

## Introduction

At its meeting of April 27, 1984, The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education placed Bennington College on warning status (Appendix B). In the letter informing Bennington of that action, the Commission asked that the College submit a report by October 1, 1984 with data relevant to applications, admissions, and enrollment, to the then pending lease-leaseback arrangement, to the College's financial status, and to the status of fundraising. In addition, the Commission scheduled an evaluation visit for the fall of 1985 to review the College's warning status. The report that follows was prepared for the focused evaluation visit scheduled for September, 1985.

In addition to those areas in which the College provided data for the October, 1984 report, the Commission asked the College to provide evidence of faculty and trustee involvement in academic program review and planning. Most specifically, the Commission found that conditions at Bennington jeopardized the College's ability to meet four standards, the relevant portions of which were cited as follows:

### Financial Resources:

"The institution should be financially stable. Its resources should be sufficient to carry out its objectives and adequately support its programs, now and in the foreseeable future."

### Organization and Governance:

"The authority and responsibilities of each organizational component of the institution (governing board, administrative officers, faculty, students, and other significant constituencies), together with the processes by which they function and interrelate, should be clearly described by means of a constitution or by-laws or some equivalent means. Provisions for the distribution of authority and responsibility should be depicted in a table of organization that represents the actual working order of the institution....The governing board is...responsible for sustaining the institution and its objectives; it should exercise ultimate and general control over its affairs..."

### Faculty:

"Provision should be made for regular and open communication among members of the faculty and between the faculty and administrative officers of the institution."

### Evaluation and Planning:

"The institution should have effective mechanisms for systematic self-evaluation and planning."

The following report contains Bennington College's response, not only to the specific areas of concern cited above, but to the Commission's statement that it was

"...deeply concerned that the maintenance of this [College's strength and vitality in many components of its academic program] is threatened by a rapidly deteriorating financial situation."

The text of this draft was generated by an ad hoc committee of three: Ronald L. Cohen (Dean of Faculty-Elect), Michael T. Rock (Dean of Faculty), and Rush Welter (Dean of Studies) in consultation with the President.

The report is organized according to the guidelines prepared by the Commission. Immediately following this introduction, there are sections devoted to an Institutional Overview, Areas of Focus, and Summary Appraisal and Plans; an appendix (Appendix A) including data on finances and enrollment follows.

#### Institutional Overview

Bennington College was founded in the context of the progressive education movement of the 1920's, which sought to break with the accumulated traditions of American education in order to promote individual growth and a broadly experimental attitude toward life in place of what its sponsors perceived as the stultifying effects of subject-matter learning conveyed by lectures and tested by formal examinations. In devising their plan for a new college, which was free to be innovative in part because it was designed for women students who could afford to be different in ways that career-oriented men could not, the founders enunciated a series of ten propositions that usually accompany any formal statement about the institution. Rather than reiterating them, however, we have chosen to identify what we take to have been a smaller number of operating principles that have characterized its operations and



influenced its policy decisions over five decades.

The primary operating principle of the College has been its commitment to encouraging students to treat learning as an active process of discovery aided but not dominated by their teachers. This principle has in turn generated a series of educational experiments intended to facilitate that process: students' responsibility for designing their own programs, fruitful and continuous contacts between faculty and students, the use of student projects both to document and to extend the students' grasp of the disciplines they are pursuing, the abolition of letter grades and the substitution of extended narrative reports on their work in progress.

The second operating principle, and the one for which Bennington is best known, is its equal respect for the arts with the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences. At Bennington these modes of coming to terms with experience are genuinely equal, and different decades have seen student programs emphasize different modes. Moreover, although its students have always tended to choose one part of one of these areas as the focus of their advanced studies, the best of them have typically juxtaposed disparate modes. Indeed, the college as an institution has employed a succession of measures to encourage them to do just this, for it has always recognized that they would have to live in a world that would present them with unpredictable opportunities and make unpredictable demands of them.

The third operating principle, which has emerged from the college's selection of active practitioners as teachers of its disciplines, is its commitment to critical intelligence both as the



core of its educational process and as the criterion by which it seeks to judge both its faculty and its students. One of the reasons it presses students to work seriously in disparate fields of study is that it seeks to deepen their grasp of the phenomena they deal with; another is to suggest how little able they are to do so if they take only a single approach to experience as a sufficient means for making sense of it. Bennington encourages the taking of risks in order to learn from the results, whether in the classroom, the studio, or the library.

As a result Bennington remains distinctive even though many institutions have copied many of its experiments--the introduction of the creative arts into the curriculum, the winter intersession, the giving of academic credit for practical experience, the use of seminars rather than didactic forms of instruction, the employment of practitioners as well as academics as teachers. The fact helps make both the faculty and the students reluctant to change their policies and practices; they feel that they have earned the right to follow the paths they do by the seriousness with which they have made their educational choices. In the past these attitudes have led the faculty to resist attempts to change the structure or the emphasis of the college, but during the past two years they have gradually acquiesced in the need to entertain changes in its organization and its educational design, and they seem to be prepared to cooperate with further changes if they are ways that do not simply disregard, rather than build on, their experience.

Certainly this was the way in which they dealt with the decision

of the college to become coeducational in 1969. They were divided between those who thought that it was imperative that Bennington become coeducational, whether for financial or social or political reasons, and those who felt that making such a drastic change would (as it were) unman the institution. In the event, however, they have rallied to the cause of educating men with the same seriousness and the same scrupulous attention to their needs as the college had previously displayed toward its women students. Their only sticking-point has been that they would not allow the men to convert the institution into a miniature version of graduate or professional school, thereby losing the experimental and elastic character that had made the college's education valuable for the women who attended it. The process of adjustment took some time, but we think it is fair to say that hardly anyone who teaches at or attends the college regrets either the change it went through or the process by which it felt its way to its present structure.

#### Areas of Focus

The Commission's May 3, 1984 letter to President Hooker asked the College to include several kinds of evidence in its report for the focused evaluation scheduled for September, 1985. As requested, the College submitted an interim report on September 26, 1984 that addressed, and included data, on the following matters:

applications, admissions, and enrollment; the lease/leaseback arrangement; the College's financial condition; and the status of

fundraising. In the present report, we will be addressing these areas as well as providing evidence of "faculty and trustee involvement in academic program planning and review." Rather than devote separate sections to these areas, we have decided to incorporate the central portion of our responses to all the issues raised in the present section.

The College has been asked to respond to four areas of focus: financial resources, organization and governance, faculty, and evaluation and planning. Each will be addressed in turn. However, we should emphasize at the outset that the material relevant to each of these specific foci may also be found in our response to the others.

#### Financial Resources

The 1978 visiting committee criticized the pattern of minimal management at Bennington which resulted in a largely unsystematic and discontinuous approach to reporting and record keeping. By 1983, a visiting committee was able to report that, "The College now has in place a sound and capable management structure well able to cope with the problems...of the years ahead..." Despite the significant improvement in managerial capabilities, the 1983 Committee was concerned that the College's resources were not sufficient "...to carry out its objectives and adequately support its programs, now and in the foreseeable future." That issue is addressed here.

Improvements in management structure and capabilities have made the senior management team acutely aware of the College's precarious



financial condition. Once recordkeeping and accounting practices became routinized, the senior team turned to the development of a medium term financial strategy designed to secure the College's financial viability. Identification of that strategy was aided by the development of a management information system in admissions and financial aid, computerization of the budget system, and the development of a linear (historical) projection model. The projection model was used to assess our medium term financial viability and to identify a policy/(action) package. A status quo projection (Appendix C, Table I) revealed that we could not continue to operate as is in the medium term (five years) unless our short term debt was permitted to grow to approximately \$17 million. (The model reflected the College's practice of covering the difference between revenues and expenses by short term borrowing.) By extrapolating historical trends we identified the following problems:

1. The College had developed an expenditure base which it could not sustain, except by short-term borrowing. The primary problem was capital expansion which was not adequately funded in the middle 1970's.

2. Endowment income contributed minimally to expenses (2% in 1983-84). Even rapid growth (30% per year) would leave the endowment contribution to expenses at a low level (5% by 1988-89). This suggested that endowment growth was not likely to play a significant role in a medium-term strategy.

3. Two revenue categories--student fees and annual (cash) gifts--provided 93% of revenues, yet it looked as if it would be

difficult to continue to increase both. With respect to student fees, a stagnant applicant pool and a burgeoning institutional financial aid budget pointed toward declining marginal returns to fee increases. In the basic projection, a continuation of past trends indicated a strong possibility that marginal returns would be negative, (that is, net student fee income would decline over time). On the gifts side, the College was heavily dependent on trustee giving and a small number of large donors. The former was probably not sustainable while the latter left the College vulnerable to substantial year-to-year fluctuations unless the base could be broadened.

4. The historical growth in the College's institutional financial aid budget posed a serious threat to the near term future. Institutional aid as a percentage of gross student fees was increasing at 16% per year and could reach 50% of gross fees within three years.

5. A closer examination of budget practices revealed several additional problems.

a. An historical practice of overestimating revenues and underestimating costs worked to hide underlying budget realities.

b. The educational program was seriously underfunded. There were too few faculty in several key areas, there was no ongoing capital support program for educational equipment, faculty salaries were deteriorating, and the library was inadequate and rapidly deteriorating.

c. The physical plant was undermaintained and subject to

unexpected breakdowns. There was inadequate provision in the budget for capital repair and resulting breakdowns routinely added \$100,000 to \$200,000 in unbudgeted expenses.

d. Although the administration had grown substantially, additional expenditures would be required in admissions and development. The process of professionalizing the administration had to be quickened.

### The Strategy

Based on this assessment of the problem, we adopted a policy package which assumed that:

1. We would be unable to cover expenses out of normal revenues for three years. The difference would have to be met either by restructuring short-term borrowing (lease-leaseback) or increasing our short-term line of credit.

2. Despite the diseconomies of scale in the administration, the educational program, and maintenance, we would have to adopt an austerity program which contained cost increases and, where possible, reduced expenditure levels. We assumed that efforts in admissions and development would require additional financing, so the austerity program would have to focus on personnel costs (salary freezes), the instructional program, and those areas in administration and maintenance which seemed less critical.

3. By adopting a more aggressive and "mainstream" admissions marketing strategy we could significantly increase the applicant pool within three years.



4. We could significantly slow the rate of growth in the institutional financial aid budget.

5. By investing substantial resources in development we could simultaneously increase annual cash gifts and build an endowment.

We were aware that the policy package required effective political skills and substantial success in a large number of areas. After reviewing alternatives, we settled on a policy package identified above and developed, in a five-year plan (Appendix C, Table II) the requirements to meet it. Our best estimate indicated that we would need approximately \$5.5 million in short-term credit. Chittenden Trust accepted our proposal and five year plan and committed a \$5,500,000 credit line. In admissions, we changed staff, redesigned our publications, expanded our recruitment efforts along traditional lines, and developed a management information system for assessing progress. In financial aid, we hired a consultant to assess current practices, considered the adoption of a merit aid program, capped the aid budget at 30% of gross student fees for planning purposes, and computerized the aid data base to increase managerial control. In development, we hired a seasoned professional, expanded budget support, separated the annual fund from the alumni office, built a professional public relations office, and established the structure for a mini-capital campaign. On the cost containment side, we froze salaries for two years, level funded the educational program, and increased productivity in maintenance while we were providing increased budget support to admissions, development, and data base management.

## The Present

A preliminary performance assessment of our strategy undertaken in fiscal 1985, revealed that operating expenses were \$95,000 under budget, while revenues were \$277,000 over budget with an operating result of \$372,000 better than budget. This surplus was offset by greater outlays in capital items and loan reduction and delay in selling part of the art collection. This was the consequence of:

1. Despite the freezing of salaries, we were unable to implement all of the elements in our cost-cutting program.
2. Although we were able to meet the institutional aid goal for 84-85 (we actually exceeded it as institutional aid expenses were 29% of fees against a budget of 30%), data for 85-86 showed that we would probably have to increase the aid budget to 33.8% of fees to maintain enrollment.
3. Despite the recovery in the applicant pool (a 26% increase over 83-84) and an increase in the yield on full pay applicants from 30% to 37%, our enrollment will be smaller than projected. (Assuming that attrition holds at the five-year average, 85-86 enrollment will be 510 versus a planned 530.)
4. Endowment growth fell short of projections, however, we are confident that it is more a matter of time to attain a substantial endowment.

In preparing for the 1985-86 budget year, it was clear that we needed to adjust our goals and find additional cash to cover short-term needs within the Chittenden line of credit. In a revised plan for 1985-86, as directed by the Board, we undertook a major cost

reduction program and an asset deacquisition program (Appendix C, Table III). This plan will enable us to meet the year's financial needs within permissible limits provided by the Chittenden credit line.

Despite significant improvements in our ability to hold the line on expenses and to improve performance in admissions and development (Appendix C, Tables IV and V), those efforts were not sufficient to provide secure medium term financial viability. In a revised five year plan (Appendix C, Table VI) the aid budget was permitted to grow, enrollment expectations were reduced, the rate of growth of endowment was cut back, cash gift expectations were revised, a major change in the student faculty ratio was assumed and a campaign to retire the Chittenden debt in two years was projected. If successful in these areas, the College's medium-term future seems secure. But the ultimate success of these efforts will require a mobilization of the entire Bennington community (including alumni and parents of current students). We are now in the early stages of mobilizing the community.

#### Organization and Governance

The relevant sections of this standard were cited in the Commission's action of April 27, 1984 and are reproduced in the introduction to this report. The 1983 report of the Evaluation Team had called attention to structural problems in governance and to the need for the College's Board of Trustees to exhibit "not only a greater degree but also a different kind of involvement..." We begin



our response to this area of concern with a discussion of the way in which the Board has responded. For more detailed information, we refer the Team to the accompanying Trustees' Report (Appendix D).

#### The Trustees

Three major changes have occurred over the past year that speak directly to the changes in the Board's involvement in the College. First, at the direction of its Chairman, the Board created an Ad Hoc Committee on Trustee Role and Governance which produced a report on March 21, 1985. That report proposed, and the Board subsequently adopted resolutions, concerning the recruitment and terms of service of Board members, the orientation of new members of the Board, the internal structure of the Board, and the scheduling of meetings. Most directly relevant to the Commission's concern with organization and governance is the Board's internal restructuring.

The Board reorganized itself into four standing committees, with each trustee serving on one: Academic Affairs, Admissions, and Financial Aid; Budget and Finance; Campus Facilities and Community Life; and Development and Alumni Affairs. Most importantly, and most relevant to the matter of collaboration among constituencies to be addressed more fully below, meetings of these committees are to be open to students and faculty for observation and participation. The process for ensuring faculty participation has already begun through meetings this past term between the Trustee Committee on Budget and Finance and the Budget Committee of Academic Council (see below). The Chairman of the Board has asked for nominees from the President and the Dean of the Faculty who might serve as members of each of these four trustee committees; processes for ensuring effective student participation are currently being devised.

The second major change that has occurred in the past year is the direct participation of the Board in the detailed planning of budgetary expenditures for 1986-86. At its April, 1985 meetings the Board adopted a series of resolutions (see exhibit G of Trustees Report in Appendix D) related to budgetary preparations. These resolutions included provisions for the planning and sale of some College assets, and the setting of parameters within which the operating budget for 1985-86 would be devised. After passage of these resolutions, the Chairman of the Board explained them to the community at large at a Community Meeting, and met with the faculty in Faculty Meeting to explain and discuss them. In addition, these budgetary parameters provided the context within which the Budget Committee of Academic Council, the College's administration, and the

academic divisions struggled to produce the details of a sensible operating budget for 1985-86.

Two specific examples of our experience with these resolutions, and the changed nature of the Board's involvement, will illustrate both how far we have come, and what more we have to learn. One of the resolutions put an absolute ceiling on the amount available for operations. The administration presented an initial proposal for internal allocation of the available funds to the Budget Committee of Academic Council. After several weeks of discussions and debate, a proposal for this internal allocation was agreed to by the Council and the administration, and forwarded to the Board. Stringent parameters worked well to provide the context within which the faculty and the administration, working through Academic Council, collaborated to produce a budget responsive to the College's overall financial situation and to the need to preserve the integrity of the curriculum.

Another resolution put an absolute ceiling on the amount of financial aid that could be offered to any entering student. This was part of a longer-term strategy to reduce the percentage of increase in financial aid overall, and the hope was that the College would thereby be able to provide a more solid base for its financial viability. Our experience for this year (at least) suggests that by limiting financial aid in the way the resolution required, we reduced our net revenues from student fees by approximately \$90,000. This year's experience will no doubt be useful in future budgetary planning.

The third major change involved the establishment of an Ad Hoc



Committee on the Agenda for 1985 and beyond. Realizing its responsibilities for a different kind of involvement in setting parameters for yearly budgetary planning, the Board also realized the necessity of its direct involvement in long-term planning. This Ad Hoc Committee produced a report on April 11, 1985 (see Exhibit F in Trustee Report) which addresses issues relevant to the College's mission and its continuing ability to carry it out.

In these three major ways, and in several other important ways, the Board has attempted to make clearer, both for the Commission and for itself, its responsibility for "sustaining the institution and its objectives" and the necessity that it demonstrate the ability to "exercise ultimate and general control over its affairs." The changes that have already been adopted, and those that are still being explored, are important both because they demonstrate the Board's intention to exercise the authority and responsibility it has, and because they demonstrate the Board's recognition that part of its responsibility involves raising questions central to the College's viability and providing an institutional context in which the various constituencies can participate in addressing them.

#### The Administration

The 1983 visiting team report referred to a number of issues concerning the College's administration. It expressed concern about turnover in key administrative personnel and about the nature of the relationship between the administration and the faculty. It is difficult to separate consideration of these two issues. Indeed, so closely are they related that, in its section on Administration and

Governance, the 1983 team referred to the "still substantial isolation between administration and faculty," and the letter of May, 1984 cited that portion of the Commission's standards on the Faculty which referred to the need for "regular and open communication among members of the faculty and between faculty and administrative officers of the institution" (emphasis added). So the discussion we begin here will speak both to the issue of turnover and to the issue of the relationship between faculty and administration. On both these matters, we can report substantial changes that we see as crucial steps toward remedying the "fragmentation and lack of coherence among the several constituencies within the institution."

#### Administrative Turnover

One of the concerns expressed by the Accreditation Committee was the apparent instability of the administration of the college, to which it attributed some of the institution's difficulties in establishing and maintaining effective management of its operations. We have two kinds of responses to this concern. On the one hand, we acknowledge that there does not seem to be the stability of operations that is characteristic of more traditional colleges, and of course the lack of stability hinders effective management of revenues and expenditures, while the weaknesses in management work to undermine such stability as the institution may attain. On the other hand, we do not agree that turnover in the administration is the real cause of the institution's difficulties.

Bennington's presidents have traditionally maintained the existing administrative structure and personnel at least until they

had achieved a grasp of the ways in which the college worked; in this sense, they have made a point of maintaining continuity even when it may have worked against their best interests as presidents. So, too, it is worth noting that Bennington is such a small institution, and its administration so small by comparison with other liberal-arts colleges, that unpredictable events like the death of a dean create abrupt changes in personnel and also in policy orientations.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Committee's sense that every new president should be free to appoint his own men (or women) as deans and other administrators stands at odds with the idea of continuity it also champions. To the extent that Bennington relies on agreed principles of operation and lore rather than legalisms for its success in enlisting faculty cooperation, in fact, it is necessary that the president rely on incumbent officers when he arrives, and change them only when he has a better idea of what he expects them to do. For all these reasons we are inclined to believe that Bennington's administrative turnover is not as much of an issue as the Committee was led to believe.

Oddly enough, the college is the more vulnerable to the charge of instability in the administration now than it was at the time the Committee drafted its report. Between January 1 and December 31 it will have witnessed the resignations of the Vice President for Finances, the Dean of the Faculty, the Dean of Studies, and the Director of Computer Operations. Each of these events has been caused by important personal considerations that could hardly have been avoided, and taken all together they have caused a considerable hiatus in the operations of the college. On the other hand, the same



combination has also increased the president's opportunities, not only to appoint persons of his own choosing to these offices, but also to launch the kind of reorganization of the college that its financial predicaments and educational bad habits make necessary. As always at Bennington, the structure of the administration is really less important than the persons who fill the particular positions.

In these terms the recent replacements of both the Dean of the Faculty and the Dean of Studies, which might seem to threaten the stability of the institution, should also prove to be a vehicle for necessary change. Each of the new deans is an experienced member of the faculty who has served on its major committees, and each is acutely aware of the critical situation in which the college finds itself. Indeed, each has made himself persona non grata to the administration of the college in the past by his sharp criticisms of some of its major decisions. It is to President Hooker's credit that he felt able to name these two men to these important posts--and to their credit that they have risen above previous expressions of hostility to the administration to try to help the college come to terms with the problems they had previously only deplored.

The new deans are also committed to playing a more active role in managing the operations of the institution. This is not to say that they can expect to dominate or even to lead the faculty all of the time; but they will try the experiment of making use of powers and exerting pressure that their predecessors tended to leave untouched. By the same token, they offer serious hope for overcoming the fragmentation of the college into autonomous and often competing divisions or departments, not by building on the device of appointive

divisional secretaries suggested by a previous Accreditation Committee, which the faculty have consistently criticized for a mixture of good and bad reasons, but by influencing the framework in which policy decisions are debated, whether in committees, in divisions, or in full faculty meetings. In short, they hope to revive the common institutional commitment on which the effective operation of a college like Bennington depends no matter how it organizes its administrative procedures.

We must admit that the selection of these two new deans was in part a coincidence, which we cannot argue that the college is likely to repeat. According to present policies, the president is required to choose his deans from a list of three persons nominated by weighted secret ballot of the faculty. We hold that the nominating procedure is indispensable to providing for any sort of cooperation between administration and faculty. If Bennington imitates the conventional administrative practices of other colleges, it will undoubtedly destroy not simply the morale but the personal commitment of making Bennington work on which the day-to-day success of the college depends. In this sense, the institution is not presented with a choice between an anarchic system of management and an alternative system that solves all problems by structural means; it has no real choice if it is to retain the faculty vitality that is its major asset.

#### The Faculty

An important portion of the 1985 Evaluation Team's report called attention to the "limited effectiveness of any collective faculty

action on curriculum and other academic issues" which led it to judge that "in its academic activities the College is essentially unmanaged." To remedy this, the team suggested:

The College needs effective collaboration between faculty and administration in defining priorities for the institution, in finding optimal ways of dealing with continuing change in external and internal conditions in ways which are consistent with its basic goals, and in making the necessary choices and decisions. Following shortly on the receipt of this report and the

Commission's action of May, 1984, President Hooker reconstituted the Faculty Educational Policies Committee as an ad hoc committee to consider alternative forms of organization and governance. That committee presented an initial report of its deliberations and recommendations to the faculty as a whole for the first time on October 31, 1984. This proposal was discussed and vigorously debated in subsequent faculty meetings. The ad hoc committee finally returned to re-draft its proposal in response to the faculty's considerations and suggestions. The final proposal for creation of an Academic Council was presented to the faculty as a whole on November 21, 1984 and was established by vote of the faculty on November 28, 1984 (Appendix E).

The Academic Council both replaces the prior Faculty Educational Policies Committee and broadens and deepens its authority. The Council consists of seven members of the faculty elected at large (with the stipulation that no more than two be elected from any one of the College's seven academic divisions), three students elected by the student body from among those students who have had their academic proposals (tentative plans for advanced work) approved by the College, the Dean of Studies, the Dean of Faculty, and the



President. Of the seven faculty members elected at large, three are elected to membership on the Budget Committee, with special responsibilities for formulating and considering both yearly budgets and longer-range budgetary and financial planning. This Budget Committee meets with the Academic Council, but also meet separately to gather information and to make proposals to the Council as a whole. The Dean of Faculty meets with this Budget Committee, and the President chairs meetings of the Council as a whole.

The Academic Council serves as the executive committee of the faculty as a whole, but as its structure suggests, it provides the basis for regular contact and effective collaboration between faculty and administration. The primary responsibilities of the Council include the making of educational policy, consulting on the preparation of yearly budgets and considering the development of long-range financial planning, and conceiving, developing, and evaluating the College's curriculum.

While this new governance structure was approved by the faculty on November 28, 1984, an unfortunate error in the initial election procedure prevented the Council from being seated until several weeks after the beginning of the Spring Term, 1985. Thus, our evaluation of the new governance structure and its work is based on the performance of the Council during that Term and on its work through the summer of 1985 on this report.

Because the ad hoc committee established by the President addressed all of its attention to the proposal that eventually established the Council, the day-to-day business previously a portion of the function served by the Faculty Educational Policies Committee

was laid aside. Thus, save for minor, housekeeping functions which were performed, the major curricular, educational policy, and budgetary decisions that the Council must ultimately make have tended to accumulate. As a result, the Council has been faced with a backlog of important decisions as well as the necessity of sensing its way through a governance structure new to the College.

On balance, the Council has worked extremely well. Because of the College's current financial situation, the operating budget for 1985-86 had to be reduced substantially, and the development of a proposal to reduce instructional expenses fell to the Budget Committee of the Council. Most of the Council's time and energies during the Spring Term, 1985 was taken up with the development of a proposal to reduce instructional expenses, along with the reduction of expenses in other areas of the College's operations. The Budget Committee collected information from the Dean of Faculty, the Vice-President for Finance and Administration, and the academic divisions. It met with secretaries of the seven academic divisions to determine how to reduce costs in such a way as to do least harm to the curriculum and the College's overall educational program. After lengthy and often heated discussions, the Budget Committee proposed, and the Academic Council and administration agreed to an instructional budget for 1985-86 that met the constraints imposed by the College's Board of Trustees at its April, 1985 meetings, and did so in a way that augurs well for the future of the Council and the College.

In the structure it now assumes, in the responsibilities it has, and in the initial indications of the way in which it operates, the

creation of the Academic Council responds in an effective and direct way to many of the concerns in this area raised by the Commission. In one of its summary sentences, the Commission "urged" the "Faculty Educational Policy Committee /to/ assume a more active role in speaking for the Faculty as a whole, and as the instrument of the faculty in the systematic and thorough review and evaluation of the College's programs and policies." The Council is well on its way to doing precisely that.

In spite of this substantial progress and its positive implications for the future, the College has not been as effective in its response to another concern in this area expressed by the Commission. Referring to the academic divisions and their internal organization, the Commission noted that "there needs to be, between the administration and the individual faculty members, an organizational level occupied by persons who are more than "conveyors of communications and conveners of meeting." It noted the then-recent, and abortive, efforts to increase the length of office of divisional secretaries, and suggested the College review not only the role of those secretaries but the entire divisional structure.

In two ways the College has responded to these concerns. It has reduced the number of academic divisions by merging the Black Music Division and the Music Division. It has also regularized weekly meetings of all divisional secretaries with the Dean of Faculty, and at times the President, to discuss College-wide issues and concerns. While the College has not yet succeeded in moving to a version of divisional chairs instead of secretaries, the new and regular process of consultation and discussion has begun to break down divisional



isolation and to bring other faculty members to recognize institutional needs that must sometimes take precedence over divisional or personal imperatives. In some ways, bringing divisional secretaries face-to-face with real, if as yet relatively minor, problems may prove as important in creating genuine possibility for creative change as will the structuring of academic governance more grandly attempted through the Academic Council.

In spite of these changes, the new Academic Council itself has not yet had the time to consider the possibilities of rethinking the overall structure of divisions. However, the issue is clearly an important one. As a consequence of the Commission's report, and as a response to the College's financial situation, the Board of Trustees has created a College Wide Task Force to consider plans that would restructure the College. These plans are in a very early stage of development, though we realize that thorough consideration of them cannot unduly slow that process. In addition, since re-structuring clearly must be organized by further decreases in costs, the process must be thought through carefully, responsibly, and with the opportunity for serious input from, and the cooperation of, all the College's constituencies: trustees, faculty, administration, staff, students, alumni.

#### Evaluation and Planning

The visiting committee from the New England Association eight years ago commented on the College's need to develop a capacity for long range planning and evaluation. In response to that charge, the College adopted a number of changes in administrative practices which

were outlined in the College's 1983 self study document and which worked to enhance the ability of the College to evaluate the present and plan for the future. Since then, enhanced capacities in recordkeeping, budgeting practices, and long range planning efforts in maintenance have been supplemented by the establishment of a Retention Committee charged with assessing and evaluating the reasons for student attrition and devising interventions to reduce it, where appropriate; the creation of a computerized data base management system for administrative purposes, especially in admissions and financial aid; and the systematic use of a financial projection model for assessing medium term financial viability. While these essentially administrative mechanisms bring the College a step closer to having an effective institutionalized mechanism for self-evaluation and planning, several problems remain:

1. Systematic institutional research has not, as yet, been institutionalized within the College's decision-making structures. Much of the research that has been undertaken over the past several years has been ad hoc in nature and limited in scope. Moreover, efforts to establish a separate office for institutional research and planning or to integrate it within existing offices have been constrained by budgetary pressures.

2. More importantly, the most trenchant criticisms of the last visiting committee were directed not at institutionalizing research and data gathering efforts within the administration but rather at,

"...the faculty's fundamental and long standing disinclination to work collaboratively with the administration in institutional self-evaluation and planning." And with a concern,

"...whether the College's governing Board is (was) sufficiently aware of the severity of the College's problems and appropriately involved in the search for solutions."

Fortunately, a series of actions over the past 18 months by the faculty and the trustees suggest that the College community has begun to develop the necessary cooperative mechanisms on which systematic evaluation and planning can be based. With respect to the faculty, at the urging of the president, the faculty, after much debate, fashioned an executive committee (the Academic Council) of the faculty charged with,

"...considering all questions of educational policy..." and  
 "...review(ing)...expenses". "...with the Budget and Finance Committee of the Board of Trustees."

As mentioned in the section of this report on the faculty, the Academic Council, did, this past spring, work in concert with the administration under Board direction to reduce the 1985-86 operating budget so that the College would not exceed its credit line with the Chittenden bank. With respect to the Board, the Trustees reorganized themselves into a smaller number of working committees and they have made regular provision for faculty and student participation at Board meetings (see Appendix D). Moreover, this past Spring, the Board adopted a series of budget resolutions for 1985-86 which defined fundraising goals, limited expenditures, and mandated that the budget deficit fall within the College's existing revolving line of credit.

More recently, these actions have been extended to the creation of a College-wide Task Force to reconsider the future of the college in light of existing resources. Medium term budget forecasts strongly suggested that the College would be unable to maintain its



current academic program with resources now seen as reasonably available. As a result the Board of Trustees Executive Committee has directed a Task Force to prepare a proposal for the October board meeting which is consistent with budget realities and is reflective of the College's historical mission as a progressive liberal arts college. While it is too early to predict the ultimate success of these efforts, it is clear that the entire college community has finally been mobilized to address the threats to the College's educational integrity posed by its financial crisis.

#### Summary and Appraisal

Since the 1978 New England Association's visiting committee, it would appear that the college has taken a number of important steps to redress past deficiencies. The administration of the college has been significantly strengthened and professionalized and as evidenced by the 1983 committee's comments, the college now has "A capable management structure to cope with the problems it faces." More importantly, after some difficulty, the faculty and trustees have responded to the concerns of previous visiting committees. At presidential request, the faculty, after much debate, created an executive committee of the faculty to work in concert with the administration and the trustees to address the college's problems. The successful effort, this past spring, at budget cutting augurs well and suggests that the faculty is willing to assume its role as an equal partner with the administration and the board in systematic self-evaluation and planning. Similarly, the actions of the Board of

Trustees over the past 18 months indicate the Board's full awareness of the severity of the College's problems and its involvement in the search for appropriate solutions. But this is not to say that difficult problems do not remain. As the college's financial predicament reveals, the mobilization of the Bennington community comes not a moment too soon. It is not clear that either a nascent Academic Council or a newly resolute Board can successfully navigate the difficult course ahead, but it is clear that the College is in a better position to do so than it has been in the past.