

Bennington College Fall 2020 Plan

Isabel Roche, Interim President

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BENNINGTON COLLEGE

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Bennington Community,

I hope you are safe and well today. The disruption to all of our lives caused by the current public health crisis has been profound, and I know you are seeking clarity on the College's operations going forward. With that in mind, I write to share with you our planning in progress for working, teaching, and learning in the Fall 2020 term.

First and most importantly: **We are planning to reopen our campus in the fall for students and faculty who can safely return, with a number of changes to ensure the long-term health and safety of the community.** Below, I outline the contours of the adaptable plan that will enable Bennington to respond to various potential public health scenarios without compromising the rigorous, close-knit, experiential education that defines us.

This plan is informed by regular consultation with a network of health experts from the State of Vermont and the Southwestern Vermont Medical Center (SVMC), located in Bennington, with whom we share a strong and collaborative relationship. It was shaped by the College's COVID-19 Task Force (members are listed on our [COVID updates webpage](#)), which has been hard at work since March considering the impact of every facet of this challenge on our community. It also reflects our ongoing discussions with higher education leaders from across the state, who are themselves in regular dialogue with Vermont officials.

The [curve of reported infections has been flattened](#) in Vermont, and the state has the [lowest coronavirus growth rate in the nation](#). Public health recommendations are being incrementally relaxed. As fall approaches, we will continue to adhere to state and federal guidance on best practices.

The reimagined academic model for Fall 2020 outlined below utilizes the lessons learned and structures we now have in place for remote learning to create a blended model that can accommodate individual and public health needs. It also preserves the most essential aspects of a Bennington

education, including extensive one-on-one interactions with faculty, mentoring of student work, thoughtful advising, and an engaging, substantive curriculum.

An Adaptable Plan

Because there is no way to precisely predict how the pandemic will impact each member of this community, our return plan can both accommodate the health needs of individuals and scale remote learning up or down as necessary. It has been endorsed by the Board of Trustees and will continue to be refined.

Here are the core elements of the plan:

Blended In-person/Remote Learning. The Fall 2020 term will be delivered in a blended format that allows for remote learning in concert with in-person learning. Students who can be on campus will attend classes in person; and any student who cannot safely come or return to campus can engage remotely. All staff members who can work remotely will continue to do so in order to maintain a safer and lower-density on-campus population.

Reimagined Fall Term Structure and Curriculum. Based on the [recommendations](#) of the Fall 2020 Planning Working Group, Fall 2020 will be split into [two seven-week terms](#), allowing for more flexibility for both students and faculty, without compromising the quality of learning or our advising and mentorship model. This will also allow for a later reopening of campus if public health risks are high in the fall. A substantially revised curriculum reflecting the above changes will be released on Friday, May 22.

Continued Social Distancing. We continue to plan for the long-term goal of having all students, faculty, and staff together on campus, with people returning in waves over the coming months as public health conditions improve. We will work together to ensure that our campus is responsive to changing public health needs. Furthermore, our location in the hills of southern Vermont—the state with the lowest coronavirus spread rate in the country—makes us well-positioned to safely welcome more people back to campus, to establish and maintain new protocols for social distancing, and to further utilize our copious outdoor spaces for studying and socializing in the warmer months. While the College is in a bucolic, rural area, we boast an award-winning hospital, [Southwestern Vermont Medical Center](#), part of the Dartmouth health system, just minutes from our campus.

Shared Responsibility. We are all in this together, and our commitment to each other as members of this community has never been more important. Students, faculty, and staff will be invited to help reimagine how we live, learn, and work together safely. Before returning to campus, all members of the community will be required to sign a Commitment of Shared Responsibility. This agreement will outline the required health and safety protocols and behavioral expectations for all.

Health Screening and Monitoring. Upon return to campus, all students, faculty, and staff will be required to participate in a health screening and possible quarantine before re-entry. Members of the campus community will also be required to monitor their own health and take immediate action to self-isolate and report any signs of illness. Some travel may require quarantine upon return.

Partnership With Southwestern Vermont Medical Center. Bennington College maintains a close relationship with our local [Southwestern Vermont Medical Center \(SVMC\)](#), which was an early leader in offering drive-through COVID-19 testing and is a globally-recognized Magnet Center for Nursing Excellence. In the inevitable event that a student on campus falls ill, we have a plan in place for testing, in coordination with SVMC, and the ability to provide on campus follow-up care with our College physician, Dr. Randy Anselmo. We also have a plan for student isolation which ensures

students will be provided with a safe, on-campus location and receive the necessary services and provisions.

Preserving Bennington values amid change

Our most immediate concern is for the health and safety of this community, which informs all of these changes. But we are also cognizant of preserving those elements of a Bennington education that are distinct and exceptional: student agency, learning by doing, engagement with each other and the world around us. And so, even as we adapt to the needs of an uncertain world, we remain committed to the essential Bennington values that make our education more relevant today than ever before. With this plan, we are building a safe environment to do what we do best: learn together, on campus.

We know that current and prospective students are weighing concerns about what is prudent in the immediate future *and* which college will prepare them for the long-term. Here at Bennington, we can do both.

Keeping you informed and involved

There are few concrete answers today about what next term or next year may look like in the United States, but we are confident that this plan will enable us to safely open campus to many in the fall. We will continue to share new information through the College's [coronavirus response web page](#) and regular emails. We will also be creating and regularly updating a new set of FAQs regarding the Fall term to provide you with as much relevant information as possible. Bennington is strong because of all of you—students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends—and our close coordination will be invaluable to weathering this storm.

With that in mind:

Incoming and admitted students and their families are invited to participate in a forum on Saturday May 23 at 12:00 PM ET. (Reminder and videoconference link will be sent on 5/23)

Current students and their families are invited to participate in a forum on Saturday May 23 at 1:30 PM ET. (Reminder and videoconference link will be sent on 5/23)

Staff will have an opportunity to learn more about summer and fall planning in an upcoming all-staff meeting to be scheduled for June.

Faculty will have an opportunity to discuss these plans in our forthcoming meeting on May 28 at 12:30 PM.

I hope you will join us for these discussions. Bennington's strength and resilience today is a testament to the shared commitment this community has demonstrated over the past few months. I look forward to working with you as we plan for the future, and I can't wait to be together on campus in the fall.

Isabel Roue