the view that, "The President and the Dean need to learn to accept that if someone is criticizing them that person is not trying to undermine them or the college." While the team believes that this may be an extreme view, we are convinced that the faculty as a whole would benefit from more widespread and formal communication with the administration and a better developed system of shared governance.

There are other issues of faculty development and community that need immediate attention, including the traditional academic value of making new members welcome in a community that allows them to grow in a complex of mentor relationships with genuine collegiality. In general, building a community from highly independent faculty members whose work is highly individualized and who may be off campus a substantial proportion of the time, and, in addition, who have no departmental or divisional "homes" in the institution, requires special focus and unrelenting effort. The administration's hope that faculty members would form themselves into informal "program groups," has so far not come to pass.

Diversity: As the college has acknowledged, The Bennington faculty would be enhanced by a more diverse presence racially and ethnically. This is an observation on the part of the evaluators gathered both from silent observation and from listening to Bennington students who would like a faculty that is composed more of members from non-white backgrounds.

The Bennington tradition of inviting guests to lecture and give seminars is designed to give the students exposure to practitioners who have other and distinct approaches to their fields of interest. In an academic situation that is financially challenged this may be seen as an interim gesture, in lieu of new faculty appointments, that provides a chance to approach issues of diversity in the arts and sciences.

Standard 6: Student Services

Although the validity of the following statement is obvious, its message bears repeating. “Students are the primary beneficiaries of any college or university’s educational mission”. Ideally, campus leaders, utilizing existing scholarly research and a host of other less formal tools and techniques, should attempt to learn more about their students’ beliefs, attitudes, values, interests, skills, cultural awareness and other aspects of psychological and social development. They should craft student service programs designed to support and sustain their institution’s clearly articulated mission and objectives.

In its own words, Bennington College, for a significant segment of its history appears to have, either by design or by necessity, allowed much of the responsibility for co-curricular life to be handled by its students. More recently, college leaders (faculty, student and administrative) have consciously and vigorously attempted to reshape and redirect co-curricular life in order to strengthen and enhance the College’s mission. We think that they have chosen the right course. We also believe that they have achieved many promising results and that they should be encouraged to continue in this direction.

Residential Life

In every instance of which we are aware, strong and vital liberal arts colleges evidence philosophically and operationally sound Residential Life systems. Bennington College is in the process of completing the design and implementation of just such a Residential Life system.

The basis of such a system is, of course, the residence houses themselves. At Bennington all undergraduate students live in college housing, with a few exceptions based upon age and marital status. They live primarily in 15 houses, each accommodating about 30 students. All houses are co-ed; all common areas are smoke- and alcohol-free. During the period of the financial crisis, some of the maintenance of the residence houses was deferred. An active program is now underway to renovate all house living rooms, bathrooms and kitchenettes; we believe that the renovation project has elevated the entire program. Additionally, the construction three new houses, each of which will hold 35 beds/residents will add dimensions of flexibility, attractiveness as well as the potential to increase the size of the student population (a vital necessity).

Programmatically speaking, the implementation of the recently redesigned Student Residential Coordinator and House Chair positions serve to enhance the level of the Residential Life program by increasing staff accountability, philosophical congruity and by increasing student staff commitment and competence.

The Office Of Student Life: The current version of the Office Of Student Life (personnel, philosophy and policies) appears to have earned student trust and, as a result, a willingness on the part of many students to work collegially with Student Life Administrators rather than oppositionally to them. A strong and noticeable student development philosophy shared and espoused by the staff is implemented comprehensively in programs and services.

New Student Orientation: The Orientation program for New Students has been expanded to include student led workshops and pre-orientation backpacking trips. These recent additions make programmatic sense and, according to the two dozen or so students with whom we spoke, were well received.

The Office of Admissions and The First Year: According to the Self-Study,

“ In the case of students with special needs, admissions suggests specific counseling or housing assignments. Prior to each term, the admissions staff meets with the student life staff to discuss the new class and to identify and devise support for students with special needs. Staff members throughout the year track their progress. Since 1994, when the admissions office became the office of admissions and the first year, we have placed a greater emphasis on the first year experience.”

In pursuing additional information about this interesting and potentially innovative concept, however, it was not possible for us to obtain a clear picture of how it actually works. We are left with the conclusion that this concept is still in the early states of its development, and that it needs timely clarification both in its description and in its implementation.

Psychological Services: Based upon our interview of the Director of Psychological Services, the opinions offered by the students with whom we spoke and on the descriptive materials provided for us, it seems clear that the psychological services offered to the Bennington College student population are currently meeting their needs. We chose to highlight this service because of the historically significant role this service has played at Bennington College.

Student Body Diversity: The major dimension of diversity in the student body is provided by the approximately 52 international students who represent about 11% of the students. Beyond these numbers, the homogeneity of Bennington College's individuality is striking! Although we are acutely aware of the state of the College's finances, especially as they relate to the Offices of Admissions and Financial Aid, attempting to improve the College's financial position while also trying increase racial and ethnic and religious diversity, need not be mutually exclusive tasks.

Student Government

As the Self-Study indicates, the college has since 1994 encouraged students to develop a comprehensive form of governance. The primary governance bodies consist of the Student Council, the Judicial Committee, the Student Educational Policies Committee and the Campus Activities Board.

Student Council: The foremost student governance body on campus, the Student Council is composed of student representatives from each house. It provides a forum for discussion of campus issues, makes recommendations concerning college policies, and generally represents student opinions. The Council also oversees student elections to the other committees, and recommends appropriation of student funds to various student organizations. This body has been active since 1994, and seems to play the strong role for which it was designed.

The Student Educational Policies Committee (SEPC): According to the Self-Study, the SEPC consists of two students elected from each of the disciplines or programming groups. They are responsible for student input regarding end-of-term faculty evaluations. We were not able to determine how, in Bennington's interdisciplinary academic program, students come to represent disciplines or programming groups, or what is the nature of their contributions to the faculty review process.

The Judicial Committee: This Tripartite committee (students, faculty and staff) appears to meet and execute its duties in a fashion that is fair, educational, community-centered and clearly defined in the student handbook. It should also be noted that, Bridges, the Bennington College Conflict Resolution Program, offers an arena for conflict resolution that makes educational sense and also has the potential to alleviate the number of judicial cases.

Student Activities

The Campus Activities Board: With its \$40,000 per year programming budget and its motivated officers and committee members who are formally advised by members of the Student Life staff, this board evidences the beginnings of a strong student centered activities and events planning body.

The Café and the Pub: Two student gathering centers, the Café, alcohol free, and the Pub, serving alcohol to those 21 and over, make philosophic sense in that they increase the variety of activities offered and also offer valuable educational lessons to those students who plan and design these and related activities.

Community Service Program: This program, established in 1995, involves "students, faculty, and staff in courses and research, volunteer service and critical reflection on the relation between them." (Self-Study). Although we did not see data

regarding participation or outcomes related to this program, such a program seems particularly appropriate for an institution such as Bennington, where “practice” plays such a prominent role in the educational process.

Intramural/ Health and Wellness programs: offered in the form of Soccer, badminton, basketball, rock climbing and the soon to be available Fitness Center, present Bennington College students with a new and heretofore absent dimension of co-curricular life.

Space for Student Events: Although the plan for renovating the Commons must, because of other more critical and pressing financial needs, wait for future funding, the feeling of student frustration related to the lack of social and public party spaces was palpable. Whatever the College can do on an interim basis to alleviate this situation will certainly improve student life and morale, a valuable commodity which, due to the efforts of so many positive people and programs, is clearly on the upswing from its 1994 low point.

Standard 7a: Library Resources

The Crossett Library is a well-maintained and welcoming building. It won the American Institute of Architects First Honor Award when it opened in 1959. It houses about 120,000 volumes, including about 500 current periodical titles. The collection also includes about 25,000 slides and a growing collection of audio and video tapes and CD ROMs. Laptop connectivity to the campus telecommunications network is provided from network outlets in public areas on three floors. A cluster of workstations on the entry level near the reference service point support Internet access to electronic resources and special applications for library research. This cluster is used throughout the service day by individual patrons or, when scheduled, by librarians for group instruction. Compact shelving systems on the lower level provide efficient storage of periodical backfiles.

The Library staff has taken significant information technology initiatives, including the timely creation of a machine-readable catalog and, recently, the implementation of an online public access catalog and related modules of a Y2K compliant integrated computing system. The staff continue to develop the print and nonprint media collections in consultation with faculty, and have been able, despite limited budget allocations, to license several important electronic databases, including Infotrac and Lexis-Nexis.

Staffing: The library operates with a full-time staff of 10, which is adequate to serve the current population of students and faculty members. The visiting team commends the staff for successfully providing responsive services and access to resources and facilities during and following Bennington’s crisis of the mid-1990s. Faculty and students commented on their appreciation of this important and reliable continuity.

The appointment of a reference/outreach professional has improved the Library's capacity to articulate and deliver user instructional programs to classroom and laboratory sites, as well as providing in-house instruction and service.

Articulation of a plan for the support of expert users within the Library and in relation to expertise of computing staff members should ensure the continued efficiency of their present partnership. In-house and consortium-provided training (such as provided by Vermont and New England regional library and technology consortia) should become part of a recurrent program for staff education and training. The Library staff's capacity to remain technologically adept in concert with their computing service peers may need to be more systematically supported, as user demands increase in variety and complexity.

Acquisitions: Limited acquisitions funding must annually provide support for a very dynamic curriculum. Some systematic process might be determined to improve the Library's strategic acquisitions capacity. In particular, a comprehensive plan for the development of the collection would be extremely useful at this time. Such a plan would include both print and electronic resources, and would also enable the library to plan the removal of space-consuming print materials.

Space: The Crossett Library is clearly filled to capacity, constraining the growth and storage of collections, their use by individuals and groups, the instruction of users, and the most efficient and responsive configuration of information technology. We understand that plans are on the horizon to expand the library facilities, but that these must necessarily await other construction such as the three new residence houses. We believe that the college should consider developing a master plan for the renovation and expansion of the library, addressing projected growth of collections, space needs and configurations, electronic facilities, and needs for individual and group uses.

Technology: The development and maintenance of the Library website and gateway to Internet resources has provided important research support. The staff's design and provision of "webliographies" and selected World Wide Web links has ensured the changing and increasingly useful content of the website.

Recent licenses to full-text and other electronic databases, such as Infotrac and Lexis-Nexis, has been welcomed by many students and faculty, alike.

Planning: Planning for information services lacks sufficient input from the academic community, despite the existence of an Information and Library Resources Committee. The College may want to review and revise the charge to this committee to emphasize its academic and administrative representation, and its potential function in planning, as well as, articulating more immediate service and support concerns.

Standard 7b: Information Technology

Bennington College has understood the central importance of information technology to teaching and learning, and to its conduct of administrative operations. It has recognized the unity of purpose of library and computing functions and services, fostering a highly collaborative partnership between these two departments. Although its financial resources have been limited, the College has taken recent and strategic steps to improve the campus information technology facilities: networking residence halls, offices, and instructional sites; establishing a public computing cluster for specialized and general computing applications; acquiring a comprehensive integrated system for administrative support; and providing universal Internet connectivity from every campus network port. The visiting team has observed that the College has a campus culture which is atypically amenable to the shared responsibilities for technology application and use on the one hand, and its support, on the other.

Hardware and Software: The installation within the past year of the fiber optic backbone has provided improved telephone and data services. The backbone is connected to the Internet, and is accessible through every workstation on campus, student rooms, faculty and staff offices, and classroom buildings.

In the past, the college has operated primarily on a Macintosh platform; now PC machines are being introduced, and both platforms will be supported in the future. A concern noted by the visiting team is the increasing variety of hardware and attendant applications introduced by faculty (for teaching and research) and by students. Multimedia applications (installations in classrooms or studios for creative use and experimentation, in auditoriums and lecture halls for presentation purposes) will require support from experts in audio, video and digital media.

Forecasting the growth and demand for information technology applications and support will require ongoing detailed inventories of hardware and software and their usage by faculty, staff, and students.

Administrative Computing: The acquisition of the Quodata integrated system ensures a standard platform for the integration of applications in support of financial management, admissions, registration, development, alumni affairs and other operations. One-on-one training and orientation for administrative users of PCs has ensured a basic proficiency level in preparation for Quodata and standard Microsoft Office applications. The acquisition and integration of the Quodata system provides a critically important foundation for the kinds of data gathering and sharing that will be so necessary for college-wide planning and decision making in the future.

Student/Faculty Computing: Students are encouraged to purchase their own computers, using either the PC or Mac platform. Public computing resources are provided in the library, the science building, and the visual and performing arts building. The college has, we think sensibly, concentrated on providing computing

resources that supplement the student's basic word-processing needs, rather than duplicating them. Although faculty offices are connected to the backbone, the college has not been able to provide computers for faculty members.

Information and introductory programs at Orientation and registration periods have provided computing and Library service exposure for new students and parents, annually. We address additional training and support functions below.

The special support requirements for multimedia installations (limited presently, perhaps, to lab and studio environments) will require careful planning, the preparation of facilities (speakers, lighting, projectors), and the orientation of primary users (who will need to be sensitive to the integrated applications these facilities include). Multimedia usually places increased demand on computing and audiovisual support personnel.

Staffing and Coordination with Library: A computing and Library staff partnership is represented by a strong service-orientation and a willingness by all parties to consult and collaborate. The visiting team noted a high degree of concern among computing staff members for the support of the end user.

The personnel which so ably provide support services, currently, must be able to anticipate demand and plan for its future support. The help desk functions will be improved through a systematic training and oversight of student employees in the computing center. Cross training specified Library student employees and staff to ensure appropriate support and referral in the Library will also be advisable. An informal but deliberate fostering of expert users among academic and administrative departments would contribute to the timely support for users of special applications. At Bennington, like any institution, no single agency or service will be able to provide all the computing support desired by the end user.

Planning: The College's recent progress in information technology will likely encourage a corresponding increase in user demand which will exceed the capacities of present staff.

A comprehensive plan for information technology is needed. Such a plan will include the forecasting of administrative and academic usage, anticipating levels and varieties of this usage, and routinize the hardware and software replacement cycles as part of the operating budget process. The plan would represent a continuing discussion among academic and administrative constituents which ensures that institutional priorities for technology effectively represent the most important needs of the College.

Standard 8: Physical Resources

Bennington College occupies approximately 550 acres on its attractive main campus where there are 61 buildings. The college also has non-contiguous property in Shaftsbury and North Bennington. The campus buildings provide adequate space for current and projected academic needs. The Visual and Performing Arts Center (VAPA), Dickinson Science Building, and Tishman lecture hall are the classroom centerpieces of the campus. There appears to be no significant deferred maintenance in these buildings, and minor projects for the amelioration of the lesser problems are included in the Fiscal 2000 Deferred Maintenance program. An annual maintenance budget has been developed to make ongoing improvements in these and other campus buildings. There are no additional classroom buildings planned at this time.

The planned enrollment will exceed 600 students and current on campus housing is not sufficient for a student population of this size. A recent bond issue will provide funds for an additional 105 beds to meet the need for on campus housing. The area selected for construction is sufficiently large for another building housing 35 students if necessary. When the new housing is available certain improvements will be made to existing housing where deficiencies have been identified as enrollment grows to the expected level. The existing student houses have improved living rooms and bathroom and kitchen upgrades are ongoing. The three Barnes houses are not as functional as students would like and there are planned changes for these buildings. These improvements will be made within the budget set aside for deferred maintenance.

Major improvements to campus buildings will be made through fund raising since the college is at debt capacity. Commons is the primary focus of attention since it is at the center of campus and is at the core of student life. There are several interested donors for this project, which will likely be done in three phases because of the expected high cost. Preliminary plans are being developed for the Crossett Library expansion project and potential donors have been identified. Finally, plans are being developed for additional student recreation space on the campus, either a new building near the athletic fields or through the use of a building near the maintenance building.

In recent years the college has developed a campus master plan for buildings and a landscape plan as well. In addition there is a plan to overcome deferred maintenance as well as a plan to make infrastructure repairs and improvements. These activities will direct activities to improve an attractive campus with generally well maintained buildings.

Standard 9: Financial Resources

The Bennington College 1999 self-study includes an appraisal of financial resources: "Bennington's financial situation has improved markedly in relation to the pressing

circumstances caused by the accelerating enrollment declines during the early 1990's that culminated in the bottoming out of the undergraduate student population in fiscal years 1995 and 1996." Using Bennington itself as the unit of comparison, it is possible to identify several areas where improvement in financial condition has occurred and also to suggest that a measure of financial stability has been established. Yet from the larger perspective it is clear that Bennington College is weak financially and continues to have little margin for error in operations. This observation is not intended to diminish recognition of the steps taken to resolve the financial problems at Bennington, but to suggest that the road ahead remains very difficult.

The material provided to the team is adequate to develop an historical perspective regarding the Bennington financial tribulations of the recent past. However, the college appears to have adopted a financial strategy to re-establish itself at an enrollment in excess of 600 students, but this plan is prepared in a financial format that is not clearly articulated by program. This is particularly salient because the path chosen to establish financial equilibrium is built on a number of variables, each of which carries a relatively high element of risk: (1) Increasing the undergraduate enrollment by more than 33% from the current 450 students; (2) maintaining the unfunded aid discount at 36% or less; (3) increasing the annual fund by \$100k yearly from this year's \$1.4m; (4) maintaining a high level of major giving for the next several years, and (5) funding new capital projects through donations.

Over the past several years the Commission has expressed deep concern about a number of specific measures of financial condition at the college: net cash from operations; the change in unrestricted net assets; accounts receivable; accounts payable; expendable net resources to operations; expendable net resources to debt; long-term debt, and litigation risk.

Net cash from operations was positive for 1998 and 1999 after being negative in preceding years. Much of the increase derives from the receipt of pledges receivable and the use of proceeds from Bennington Bonds for capital expenditures, to repay bank debt and 1970 bond principal refinancing.. The institution acknowledged a deficit budget situation for FY 1999 and the role of Bennington Bonds in total college financial operations.

Unrestricted net assets are negative at (\$4.2m), down from (\$3.7m) in 1998 and at the same level as 1997 at (\$4.3m). Unrestricted net assets declined with the operating shortfall for the current year. Total assets have risen to \$8.8m because of temporarily and permanently restricted gifts and grants. Accounts receivable continue to rise at a rate which was previously thought to suggest a problem with collections. Receivables rose by more than 100% from 1997 to 1998 and another 88% from 1998 to 1999; however, the college has provided a schedule of accounts receivable at the balance sheet date for the past several years and this increase can be attributed to federal funds receivable in each year. Accounts payable were essentially stable over the past three years, standing at \$1.4m for the fiscal year ended June 30, 1999.

Two ratios were noted in previous evaluations: expendable resources to operations (primary reserve ratio), and expendable resources to debt (viability ratio). These ratios have both improved slightly because the computed expendable net assets, the numerator in the calculation, was better, albeit negative, each year beginning at (\$3.6m) in 1997, to (\$3.1m) in 1998, and finally (\$2.3m) in 1999. The amount for the latter year is heavily influenced by the growth in temporarily restricted net assets.

The primary reserve ratio is a measure of institutional reserves and answers the question, how long could the institution operate if all income stops. The standard is about five months, or 0.4:1, and the ratio is computed as expendable net assets/total expenses. For Bennington the trend is improving along with the change in expendable net assets, but the growth in total expenses in 1999 prevented this ratio from being a positive number. The three year trend begins in 1997 at (0.25), followed in 1998 by (0.21) and (0.15) in 1999. Obviously, Bennington's reserves are negligible given this commonly used measure, and while the trend is improving the continuing lack of financial cushion continues to be a cause for concern.

The viability ratio, expendable net assets/long-term debt, stood at (0.46) in 1999, an improvement over the (1.12) in 1997 and (0.69) in 1998. This ratio contrasts available resources to long-term debt at the balance sheet date. The trend is a good sign but the ratio remains well below relevant thresholds and continues to be an item of concern, particularly in view of the growth in long-term debt from \$3.2m to \$5.0m in the three previous years and the addition of \$8.2m in the current year.

The growth in long-term debt is problematic. In the first instance, the Bennington Bonds appear on the balance sheet as long-term debt and this is further explained in the notes to the financial statements. These bonds have been issued through June 30, 1999 at \$3.2m (net of a \$250k donation) with an authorized upper limit of \$8.5m. The Bennington Bonds were used to defease the 1970 and 1972 bond issues in order to proceed with the 1999 bond and this consumed most of the current outstanding commitment to purchase bonds. With only \$80k remaining available for working capital the college will need to rely on the bank line of credit should cash flow become a problem. Notwithstanding the hope that these bonds will be donations as they mature, the continuing opportunity to use the bond proceeds for operations and funding deficits permits borrowing long to meet short-term requirements. This adds significant risk to the institution, notably in 2003 when principal payments are scheduled to begin. While there is expressed optimism bond holders will make this debt charitable contributions, this is not a given.

Through the extreme period of financial difficulty the college borrowed heavily from its endowment. This action, along with Bennington Bonds, provided the cash the college needed to survive. The repayment of the Bennington Bonds is considered in projected budgets. There is no current plan to repay the endowment.

To this situation one must add another component, the recent \$8.2m bond issue for student housing and campus facilities. Annual debt service for this new debt will be \$540k beginning in 2001 and will rise to \$655k in 2004 when principal is added to the annual payment. This bond issue is considered "parity debt" where the increase in housing revenue will offset the added debt service requirement, but this is naturally tied to the objective of enrolling more than 600 students. Timing could be a problem if enrollment does not increase at the rate expected. With the recent increase in debt and the consequent rise in the debt service obligation, Bennington should not expect to rely on new debt to fund capital projects in the immediate future. While the college has indicated no desire to do so, the recent bond issue has no negative covenants or ratio-related restrictions limiting college action in that regard.

The risk posed by litigation is unclear at this time, but for an institution with no financial reserves this is necessarily a cause for concern. The notes to the financial statements include the judgment that "... the likelihood of an unfavorable uninsured outcome cannot be determined at this time."

Enrollment, it has been noted, should reach a minimum of 600 students to balance operating revenue and expense provided that annual fund revenues meet expectations. The growth in the number of new students has been steady, though slower than previously predicted, and appears to have been achieved in large part through a rising yield rate. In 1997, 27.2% of those accepted actually enrolled and this rate rose to 34.1% for the current year. To continue this pattern the projection is for a yield rate of 38.9% for next year, a rate that is quite high and appears to offer little opportunity for increase in the future. It is not clear if this rising yield is the result of changing admission standards, but the possibility this would hold for the future should be evaluated. While the intent to achieve an enrollment of 600 students is obvious, there appears to be no specific strategy to increase the number of applications for freshman and transfer admissions. The latter activity is essential to meet the desired minimum enrollment level of 600 students.

The college had planned a reduction in the discount rate (unfunded student aid) to 28% of tuition, room and board in 1996. The Commission's review in that year suggested this objective was not realistic and suggested a rate of 35%. Bennington's current plan and projection includes holding at 36%, a rate that appears manageable. For the current year the rate is 35%, the same as in the prior year. In 1996-1997 the rate was 38%. It appears that the institution is realistic in holding at the current rate, at least while the expanding national economy continues. What has not been evaluated is the relationship between discount and enrollment and the goal to exceed 600 students.

The balanced budget scenario mentioned above is contingent upon annual fund revenues meeting expectations. While the college is rightly proud of its fund raising efforts, the variability of unrestricted gifts could pose a problem in budget development and execution. For the most recent three years unrestricted gifts and

grants were \$1.1m (1997), \$3.4m (1998), and \$1.4m (1999). In addition, total gifts and grants spiked to \$6.5m in 1997 from \$2.0m in the preceding year. In 1998 the amount was \$5.3m followed by \$5.1m in 1999. The trend from \$6.5m to \$5.3m to \$5.1m should be evaluated since it could suggest a decline in future giving patterns.

To this outside team the greatest lack in the self study is a comprehensive financial and programmatic projection of the next five years. The "survival mode" that characterized recent decision making has been rather successful to this point and it is clear that college executive leadership is working well together. Bennington College has made the necessary changes in operations to stanch the outflow of cash and the ongoing financial decline of the institution. This present state of stability may be tenuous in view of the risky nature of the revenue assumptions noted earlier, and with the continuing ability to control expenses within the planned levels. Bennington remains weak financially by standard measures of financial condition and has little financial flexibility to respond to plans gone awry or to react to external events that constrain the financial assumptions. For these reasons, a comprehensive plan tied to budget can provide the necessary discipline and coherence for decision making over the coming crucial years.

Standard 10: Public Disclosure

In 1996, as part of the restructuring of the college, the communications office merged with the development office. The combined Office of Development and Communications is responsible for almost all of the college's publications and media relations, including publications related to admissions and alumni.

In the team's view, the publications of the college accurately portray the institution, giving an important picture of the educational mission and strengths and of the high degree of individual initiative expected of students in crafting their academic programs.

In the area of public relations, the college strives to get its message out to the media, and has been particularly straightforward with regard to its financial situation, the difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions that followed the *Symposium Report*, and the challenges it continues to face. It is particularly eager now, and reasonably so, to encourage its constituencies to see that the college has turned a corner and to look to the future rather than focusing on the time of the Report.

Two challenges that the college faces have to do with e-mail and internet representation of itself. The Bennington Web site is not yet optimally developed, and systems for routinely updating it and assuring that it always represents the college accurately are not fully in place. The college acknowledges this problem in the Self-Study and seems determined to address it in a timely way. The other challenge comes from the practice of having students communicate via e-mail with prospective students

in individual correspondences that may involve relatively large number of messages. It will be important for the college to be sure that, when these prospective students decide to attend Bennington, they do so on the basis of accurate information about the college and their opportunities there, and that nothing in the students' e-mails has been misleading in any way.

Standard 11: Integrity

The visiting team is confident that Bennington College represents itself with integrity in its dealings with students, faculty, administrators, alumni, trustees, and the public. Faculty and students enjoy an unusual level of freedom in teaching and learning. Administrators speak candidly about the college's challenges and about mistakes that have been made. We perceived a high level of trust throughout the institution.

There is also a level of optimism that critics might question, given the financial vulnerability of the institution. But the facts of that vulnerability are available to all who seek them, and the optimism is perhaps based upon the very real successes of the college, both over its history and, most of all, over the last few years.

Strengths and Concerns

Strengths

1. A passionately committed, engaged and knowledgeable Board of Trustees, which continues to initiate bold, if risky, incremental changes to strengthen the College's ability to fulfill its special mission in liberal arts education.
1. An extraordinarily engaged, articulate and experienced President actively involved in realizing the College's mission both internally and externally.
2. Leadership in the Business Office that has contributed to finding creative ways to respond to the financial crisis and to achieving financial and budgetary control.
3. An administrative team that works collaboratively and cohesively.
4. The level of engagement, commitment, passion, collegial cooperation, and willingness to think "outside the box" of the entire Bennington community during the period of crisis.
6. The *Plan Process*, which guides and tracks the students' development of their individualized Bennington education. The process is based upon carefully thought-out core educational values, and involves work with advisors, faculty committees, and the Dean's office. Now in its second year, the process enjoys what appears to be almost unanimous support from both students and faculty.
5. Commitment to the support of the arts, human, physical, technological.
7. Major steps taken by the college to improve the quality of student life, including administrative reorganization, new commitments to student activities, and residence hall renovations.
8. Planning for and execution of campus improvements. Campus buildings are generally well maintained and there is a plan to overcome the little deferred maintenance identified to date.
9. A strong and successful record in the areas of fundraising and development, which has produced impressive increases in the annual fund and major gifts from alumni and friends.

Concerns and Suggestions

1. The ongoing financial vulnerability of the institution. Bennington College is stable but weak financially, with little margin for error or to overcome adverse events. Planning remains close to the “survival” mode with an eye to the near term.
2. Critical issues of admissions and retention. The probability of meeting future admissions and financial aid goals depends upon understanding external market conditions as well as internal projections. Given the importance of admissions and retention to the college’s continued financial health, it will be important to develop a comprehensive enrollment management plan. Specific attention should be directed towards implementing strategic use of financial aid to maximize enrollment and net tuition revenue.
3. The mandate of the Faculty Review Committee is narrowly circumscribed and there is some anxiety regarding the possibility of “arbitrary” or “capricious” decisions about faculty appointments. We suggest that the College consider giving the committee fuller information about and involvement in decisions regarding lengths of contracts. The FRC has recommended that recommendation letters from previous reviews be included in candidates’ dossiers; this issue needs to be decided. There is also some concern about the appropriate ways to evaluate professional activity. A conversation between faculty and administration needs to take place on this issue as well, as the Self-Study acknowledges.
6. The Academic Policies Committee should clarify its goals and set an agenda which will engage the pressing questions about the design and delivery of the curriculum as a whole, the organization of faculty that can best create and maintain the Bennington curriculum, and the range of disciplinary appointments required to enable the fullest possible range of learning options for Bennington students.
4. The faculty and administration should address immediately the processes needed to develop a multi-year curriculum. As part of these processes, they should address questions of the evaluation of the curriculum, and of the students’ experiences and learning.
6. The Library should continue its responsible and efficient use of operating funds for the acquisition of resources, guided by the design and implementation of a comprehensive plan for collection development. This plan should have faculty input and ensure the strategic funding of electronic resources and both monographs and serials, in recognition of current and anticipated resource sharing agreements with other institutions. The plan should also enable the Library to determine the removal of space-consuming print materials from the present and overtaxed storage systems.

7. The College should consider developing a master plan for the renovation and expansion of the Crossett Library, addressing the configuration of space, projected growth of collections, the impact of electronic resources on this growth, provision for group use of resources and services, instruction of users in a space designed for multimedia, and, possibly, the accommodation of public computing facilities in other campus instructional facilities. This master plan, while addressing the present and increasingly urgent spatial constraints, would also represent a timely consideration of the importance of the Library as a center for cultural enrichment and individual and group study.
8. The goals of a Bennington education are not easily met in a community as homogeneous as this community is. While the recruitment of international students is laudable, the college needs to address much more seriously ways to increase diversity in students, faculty, administrators, and staff.
9. The college's ability to demonstrate institutional effectiveness at many levels continues to be weak. We are pleased to see efforts being made in the specification of information needed for institutional decision-making and planning in a number of administrative areas, but the ongoing inadequacy of an institutional research capacity, and of a mind-set for evaluating the consequences of actions, has pervasive negative effects throughout the institution. Throughout this report we have called for better collection and use of data in the evaluation of educational, student, and administrative activities and programs. We urge the college to move ahead now to understand better the outcomes of its own initiatives and to present a better documented picture of itself to its external constituencies.

Afterward

We think it appropriate to close this report with the words of one of our team members at the conclusion of our visit:

One of the most impressive aspects of the Bennington community is how it offers a valid academic sanctuary to students and faculty who are, for multifarious reasons, leading lives informed by the peculiar tyranny imposed by the outsider status of artists and thinkers in this society. This academic sanctuary of mountain and forest thrives on an appreciable freedom from restriction or boundary where everyone is thus a lion in the forest as opposed to being a lion in a backyard or an invisible but besieged lion in this society's egocentric materialism. This sanctuary is where the quaint preciousness of biologist/painter may study with a painter who loves trees. In this way these themes are exalted--trees, botany, stroke and color, and the poetic of awakening which we may assume is a pedagogical thesis.