

B E N N I N G T O N C O L L E G E

Pioneering



► You will be reading about Bennington's pioneering changes in academic structure and organization. The College is committed not only to providing the highest quality education for our students, but also to addressing the need to make it more accessible financially. For years, college and university tuitions have increased at ever-escalating rates; as part of the Symposium's overall goals, Bennington aims to reverse that national trend—reducing tuition by ten percent (in 1994 dollars) over the next five years, and aggressively seeking other ways to relieve the financial burden, such as an expanded work-study program.

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Pioneering

“BENNINGTON REGARDS EDUCATION AS A SENSUAL AND ETHICAL, NO LESS

THAN AN INTELLECTUAL, PROCESS. IT SEEKS TO LIBERATE AND NURTURE THE INDIVIDUALITY, THE CREATIVE INTELLIGENCE, AND THE ETHICAL AND AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY OF ITS STUDENTS, TO THE END THAT THEIR RICHLY VARIED NATURAL ENDOWMENTS WILL BE DIRECTED TOWARD SELF-FULFILLMENT AND TOWARD CONSTRUCTIVE SOCIAL PURPOSES. WE BELIEVE THAT THESE EDUCATIONAL GOALS ARE BEST SERVED BY DEMANDING OF OUR STUDENTS ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE PLANNING OF THEIR OWN PROGRAMS, AND IN THE REGULATION OF THEIR OWN LIVES ON CAMPUS. STUDENT FREEDOM IS NOT THE ABSENCE OF RESTRAINT, HOWEVER; IT IS RATHER THE FULLEST POSSIBLE SUBSTITUTION OF HABITS OF SELF-RESTRAINT FOR RESTRAINT IMPOSED BY OTHERS. THE EXERCISE OF STUDENT FREEDOM IS THE VERY CONDITION OF FREE CITIZENS, DEDICATED TO CIVILIZED VALUES AND CAPABLE OF CREATIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE MEMBERSHIP IN MODERN SOCIETY.”

*Traditional Bennington College
commencement statement, read at every
graduation since 1936*



In the Beginning

Bennington College began in 1932 as a set of ideas about education. Ever since, it has adhered to ideals and practices that have distinguished this College as a pioneer in innovative higher education and remain constant as its guiding principles. Among those ideals are the beliefs that the interests and imagination of individuals—both teachers and students—should drive

the educational process; that each student's curiosity and capacity should inform the individual course of study; that learning should be acquired actively and personally; and that a college education should not merely provide preparation for graduate school or a career, but should be an experience valuable in itself and the model for a lifelong habit of learning.

"I have now read very carefully the Educational Plan of Bennington College, and I should like you to know with what hope for the future of education I hold the effective realization of your program...."

Supreme Court Justice, Felix Frankfurter, 1929



"Robert Leigh and his associates in student body and faculty are building on their Vermont hilltop an institution so boisterously uninstitutional, so forthright and radical as to leave one gasping."

The Nation, December 1933



"Bennington has a spectacular faculty. It has always been thus...W.H. Auden, Daniel Aaron, Kenneth Burke, Peter Drucker, Francis Fergusson, Wallace Fowlie, Erich Fromm, Nathan Glazer, Theodore Roethke, Allen Seager, Bradford Smith, and George Soule—all sojourned there. And the present roster, which includes Bernard Malamud, Howard Nemerov, Francis Golfing, and Stanley Edgar Hyman, has glitter aplenty. But big names alone do not enchant. Everyone on the faculty must make it as a teacher."

Saturday Review, December 1963

Today these ideals hardly seem radical, but in 1932 they were perceived by the larger educational community—indeed, the world—as not only radical, but possibly even dangerous. It was an act of courage to join the band of educational explorers who constituted that early Bennington. The faculty who came tended to be doers and makers as well as first-class educators: Poets taught poetry, practicing scientists practiced science, artists taught art history. Students were those who wanted a direct hand in their own education, who wanted something quite other than that which traditional higher educational institutions had to offer.

Those early pioneers—both students and faculty—set a precedent for experimentation. Throughout the next decades Bennington was a place where people came to "try" things, to dream, to invent, to experience the leading edge in creative learning by doing. Dance at Bennington meant choreography and performance; science was not textbook reading, but first-hand research; drama was performance; music, composition. Collaboration across disciplines was commonplace, but never ordinary.

"Since its unsettling entry into the field of higher education 45 years ago, Bennington College has twisted the tails of more than its share of sacred cows. Bennington College was founded in 1932 as a laboratory for student freedom and creative self-expression. And it sent the educational establishment into a tizzy when it hired professional musicians, actors, and writers as instructors."

The Christian Science Monitor, January 1977



"The College is—and should be—a work in progress. As in work of a scholarly, artistic, or scientific kind, revision is often the difference between the mediocre and the superb. Yet there are no models for profound institutional revision and renewal; we will have to dare to make it up."

John W. Barr,
Chairman of the Bennington
College Board of Trustees

In the six decades since the College began, many of the innovations Bennington pioneered have been adopted by other American colleges, among them the inclusion of the visual and performing arts as full partners in a liberal arts curriculum; the requirement that students help design their own academic programs; the idea of faculty as practitioners as well as teachers; the introduction of an off-campus work period as a testing ground of classroom study; and the use of written reports in place of grades to evaluate student work. The value of these innovations is clear. Perhaps less clear is this: Where does Bennington College—founded on a call for change and grounded in a mandate for innovation—go from here?

In its seventh decade, Bennington College went seeking the answer to that question. Through a College-wide process called the Symposium, Bennington took stock—reaffirming its founding principles, rediscovering its adventurous spirit, renewing its pursuit of intellectual excellence. Through this process of exploration and affirmation—in which more than 600 of Bennington's students, teachers, alumni, staff, and friends participated—the College began anew its mission as an essential experiment in education. The result, announced by the Board of Trustees in June 1994, is a series of innovations that apply the College's fundamental principles in dynamic new ways.



"Fifty years of innovative education doesn't necessarily make that method correct but the number of Bennington concepts that have been adapted or adopted by other schools since the 1930s indicates that something has been done correctly."

Vermont Life, Autumn 1980



"[Bennington was] to be 'so administered that in the remote future the best thought of the day, not the dead hand of tradition, will rule.'"

Saturday Evening Post,
1955

What emerged from the Symposium is a set of reaffirming principles that will guide Bennington as it moves into the 21st century: namely, that the College offer a distinctive, rigorous alternative to conventional higher education; that innovation be encouraged and rewarded; that the act of making—whether it be art, ideas, or experiments—continue as the College's dominant instructional method; that collaboration, integration, and a commitment to the whole be paramount; and finally, that the world within the College sustain a lively, working partnership with the world outside.

"While working for the College to organize the attic, I came across the real history of Bennington College, with all its ups and downs, buried in boxes and files. Reading those articles and documents from the past 61 years, I realized this: I believe the future of Bennington College lies in our foundations, our history, and our founding ideals."

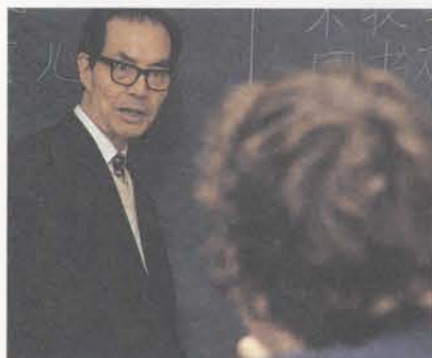
Symposium letter from
Sarah Rutigliano '95

The impulse to make connections between diverse things, to see interrelationships where they are not obvious, to create possibilities through the making of new work, is integral to Bennington's academic experience.

TEACHER-PRACTITIONERS AND INTERDISCIPLINARY CURRICULUM

Through each academic program and every instructor, the College aims to promote a spirit of collaboration, adventure, and shared purposes; to allow multiple contributions, perspectives, and responsibilities; to become truly, actively collegial. The changes in academic structure reflect that aim.

The academic heart of Bennington College is a core faculty composed of teacher-practitioners. Poets and novelists teach literature, choreographers teach dance, composers teach music. In addition to their roles as teachers and advisors, these faculty members use a special experiment and innovation fund to expand students' reach and capacities. This may take the form of enabling students to visit other learning sites, bringing to campus outstanding scholars or performers, providing new technologies—in short, anything that brings students and their work into living contact with the world at large.



"We're beginning to recognize that God did not create the universe according to the departmental structure of our research universities."

John A. Armstrong, former director of research at IBM, visiting lecturer at MIT, quoted in *The New York Times*, March 23, 1994



"It was fantastic, you know, this business of the faculty collaborating. I got interested in talking to the head man in physics about theories of turning. He had a turntable in his studio, and he would give a demonstration and lecture to the dance students. ...Our performing arts productions didn't depend on one discipline or one person. Everything was collaboration."

Martha Hill, dance pioneer and founder of the dance program

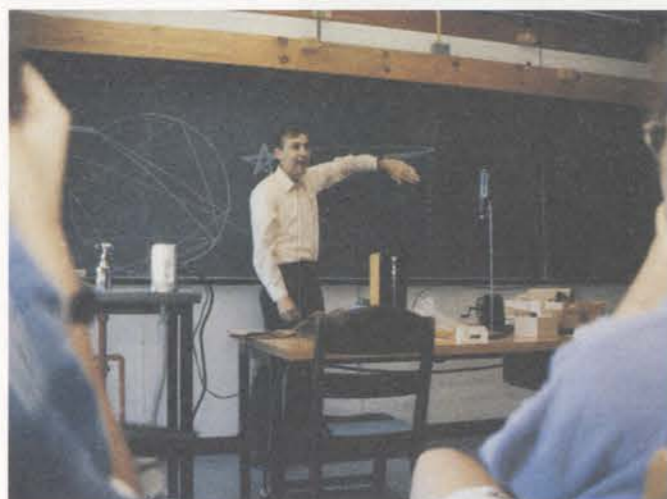


To emphasize interdependency and encourage collaboration, the College has replaced its divisional configuration with an academic structure of integrated disciplines working together. While individual courses in a range of disciplines will continue to be taught, faculty members will also organize themselves into groups in which scholars, artists, and scientists with converging interests work together to develop interconnecting programs. This rich combination of cross-disciplinary courses and individual study within disciplines produces a dynamic, organic curriculum.



"It is of the utmost importance that we recognize and nurture all of the varied human intelligences, and all of the combinations of intelligences....If we can mobilize the spectrum of human abilities, not only will people feel better about themselves and more competent; it is even possible that they will also feel more engaged and better able to join the rest of the world community in working for the broader good."

Howard Gardner, codirector of Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and author of *Multiple Intelligences*



"The main current of focus and action is that of making new work. It is the central river fed by tributaries filled with the curriculum, with all its diversity and vitality. The headwaters of these tributaries are the basic courses; as the streams approach the main current, intended objectives emerge. As the student progresses in time, the depth and momenta of these waters—the comprehension and application of the work—increase."

Dana Reitz MFA '94, faculty member in dance; two-time "Bessie" winner; artistic director, *Fields Papers, Inc.*

BEGINNINGS COURSES: LESSONS IN MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Bennington seeks to teach respect and enthusiasm for diversity in the usual ways of race, gender, culture, and tradition, but also in diverse ways of understanding the world. Toward that end, a cluster of "Beginnings" courses has been developed, each emphasizing a different mode of human expression: musical, verbal, visual, mathematical, or kinesthetic, for example. Entering students must choose at least one, the prerequisite being that the student demonstrate

a hopeless incapacity for the subject. The result is to provide a universal, low-risk experience of self-assessment, to jump-start the idea within each student that almost any arena of learning is within grasp; and to instill regard for diverse forms of knowing. As an added benefit, the Beginnings courses, taught by core faculty, are just plain fun.

"To make contexts visible, make them objects of discourse and make them explicitly reshapable and inventable are strong aspirations very much in harmony with the pressing needs and onrushing changes of our own time. It is therefore the duty of a well-conceived environment for learning to be contentious and even disturbing, seek contrasts rather than absolutes, aim for quality over quantity...."

Alan C. Kay, fellow of Apple Computer Inc. and founder of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, in *Scientific American*, September 1991



CONTEXTS

While retaining its historic commitment to freedom, diversity, and individuality, Bennington also emphasizes a broader focus that includes context—encompassing interactions with environments, communities, and selves—encouraging an ethos of responsible interdependence.

The College has already initiated new environmental programs, including a College-wide research project supported by Vermont's leading public utility company and an ecology

curriculum refocused on the College's 550 acres in Bennington and a 900-acre field station on nearby Mt. Equinox. Other projects under consideration include experiments in sustainable agriculture, student-led demonstration projects on energy conservation, and alliances with an independent ecosystems research organization, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and a leading environmental law school.



"Environmentalism should constitute a recognition of complex interdependencies in social, biological, and physical realms, and an acceptance of personal responsibility for the consequences of participation in those interdependencies."

Kerry Woods, ecologist, faculty member



Bennington has made public service a high priority as well, aggressively exploring relationships with corporate, educational, and civic institutions to develop ideas and support programs. The College is also exploring ways to link Field Work Term to community service.

The College will pursue studies of current research in understanding the workings of the brain, a multidisciplinary endeavor that encompasses neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, philosophy, and other fields. Just as ecology studies immerse students in their physical world and public service programs address their social world, this program will seek to help students understand themselves by exploring the complex relationships between mind and body.

The nature of these inquiries is experimental: They are intended as ongoing, open-ended research projects where the laboratories are the natural and built environments of the campus, the social community, and the individual.

"I think Bennington should be a place where a new kind of citizenship is learned, studied, and practiced—one in which the basic unit of public life becomes the conversation and the letter. ... Bennington has a way of giving one confidence in the small, original act; it ought to be the place where smart, creative people develop the habits of democracy and spread them across the land."

Symposium letter from Doug Cumming '74, education editor, Atlanta Journal Constitution

CREATIVE USES OF NEW TECHNOLOGY

Bennington is the only liberal arts college selected as a flagship site in the New Media Centers Initiative, a multimedia technologies development program created by a consortium of hardware and software companies that includes Apple, Adobe, and Kodak. Slated to open in 1995-96, the New Media Center will include CD-ROM authoring stations, advanced desktop publishing, computer-controlled video capture capabilities, and disk drives sufficient to handle multimedia applications.

The multimedia technology will expand interconnected learning opportunities, allowing greater integration within and among disciplines. A chemistry student studying the three-dimensional probabilistic aspects of the chemical bond, for example, may work with a visual artist and a musician, their combined knowledge producing a broader view and a fuller learning experience; or a literature student preparing a thesis on 19th-century French social criticism may incorporate political songs and paintings of the era. The capacity to bring together words, sounds, still and moving images in a single medium enables a rich integration of expressive tools.

Also, using their own CD-ROM disks, each student will compile a portfolio of work samples and teacher evaluations, providing an invaluable reference for employment or graduate school.

"The College's new emphasis on media technology and the creation of an individual student CD-ROM record will provide a tool for effective integration of knowledge, as well as for gaining insight into the process of acquiring that knowledge. This, in turn, will help promote a culture of thoughtful reflection, essential to both the creative process and measured self-governance."

Ruben Puentedura,
coordinator of technology,
faculty member



"The focus of this approach is on the conditions of mind, imagination, and spirit that underlie any serious creative process, the making of anything. At the center of this education in filmmaking is the finding of one's own voice...."

Alan Arkin '55, actor,
director

FILM AND AUDIO/VIDEO STUDIES

The New Media Center technology enhances Bennington's developing multimedia program, which includes classes in filmmaking and audio/video studies.

Actor/director Alan Arkin is part of Bennington's filmmaking program, which premiered in 1994. Under his tutelage, students learn to capture their ideas in moving images; they develop scripts, learn to use—and become—actors, designers, and directors, and make an original film.

Audio/video studies make increasing use of the New Media Center facilities. The video program aims to intertwine practice, theory, and speculation, engaging participants in learning based on the pursuit of actual projects. The audio studies program offers a sound studio that can be used both to produce and document performances and interactively as a compositional tool. It has cross-disciplinary applications for dance, drama, and music, as well as literature, psychology, anthropology, or science. During spring 1994, for example, a student used the sound studio to prepare an innovative sound structure based on fractal mathematics.



"Mainly we must be bold. We gain nothing by replicating programs, nor should we be afraid of not being 'mainstream.'"

Tony Carruthers, faculty member,
in his Symposium proposal to
expand the audio/video program

The restructuring of faculty and curriculum leads Bennington to the most radical change of all—a return to the origins of the College, to the originality of mind and thought that have distinguished this College since its inception. With funds allocated for experiment and innovation, core faculty arrange for distinguished visiting faculty and guest artists to visit campus for a year, a term, a month, or a few days, allowing a dynamic interchange to meet the evolving needs and interests of students. Faculty may also develop special projects involving outside organizations. These innovative residencies and collaborations have already become a fundamental part of Bennington's curriculum.

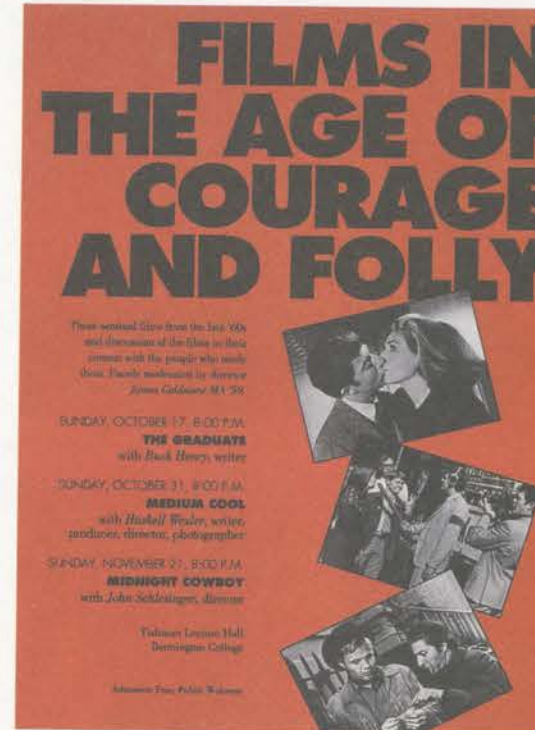


KITCHEN COLLABORATION:

Composer Leroy Jenkins, librettist Ann T. Green (above), and director Dominic Taylor spent a month-long residency in 1994 for a joint project with New York City-based producer/performance space The Kitchen. Students from chorus, movement, music, acting, design, history, anthropology, and writing classes participated in the creation of an opera, "The Negroes Burial Ground." The production was presented to the community as a work-in-progress at the close of the residency.

BUTOH AT BENNINGTON:

In his six-week residency at Bennington in 1993, Japanese Butoh dance master Min Tanaka conducted movement workshops, demonstrated Butoh techniques for dance students, performed solo and with others, in theaters and outdoors. His stay culminated in a multidisciplinary, traveling performance piece involving sculpture, dance, film, and music.



SEMINAL FILMS OF THE 1960s: To give students a look at an era of political and social upheaval that profoundly affected the culture of this country, director/producer James Goldstone MA '59 presented three major films of the 1960s and panel discussions with the people who made them: writer/factor Buck Henry, writer, producer, director and photographer Haskell Wexler, and Academy Award-winning director John Schlesinger. Faculty members also participated in the panels, which Goldstone moderated.

FOCUS ON IMPROV: Alan Arkin, who attended Bennington in the 1950s, returned to the College to give a lecture in 1993. Students convinced the actor/director/writer to lead an intensive acting improvisation seminar residency in 1994. Arkin held 45 hours of class, critiqued student performances, and offered two special workshops to the entire community. His involvement with Bennington is ongoing.

COMPOSER IN RESIDENCE:

Betsy Jolas '46, who studied composition with Paul Boepple, Darius Milhaud, and Olivier Messiaen and is on the faculty at the Paris Conservatory, returned to Bennington in 1994. During her five-week residency, Jolas taught composition to a freshman class and led an advanced class in a detailed analysis of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. She also met privately with students and gave a community lecture.

Pioneering can be risky, demanding; certainly it is more taxing than following a traditional path. But one of Bennington's strengths has always been that it produces graduates who know how to think for themselves, people with a remarkable talent for adaptability, people who lead, above all, interesting lives. If you want an education that you help to shape, an education centered on the act of making, one that asks you to consider not only your work but also its impact on the world around you—be a pioneer. Dare to join Bennington College as it sets out once more on the path of educational inquiry and discovery.



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Page 2: Groundbreaking ceremony 1932

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Page 6: Faculty member Chichung Huang, by Cynthia Locklin; ceramist, by David T. Wilkinson

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