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December 7, 1994

Dr. Elizabeth Coleman
President
Bennington College
Bennington, VT 05201

Dear President Coleman:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on November 18, 1994, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action in regard to Bennington College:

that action on the accreditation of Bennington College be deferred;

that the College submit a report on its finances and enrollment by December 1, 1995 for consideration in Spring, 1996;

that an evaluation be scheduled for Spring, 1996, focusing on the College's success in the following areas:

1. reinvigorating the academic life of the institution in order to enhance the academic quality of the undergraduate experience;
2. ensuring that the faculty is sufficient to carry out the institution's recently redefined educational objectives and that it appropriately participates in educational policy-making and institutional governance;
3. improving the quality of student life;

that the scheduling of the next comprehensive evaluation be determined based on the Commission's findings following the focused evaluation.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

Since the time of the evaluation visit, the institution has embarked upon many significant changes in its academic structure and, as a result, the nature and role of the faculty. Clearly, the institution has developed a compelling, creative and interesting design for its academic structure. We understand that the College is busily at work implementing the various aspects of this redesign. Just as much has happened subsequent to the team visit, so too much remains to be done. For that reason the Commission voted to defer action on the accreditation of the College. Through the Fall, 1996 report and visit, we look forward to having the opportunity to be apprised of the institution's progress in implementing these significant changes. During the period in which action is deferred, the College remains in accredited status.

We realize that a fundamental purpose of this bold reorganization is to reverse the long-standing financial conditions confronting the institution. That the College has had the fortitude to take these significant steps is most commendable. Unquestionably, the institution has charted a demanding course of action, one which requires hard work and possibly luck. We wish to stress that the institution needs to carefully plan and manage its resources as well as secure substantial new external resources. We are pleased to note that the College has established enrollment and financial goals and we wish to monitor the institution's success in achieving these goals through the 1995 report. We ask that the report include a clear and detailed financial plan for achieving its goals, addressing in particular needed fundraising efforts as well as provisions for dealing with contingencies as they may arise. In completing the report, the College should follow the form indicated in the accompanying procedural statement.

The areas identified for the focused report and evaluation in Spring, 1996, are matters which the Commission wishes to monitor as the College continues to move forward in implementing its future direction. We note that the College has taken very deliberative steps to restructure the academic organization of the institution in an effort to effectively accomplish its mission and purposes. The Symposium Report abounds in well-articulated concepts and ideas. The College has accepted an enormous challenge for itself. It appears to be working hard and has created a clear map for moving ahead. These noteworthy efforts notwithstanding, the actual implementation of the redesign remains to be seen as do the ramifications of that implementation. As the College continues to pursue its goals, it should be mindful of the following components of our standards. The standard on *Programs and Instruction* states that the institution's "programs have a coherent design and are characterized by appropriate breadth, depth, continuity, sequential progression, and synthesis of learning" (4.3). Moreover, our standards emphasize the importance of the College undertaking realistic academic planning and evaluation which takes into account "stated goals and available resources" (*Programs and Instruction*, 4.4). Such planning and evaluation efforts should include reviewing the coherence and substantiveness of the institution's general education requirement (*Programs and Instruction*, 4.15, 4.17).

Key to the successful implementation of the Symposium are the faculty. The Symposium endeavors to establish firmly the role of the teacher practitioner as well as a new overall role for faculty. We wish to monitor how well this new role is defined and whether the faculty is sufficient, in light of the new demands created by the Symposium, to fulfill effectively its newly conceived role and provide a curriculum of studies that encompasses the essential components of a liberal arts education that the College is so committed to offering its students (*Faculty*, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3). Moreover, in accordance with our standard on *Organization and Governance* which calls for faculty to have a "substantive voice in matters of educational programs, faculty personnel, and other aspects of institutional policy that relate to its areas of responsibility and expertise" (3.7), we will seek to assess the faculty's involvement in implementing the redesign.

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The institution recognizes that if it is going to have sufficient enrollment and if the Symposium is to be successful, it needs to build a comprehensive program of student services fully cognizant and supportive of its educational philosophy. Such services need to be "guided by a philosophy, disseminated and reviewed on a regular basis, which is conducive to the development of a shared learning community and which prepares students to become responsible members of society." Ultimately, it is critical that "the institution provides an environment which fosters the intellectual and personal development of its students consistent with its mission and purposes" (*Student Services*, 6.1). The success of these efforts will contribute greatly to enriching the overall well-being of students and the quality of campus life.

Through the 1996 report and focused evaluation, we look forward to learning of the institution's success in addressing each of these areas.

The Commission commends the College for its steadfast commitment to accomplishing its distinctive mission and providing Bennington students with a unique educational experience that is highly individualized and focuses on developing students' interests and imagination. The resolve to redesign the College in an effort to resurrect and reinvigorate the founding principles of the institution is to be applauded. We find particularly laudable the unrelenting dedication of the institution's leadership coupled with the support of a well-informed, active and dedicated Board who together face formidable challenges as they strive to chart the College's future development.

The Commission expressed its appreciation for the thoughtful, introspective and candid self study prepared by the College. That the institution used the self study to advance the purposes of the College is especially noteworthy and in keeping with the goals of accreditation. The Commission expressed its appreciation as well for the evaluation report submitted by the visiting team and welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Kevin Dolan and William Morgan, as well as team representative, Sharon Siegel, during its deliberations.

You are encouraged to share this letter and the team's complete report with all of the College's constituencies. It is Commission policy also to inform the chairperson of the institution's governing board of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to John W. Barr. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with Commission policy.

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Charles M. Cook, Director of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Frances C. Volkmann

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Enclosure

cc: John W. Barr
Visiting Committee