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Office of the President

June 5, 1976

Mrs. Stanley G. Mortimer
149 East 73rd Street
New York, New York 10021

Dear Puff,

I hate to confront you with difficult problems just as soon as you've taken over the chairmanship of Bennington Summers, but there are some important decisions which must promptly be made with respect to the Summers program, and I want you to know of my concerns about them. My responsibilities arise both under the March 20, 1976, contract between the two entities* and the "Longstreth Resolution" adopted by the College's Board on April 24, 1976,--particularly paragraph 3 which requires me to monitor closely the progress of the program and, in certain financial events, to ask the College Board to consider discontinuing the current Summers program.

Some review of the Summers program's changing shape may be in order. When you and I, as members of the College's Board, authorized the Summers program on October 3, 1975, it was on the basis of certain principles and projections. The principles were that the program "must have intrinsic artistic value, that it must maintain Bennington's reputation in the arts...above all it was felt that Bennington Summers must be committed to progress and experiment, rather than to performance and production..."

The projections contemplated that 300 students would be enrolled for the six week Jazz Laboratory course (at \$1,500 per student) for total tuition of \$450,000, and that a total of 160 students would be enrolled in one week R&D programs in the Arts at \$625.00 per student per week (\$100,000). In January, 1976, these figures were cut back, by 50 percent, to 150 Jazz Laboratory students and 80 R&D students. In addition to this reduced student income of \$275,000 the Jazz Laboratory program contemplated income from 50 "auditors" at \$55.00 per auditor per week for six weeks (a total of \$16,500) and 3,500 "observers" per week for six weeks at \$5.00 per day (total \$105,000). In addition, the October projections showing foundations, endowment and private grants at an aggregate of \$165,000 were revised to \$90,000. After meeting operating expenses, it was originally projected that the income from the Summers program would not only meet the 1976 Debt Service for the Arts Center, but would also contribute \$144,000 towards the annual maintenance of the Arts Center. The reduced January projections provided that the only 1976 income which would be received by the College would be a \$60,000 contribution towards rental and maintenance of the Arts Center space. The January projections also included, for the first time, an \$18,000 allowance toward student aid.

*See preamble, last paragraph, Article VI (which recognizes my responsibility for, among other matters, the College's public image vis-a-vis the Summers program) and Article IX.

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On the basis of the October 3 presentation, the Board of Bennington College approved the Bennington Summers proposal, determining that "it would, of course, be necessary for the Bennington College to institute safeguards to protect the interests of the College." The specific resolution delegated to the Arts Committee of the College Board (which later became the nucleus of the separate Board of Bennington Summers, Inc.) "the responsibility, with the Treasurer's cooperation, of overseeing the expenditures of the funds to be advanced in support of this project..."

I am afraid that from October until I came to Bennington in February, the Summers Program operated without any real supervision at the College level. Although I was the Treasurer of the College throughout this period, despite the "safeguards" set up by the October 3 resolution, no one ever submitted anything at all to me for review and I was totally unaware of developments. I do understand that Tom Parker authorized a 1975-76 budget appropriation of about \$134,000 of College funds for operation of Bennington Summers through June 30, 1976. However, both of the Parkers have disclaimed responsibility for the Summers program, stating, in effect, that its conception and implementation had been mandated to them by certain Trustees.

When I came to Bennington on February 4, 1976, I was immediately confronted with a proposed faculty resolution which committed the faculty to scuttling the Summers program. My first exercise as President was a successful effort to reverse this vote and change it into a determination that the Summers program could go forward, provided that it confer the maximum financial benefit upon the College and that it not prejudice the College's good name and quality. At that time, although I had grave doubts as to the "firmness" of the projections referred to above, I decided to support the program on the grounds 1) that an infant program could not be expected to support itself during the first year, 2) that I had been assured by Merrell (whose judgment I respected) that there were aesthetic and educational considerations which made it worthwhile to continue the program as planned, 3) that terminating or substantially altering the form of the Summers program would alienate an influential sector of the College's Board, who by then were both emotionally and financially committed to Summers, and 4) that (most important, at least to me) as of that time some \$70,000 to \$80,000 of the College funds had already been expended or committed to the Summers program.

I did, however, with the concurrence of the College Executive Committee and the Summers management, develop a plan to review on April 1 and then again on May 1, whether or not the 1976 Summers program would at those dates seem viable enough to continue. Unfortunately, because of delays in printing and disseminating Summers publicity, the Summers enrollment was so small at both those dates that it was not possible to make meaningful decisions. As the spring proceeded I did, however, insist on two steps which I felt to be necessary in the College's interest: 1) that the relationships between the College and the Summers Corporation be regularized into a contract which made clear a) that the College had the right to cut off further College funds to Summers if it felt such a step to be in the College's interest, and b) that Summers could make no contracts and commitments binding upon the College without the College's advance approval*, and 2) that the Summers program (including the employment contract of the Executive Director of Summers) could not be

*I assume that no such contracts or commitments have been made by Summers as none have been submitted to the College.

renewed beyond 1976 without express approval of the College Board. At the same time, the College, both by contract and resolution, was committed to the support of the 1976 program.

I was able to convince substantially the entire College community that these steps not only safeguarded the College's financial interests with respect to any funds remaining unexpended, but also provided a framework for relieving its anxieties about the tenor of the Summers program. The campus atmosphere has been reasonably tranquil since that date. Meanwhile, I hoped that enrollments in the 1976 Summers program would reach a viable level. While this has happened in the case of the R&D programs, it simply has not happened in the case of the Jazz Laboratory. As of yesterday--one month before the Summers program opens--there were only four Jazz Laboratory students who have put up the \$150.00 deposit which appears to be the minimum evidence of a good faith intent to attend the program. I have just received an oral report that another three deposits have been received. (Although 64 students have put up the \$75.00 deposit for the R&D workshops.)

I greatly doubt that many more students will enroll in the Jazz Laboratory. By June, most people have made their plans for July and August. Even if we assume that there are ten fully paid Jazz Laboratory students and another 27 who pay, on the average, \$750.00 or one-half the price (thereby using up all of the budgeted \$18,000 financial aid figure)*the gross receipts from the Jazz Laboratory will still be only \$33,000. If we assume an average of 20 fully paid R&D students per week (at the current price of \$425) this will add only another \$34,000 to Bennington Summers receipts, thus producing total gross receipts of under \$70,000 from student sources. Against this aggregate receipt figure, Bennington Summers is apparently projecting operating costs for 1976 of about \$290,000 (not including any rental or other return to the College). On this basis it seems obvious that, in the absence of daily visitors (discussed below) the 1976 program will run at a cash operating loss of close to \$210,000. I realize that a portion of this loss will be made up from grants made directly to Summers for operating purposes. This category does not include the proceeds of sale of Helen's Cave which has belonged to the College since before the 1969 tax law change, but does include Andre Emmerich's generous gift of half his commission on Cave's sale. It seems to me that, even after taking these grants into account the 1976 program will cost the College (which in Counsel's opinion can in no way escape liability for obligations incurred by Summers) about \$140,000 before daily fees are taken into account.

I gather that Summers hopes to make up about half of this deficit from fees to be received from daily auditors and observers at the Jazz Laboratory. These visitors are now expected to attend at the rate of just over 2,500 persons per week, thereby producing six weeks income of \$75,000 from this source. I am very concerned about this estimate, particularly because there is no way of testing its validity until the program is irrevocably launched. The October 1975 figures projected, on the basis of market research, that the process of instruction by masters of 300 students would attract 5,000 visitors per week (about 17 visitors per student). In January, the process of instructing 150 students was projected to attract 3,500 weekly visitors (about 24 per student). Now the process of instruction of 37 or so students is projected to attract 2,500 weekly visitors (about 68 per student). I realize that it is the masters, rather than students, who attract visitors but the size of the instructional staff has, of course, declined as the student population has decreased.

*Financial aid at the College runs 9 percent of comprehensive fees. On this basis, Jazz Laboratory financial aid will run over 50 percent of fees

I am particularly suspicious of the "visitors" figure in the light of Ken Mayers' research (delivered to the Summers Board in April) into the limited drawing power of other nearby facilities (even of those who charge no admission), my recently acquired but intense knowledge of this area which, because of peculiar highway and other patterns, is having trouble dealing with Bicentennial visitors and the fact that the comprehensive Sunday New York Times of May 23 list of attractions offered to daily tourists in this area this summer did not mention the Jazz Laboratory. I am forced to conclude that the figure for this daily attendance represents less a true projection than a constructed figure. Moreover, even if these projections of daily visitors should prove correct, I wonder if the enormous preponderance of visitors over students might not result in the Jazz Laboratory becoming (in a manner exactly contrary to that approved by the College Board) a series of "performances" rather than a meaningful educational experience.

This brings me to my final point. Money aside, and without any attempt to apportion fault, the dynamics of this College are such that the prospects of a 1977 Jazz Laboratory program here are infinitesimal. The 1976 Lab, with a handful of students, will be noted only as an anachronistic reminder of an earlier period in Bennington's governance. Ken Mayers' latest projections (attached) indicate that between \$35,000 and \$50,000 of College funds may still be saved if the Jazz Laboratory is immediately cancelled. I, therefore, see almost nothing for Bennington to gain, and a great deal for it to lose in both money and prestige, if the Jazz Laboratory now goes forward for 1976. At the April meeting of the College Board, Andrew stated that the Summers Board was itself quite capable of making a rational decision to terminate the 1976 Jazz Laboratory when circumstances indicated that such action was in the College's best interest. I believe that that time has now arrived, and would like to express my confidence in the ability of the Summers Board to face up to the unpleasant (but in my view necessary) decision to terminate the Laboratory immediately. I think it would be less divisive and in the College's interest if termination were to proceed in this way rather than under paragraph 3 of the Longstreth resolution, which would require this decision to be made by the College Board.

You, as a newcomer to Summers, may well ask me why it has taken so long for me to reach this unhappy conclusion. As stated above, there have been extensive delays in Summers transmitting its material and I wanted to give the Jazz Laboratory every possible chance to prove its acceptability. While I repeatedly warned Erni Meyer, Merrell Hambleton and the Summers Board of my premonitions on this subject (most recently at the May 22 College Board meeting), I did not take a definitive position because I hoped that the Jazz Laboratory would somehow pull a rabbit out of the hat. I am sorry to say that the rabbit doesn't seem to have materialized.

My recommendation has been made more difficult to reach because, as Helen stated at the May 22 meeting, there has been a lot of "ugliness" involved in all aspects of this history, and because I am aware of a strong emotional tendency to regard the entire program (including the Jazz Laboratory) as a memorial to Erni. Now, however, that we are facing a Jazz Laboratory opening in less than a month which has a handful of fully paid students instead of the originally projected 300, I see its continuance (and the embarrassment which I foresee for this summer) only as a disservice to Erni's memory.

I am sure we would all like to see something salvaged from this unfortunate history. A summer program of some sort, related to the College's functions, will clearly be

essential in future years. I realize that because so much has been invested "up front" in the Jazz Laboratory, very little money will be saved if only the R&D programs continue. Yet I think that these programs (of which I believe Bennington can surely be proud on an educational level) can be operated at a relatively modest further cost (without need for such expenses as auto checkpoints or a security force) and that, for the sake of the College's, and the Summers programs, prestige each of the one-week programs which can develop as many as ten students should continue. As I understand it, this means that at least the paper print and welded metal programs should go ahead, and perhaps the unfired clay program as well. I simply do not credit the doctrine that the students and teachers participating in these R&D's will refuse to do so if there is not a background of jazz. I realize there may be a number of questions as to the extent to which the dining halls and dormitories should be kept open to accommodate the relatively small number of students and instructors involved in the R&D programs, but I stand ready to cooperate so that these matters can be solved with a minimum of administrative loss to the College.

I have been closely involved in this unhappy situation since February and have a feeling that at several junctures, the persons on all sides of the matter have reacted more on the basis of personal loyalties and emotion than in the overall interest of the College. I think that the Board of Bennington Summers could set an example for all concerned if, recognizing Summers' charter requirement that it function solely for the benefit of the College, it were now to act in a statesmanship manner, recognize the unfortunate factual situation which has come to pass, and immediately terminate the Jazz Laboratory program.

Sincerely,



Joseph S. Iseman
Acting President

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