

## **BACKGROUNDER: THE BENNINGTON COLLEGE RESTRUCTURING**

In June 1994, the Bennington College Board of Trustees announced a major restructuring designed to ensure the College's viability, both academic and financial, and to keep faith with its historic mission as a pioneer in higher education. The reorganization was the result of a year-long process called the Symposium, initiated by the Board of Trustees in 1993, in which more than 600 Bennington students, faculty, staff, alumni, trustees, parents, and friends contributed ideas for the Board's consideration. The Board's report contained a number of groundbreaking concepts; implementation of the changes began immediately.

**A faculty of teacher-practitioners.** During the academic year 1994-95, four new literature teachers—poets Anne Winters, Steven Cramer, and Nancy White and novelist David Payne—joined Bennington's existing faculty, which included poet Stephen Sandy, essayist Edward Hoagland, and fiction writers Roland Merullo and James Lasdun. Composer Tobias Picker, who has received more than 30 commissions from many of the world's leading orchestras, ensembles, and soloists, and received the Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, joined the music faculty. Eight practicing, performing musicians came to Bennington as teachers of instruments. Visiting faculty members during the year included Jamaica Kincaid, Pulitzer Prize-winner Elizabeth Frank, and Margot Livesey in literature and actor/director Alan Arkin in film.

Among the new faculty is Mary Oliver, who will fill the Catharine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington. Oliver has published eight books of poetry, most recently *House of Light*; her work has garnered the Pulitzer Prize, the Christopher and L.L. Winship Awards, the National Book Award, the

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Shelley Memorial Award, the Alice Fay di Castagnola Award, Guggenheim and NEA grants, and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Achievement Award. Oliver has taught at Case Western Reserve, Bucknell, and Duke. Verlyn Klinkenborg, whose books include *The Last Fine Time* and *Making Hay*, will also join Bennington during 1995-96. His awards include the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund Writer's Award, the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award, the Distinguished Teaching Award at Harvard University, and an NEA fellowship.

Continuing achievements of current faculty were significant. A sampling: Dance faculty member Dana Reitz was commissioned by Mikhail Baryshnikov to choreograph a new solo work for him for a Jacob's Pillow premier; biologist Elizabeth Sherman was instrumental in Bennington's selection as a site for a regional science, mathematics, and technology summer institute, sponsored in part by the National Science Foundation; Regional Center director Isabelle Kaplan was named a Knight in the Ordre des Palmes Academiques by France's Ministry of National Education and appointed president of the Vermont Chapter of the American Association of Teachers of French; filmmaker Ahrin Mishan won the International Documentary Association's 1994 Distinguished Documentary Achievement Award; composer Allen Shawn won the Goddard Lieberman fellowship of the American Academy of Arts and Letters; anthropologist Kenneth Kensinger published *How Real People Ought to Live*; New Media Center director Ruben Puentedura was one of three keynote speakers at the 1994 Apple Education Development Forum, a national convention; Edward Hoagland published essays in *Harper's*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Esquire*, and *Civilization*; Stephen Sandy's *Thanksgiving Over the Water* was favorably reviewed in *The New York Times*, and biologist Kerry Woods was appointed chair of the Professional Ethics Committee of the Ecological Society of America.

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**Technology as a tool for collaborative creativity.** Bennington was chosen in March 1994 as flagship site in the New Media Centers Initiative, and immediately embraced the new multimedia technology. As the only liberal arts institution among the initial sites,

Bennington set about exploring ways to marry technology and creativity in the sciences, the humanities, and the visual and performing arts. By the time of the official opening of the New Media Center in March 1995, applications for multimedia technology were already in use in such diverse disciplines as chemistry, history, graphic design, ecology, ceramics, and childhood studies. The newly formed Center for Audio Technologies on campus includes an electronic music studio, a computer instructional studio, and a digital audio studio.

During spring 1995 five Bennington students and an alumnus conceived and produced a CD-ROM viewbook—the first totally student-produced CD-ROM viewbook ever. The project was truly multimedia and cross-disciplinary: The students conceived and storyboarded a structure; wrote scripts; interviewed students and faculty; designed interfaces; took original photography; converted archival materials to digitized images; composed and recorded original music; created a three-dimensional computer model of the campus and individual buildings; and designed packaging. Three seniors were immediately offered jobs and/or project work by major corporations (Broderbund, *Atlantic Monthly*) as a direct result of this experience.

**A pioneering venture in language learning.** Bennington's Regional Center for Language and Culture is currently developing a new curriculum that reflects its emphasis on interdisciplinary learning and the study of other cultures, along with the use of multimedia technology to achieve those ends. Selected for their commitment to innovation in language education, new faculty at the Center in fall 1995 will teach

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Chinese, French, German, and Spanish; Japanese, new to the College's curriculum, will also be offered this fall. Collaborations with the region's schools and a Japanese/American corporation in the area are under way.

**Collaborations enrich the curriculum.** Bennington and New York City producer/performance space The Kitchen teamed up in September for a phenomenal collaboration during which more than 40 students interested in everything from music, acting, and writing to costume, lighting, and set design worked closely on a new musical theater piece called *The Negros Burial Ground* with its three principal creators: composer Leroy Jenkins, librettist Ann T. Greene, and director Dominic Taylor. The month-long residency was celebrated in a work-in-progress performance and design display.

The successful culmination of the College's four-month collaborative work with Bennington's Oldcastle Theatre came in March, when 22 Bennington students joined Oldcastle's Equity actors to present Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*. In addition to acting, students were involved in design, stage management, and construction.

**A promise to lower costs.** The College committed to lowering the cost of a Bennington education through reducing tuition over a five-year period, adjusted for inflation, by 10 percent. In spring 1995, of Trustees approved a comprehensive fee for 1995-96 of \$25,800, a real dollar reduction of 3 percent, a first step toward achieving that goal.

**New programs at Bennington.** Gender and media studies, a community service program, film & video, and a new MFA program that has doubled in size since its inception are among new programs at the College. Faculty and student governance procedures are in place and in process, respectively. The campus is lively: During

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spring term 1995 alone there were five dance concerts, 26 music performances, 11 drama productions, three art exhibits, countless lectures, and readings by Jamaica Kincaid, Robert Stone, Verlyn Klinkenborg, Carole Maso, Robert Pinsky, and others. In short, while Bennington College is still, and will continue to be, a work in progress, year one of the redesign has seen much work, and tremendous progress.

**An unparalleled year for fundraising.** That progress has not gone unnoticed. Corporations, foundations, alumni, and friends of the College have been generous in their support of the redesign. Advance gifts included a \$2 million alumna pledge in support of change, as well as corporate gifts from two Vermont companies. Following the formal redesign announcement, Bennington received gifts or grants from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, \$100,000; The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, \$485,000; The Alden Trust, \$30,000; The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, \$75,000; the National Science Foundation, \$50,000; The Davis Educational Foundation, \$350,000; The Pew Charitable Trusts, \$250,000; The Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, \$500,000; and the Starr Foundation, \$250,000. Including major leadership gifts from alumni, the total gifts and grants specifically in support of the redesign now total \$5.2 million.