

# Bennington College • Bennington • Vermont • 05201 • 802:442-5401

Office of the President

March 2, 1970

Dear Parents,

Bennington College has a drug problem. There is no reason to believe our situation is any different in kind or extent from that on all other leading college and university campuses. Nevertheless, I want you to know what our drug policy is and I ask your help in meeting the problem.

Our student handbook carries the following statement:

Drugs and Liquor: In these matters, as in most other matters concerning the law, the College attempts to leave to the individual student's judgment and sense of responsibility his or her own relationship to the law. However, where the use or abuse of alcohol or drugs interferes with a student's health, or significantly limits his capacity to fulfill his educational commitments or interferes with the health, safety or well being of other members of the college community, appropriate action will be taken by an administrative officer or the Judicial Committee.

Stating a policy is one thing, enforcing it is another. As you know, our educational philosophy encompasses the view that students must assume primary responsibility for their own social lives on campus. One consequence of this principle is that we have no house masters or house mothers. This same principle precludes administrative inspections for the purpose of detecting the possession or use of drugs. Finally, in the light of this same principle and other of our fundamental educational beliefs, we cannot countenance the use of undercover agents on campus.

Under the circumstances, our chief recourse is to provide students with factual information and counseling of various kinds and to keep channels of communication open in the hope this will assist them in arriving at responsible decisions and behavior. As you might well realize, however, the impact of such efforts in the contemporary climate of student opinion is probably, at best, limited. That is why I seek your help.

Perhaps you have already had the occasion to talk to your son or daughter about the use of drugs. If you have not, or if another talk might serve

a purpose, I urge you to discuss the question before our spring term begins.

Ask for the same honesty your son or daughter expects from you. Talk about the motivation, pressures and inducements to use drugs, about the pleasures and releases in their use, and about the medical, psychological and legal consequences. Finally, I would suggest you reaffirm emotional support so necessary in helping young people cope with the problem drugs pose.

Let me add a word concerning my personal view of this matter. I believe that so-called "hard drugs", e.g., LSD, "speed", mescaline, heroin and cocaine, are so harmful as to be subject to rigid social control and prohibition. I also believe, however, that we as a society have perpetrated a grave error in making the use of marijuana criminal in the way we have. On the best evidence available to me, this drug is non-addictive and is less physiologically harmful, less fattening and less costly than alcohol. An adult society which suffers the depredations from alcohol and cigarettes which ours does cannot afford, it seems to me, to be sanctimonious about college students smoking "pot". The consequence of our being so is that we have forced an extraordinarily high percentage of our students (a recent Gallup Poll estimates a nationwide figure of 32 per cent) into regarding themselves as criminals of sorts for even having tried marijuana; we have greatly enhanced and exacerbated generational conflict; and we have helped to create a drug sub-culture in which experiments with and access to really dangerous drugs become more and more likely.

In spite of these views concerning marijuana, I believe there are at least five good reasons for not using it: (1) Sale, use and possession of marijuana are subject to severe criminal penalties; (2) Use of marijuana sometimes induces a psychological dependency in the same way alcohol does and a "pot-head" is as great a personal and social disaster as an alcoholic; on rare occasions, it induces states of confusion and psychotic episodes; (3) Marijuana is often sold by crass businessmen or venal criminals who have a strong vested interest in inducing use of really dangerous drugs; (4) Marijuana is sometimes sold by unscrupulous or ignorant people who treat it with other drugs and thereby create a drug of unknown and sometimes dangerous potential; (5) Marijuana is often used in a social setting characterized by very strong peer pressure and high order suggestibility and tending to induce experimentation with very harmful drugs.

The problem we as a college and the community at large face is a most serious one. In some respects, I liken this period to the period of prohibition, marked as it is by widespread disrespect for a law which is unwise, unjust and virtually unenforceable and by the consequent growth of a sub-culture which finds a source of pride in its alienation and its

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disobedience to law. We at the College are attempting to face up to this problem as directly and honestly as we know how. I hope you will help us by raising the issue in this same spirit with your son or daughter.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "E. Bloustein".

Edward J. Bloustein  
President

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