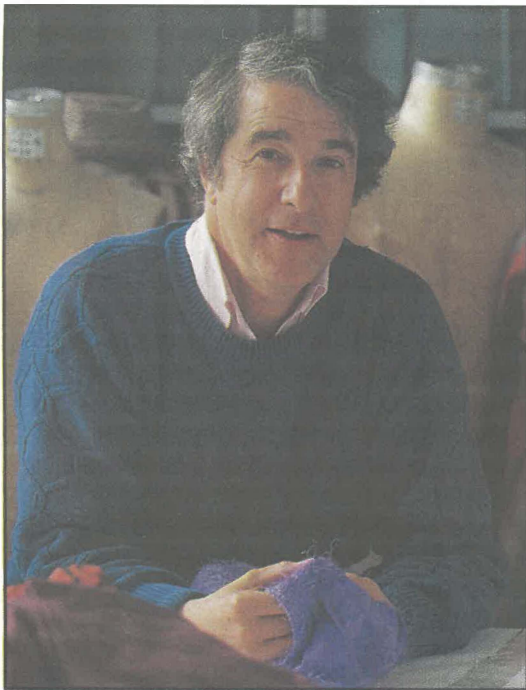


PHOTOS BY GEORGE ROBINSON, BLACK STAR, FOR CROSSTALK



Costume design instructor and certified mediator Daniel Michaelson teaches a popular Bennington course in community dispute resolution.

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folded into art classes, to cut costs) was only part of a huge college reorganization. In an effort to get the school back on track, Bennington announced that it would abolish its "presumptive" tenure system (which, pending review, renewed faculty contracts every five years) and instead would offer contracts of varying lengths that may or may not be renewed; replace academic departments with interdisciplinary faculty "program groups"; and return to a practice of hiring only "teacher-practitioners" who were actively engaged in their disciplines.

To ensure that students don't become too isolated from the world beyond Bennington's pastoral borders, they have long been required to spend eight weeks each winter working or interning off-campus. After the restructuring, the school also initiated programs designed to increase interaction between Bennington students and the blue-collar community where the college is located.

And in an effort to shed that nagging reputation as the most expensive college in the nation, Bennington promised to cut tuition by ten percent after inflation over the following five years. (The plan worked: With current annual tuition and fees at \$26,540, and room and board another \$6,700, few people would call Bennington a bargain, but last year 68 schools cost even more.)

The ensuing media coverage—which included articles in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *The New York Times Magazine*, among other national publications—astonished Coleman, who was publicly demonized by some of the dismissed faculty, 19 of whom subsequently sued the school. (The suit finally was settled in December 2000, when Bennington agreed to pay \$1.89 million to the 17 surviving faculty members and to apologize to them. Bennington still denies any wrongdoing; the settlement, said David Rees, Bennington's director of communications and external relations, merely "seemed expedient.")

"I don't know of any time in the history of higher education when any institution has attracted such attention," Coleman said. "It seems like if something happens at Bennington, it's sexier than if it happens somewhere else."

There is a reason for that, said David Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU). "I think Bennington is the case study, writ large, for the struggles of academic politics," Warren said. "The fundamental question that is posed at Bennington in a more dramatic way than at any other place is: 'Who governs?'"

For better or worse, Coleman clearly wields a tremendous amount of power. Her critics, generally fired faculty, say she is arrogant and uncompromising, that she runs Bennington like her personal Mom-and-Pop store; her fans, including Bennington's Board of Trustees President Deborah Wadsworth, consider her a visionary. "Liz has been quite extraordinary in bringing Bennington back from a low point in its history," said Wadsworth, president of the nonprofit policy research organization Public Agenda. "It's in very, very good hands."

Coleman, though, is quick to point out that the school's restructuring was not a unilateral decision but rather one undertaken with generous input and support from the college's trustees, and only after a year-long series of public meetings. That made the personal attacks very painful, she said.

Perhaps more painful was the immediate aftermath. In 1995, one year after the restructuring, enrollment sank to a record low 285, and the campus was bitterly divided over whether Coleman was the school's savior or the anti-Christ.

And the controversy didn't go away. In the spring of 2000, in response to Bennington's decision to dismiss several faculty members, including a philosophy teacher who had publicly criticized Coleman and was fired mid-semester, the American Association of University Professors organized a protest. More than 100 supporters marched onto the Bennington campus, where Coleman greeted their leaders with college t-shirts, and students drowned them out with loud music and gongs.

Bennington remains on the censure list of the AAUP.

"The college doesn't have a system of academic due process where the burden is on the administration to show adequacy of cause before terminating a faculty member," said Robert Kreiser, AAUP associate secretary. "Therefore, from our perspective, the exercise of academic freedom is at risk."

Not true, responded college spokesman David Rees. The AAUP "is an organization devoted to preserving tenure," said Rees. That puts it at direct odds with Bennington, which "has never had tenure, has no academic rank, and is devoted to giving every faculty member—regardless of seniority—the maximum possible freedom to teach, create and research what he

or she loves and wants most to explore with students."

Academic freedom is not at risk, Rees said. Just the opposite, "Bennington's uncommon pedagogy depends on academic freedom, on collegial governance, on systems of regular, rigorous and honest evalu-

Once headed toward bankruptcy, Bennington is not only solvent, it is once again in the vanguard of progressive education.

ations, and on due process."

Longtime biology teacher Elizabeth Sherman said that even though she herself has been "defrocked" from tenure, she has faith in the current system. "I cannot work just to protect the common denominator," said Sherman, who serves along with Coleman on the recently revamped Faculty and Performance Review Committee. "Do I wish I had a guarantee that I had an income for life? Yes. But I feel that if I do my job I'll be rehired."

Part of the nature of Bennington is that some faculty do come and go. Because the school is so small, those changes are keenly felt. But Rees said that the school is not the revolving door that critics like to portray. This year, he said, the school renewed 19 of 20 contracts that were expiring.

Nor is Coleman as intractable as her critics say, according to Sherman: During a debate this spring over one faculty member's contract, she said, "minds were changed."

Another faculty member who asked not be identified scoffed at the allegation that Coleman dismissed teachers because they have publicly criticized her. "A story about your own martyrdom is much more interesting than a story about your professional incompetence," he said.

The AAUP censure aside, some higher education observers consider the Bennington reorganization a resounding success.

"What once was a very artsy institution with the highest tuition in the country is now an institution pressing the academic envelope about who governs and what it

means to be a progressive institution," said NAICU President David Warren, adding that he was sometimes "dumbstruck" by what goes on at Bennington.

As the leader of the "poster child" for progressive education, Coleman "represents a kind of radical wishful thinking," Warren said. "I can name almost no one who has acted with quite the full force and effect that Liz Coleman has."

Indeed, the numbers look good. Bennington's on-campus undergraduate enrollment has increased to 537 this past academic year, and is projected to be 585 for the coming school year, just shy of the school's maximum capacity of 620. That is the highest enrollment since 1990, when it was 570, and twice as high as it was in 1995, the year after the restructuring.

The freshman year attrition rate has declined from 40 percent in 1993 to 12 percent. This year's graduation rate was 70 percent, much higher than the historical rate of between 50 and 60 percent, said communications director Rees. That has allowed Bennington to increase the faculty, too: from 51 in 1995-'96 to 75 this coming academic year.

College officials say the future appears even brighter. The graduation rate for 2002-'03 is expected to exceed 80 percent. The number of applications is up from about 600 for the 1998-'99 school year to between 750 and 800 for 2002-'03. And more of those applicants are choosing to come to Bennington: last year, 41 percent of the students accepted by Bennington matriculated there, compared to just 28 percent three years ago. More than 75 percent of students receive at least some financial aid from the college.

The quality of those students is also better: Forty-eight percent of last year's freshmen graduated in the top ten percent of their high school class, and their average combined SAT score was 1,191, up 41 points since 1997.

Students say they have noticed the difference. "Morale has never been higher since I've been here," said graduating senior Rachael Torchia, 22, of Portland, Oregon, who said she hoped to use the photography and mediation skills she learned at Bennington to work with troubled teenagers, which she had already

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Dance instructor Susan Sgorbati and her students are shown in a dance class. Sgorbati, a Bennington graduate, "can't imagine teaching anywhere else."