

SELF-STUDY FOR NEASC EVALUATION, APRIL 1996

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INTRODUCTION

Six decades after its founding, Bennington College looks to the future with a single goal: to animate its mission as a pioneering liberal arts institution by reaffirming its deepest principles, liberating itself from outdated programs, and continually cultivating ideas on the vanguard. So began the Symposium Report of the Bennington College Board of Trustees, issued in June 1994 a report that capped a process of sustained and complex self-examination and initiated a major restructuring of Bennington College, still under way.

The road that led to the issuance of the Symposium Report and the ensuing restructuring of the College had two converging paths: educational and financial. The College, founded as an experiment in education in the 1930s, had instituted a number of radical and compelling ideas, many of which have been widely adapted in American higher education. For Bennington to attract and retain the necessary quality and quantity of students in an increasingly competitive market, it became clear by the early 1990s that the College had to regain an order of academic excellence that was genuinely innovative and distinctive. Available evidence indicated that it had not. On the fiscal side, a combination of declining enrollment and skyrocketing financial aid needs gave Bennington the courage to engage in a fundamental reassessment of every aspect of the College, substantive and structural.

In 1993 Bennington's Board of Trustees suspended business as usual and adopted a two-year planning and implementation strategy for the restructuring of the College. That process, which became known as the Symposium, began with an invitation from the Chairman of the Board of Trustees to all Bennington faculty, staff, students, alumni, parents, and friends to contribute ideas for the Board's consideration. More than 600 people accepted the invitation, submitting ideas, proposals, and commentary. At the same time, conversations with people outside the College began. The aim was a redesign shaped by the best ideas available, consistent with Bennington's historic commitments and its resources.

The Board was explicit that the Symposium process would be unequivocally inclusive, but not consensual: It would be the trustees' responsibility to evaluate the advice the Board received. In so doing, the Board did not intend to create a mechanical blueprint for the College's operations; but it did intend to reaffirm principles, to jump-start a number of college-wide programs, and to create flexible, renewing structures that would be assessed and modified by faculty, students, staff, and trustees on an ongoing basis.

In the June 1994 Symposium Report the Trustees announced details of the restructuring. Among its fundamental principles were the assertions that a Bennington education would emphasize the teacher-apprentice model and reemphasize the teacher as practitioner; that the act of making would be central to the College's pedagogy; that ways to expand the relationship between the College and the world would be aggressively pursued; and that the College would reincorporate an institutional preference for experiment.

Organizational changes called for in the Report were the reinstitution of a faculty of teacher-practitioners; the retention of a full range of disciplines but an abandonment of fixed academic divisions; a reformulation of faculty responsibilities and authority into faculty program

groups composed of teachers with converging interests; the substitution of individualized contracts for Bennington's presumptive-tenure system; the call for collaborations and partnerships as a means to effect program development; and the institution of short-term, intensive residencies to increase the flexibility and breadth of the curriculum.

The Report suggested administrative restructuring that would consolidate functions and bolster admissions efforts and retention. It also mandated that governance structures, exploring ideas for new ways of linking and distributing obligations and authority be developed by faculty, students, and staff.

The Report contained suggestions for changes to existing academic programs, especially in language, literature, and music. Technology would be emphasized as a tool for collaborative creativity, and New Media Center resources used to integrate multimedia applications throughout the curriculum. As part of a commitment to strengthen students understanding of their interdependence with and responsibility toward the world, it proposed institution-wide efforts in ecology and public service. As part of a commitment to work in areas that cross disciplines, the Report proposed developing a program in brain/mind/behavior studies.

Through these reorganizational and programmatic steps, the Board of Trustees aimed to bring the structures and processes of the College in line with its mission and purposes. Specific goals of the restructuring process included increasing enrollment during the ensuing five years to a minimum of 600 undergraduate students and 130 graduate students (50 in full residency, 80 low-residency). Another primary impetus was the College's commitment, as both a practical and ethical consideration, to limit the cost of a Bennington education. Over the next five years, the Report stated a specific goal of reducing tuition in 1994 dollars by 10 percent.

(These are highlights; please see Appendix for the complete Symposium Report.)

STATUS OF RESTRUCTURING

Major administrative changes have occurred at Bennington in three areas: the consolidation of the offices of the Dean of Faculty and the Dean of Studies into the office of the Dean of the College; the creation of the office of the Dean of Admissions and the Freshman Year; and the consolidation of the Development, Alumni Relations, and Communications offices into a single office of External Relations. (Please see Appendix for resumes of administrators in those positions.)

Many of the other changes mandated in the Symposium Report are well under way, others are in a start-up phase; still others remain in the planning stages. The status of changes made to date in the areas of academic life, faculty, and student services follow. New directions in Admissions are also included.

ACADEMIC LIFE

While academic divisions have been relinquished, disciplines have not. Bennington continues to provide a curriculum with a high degree of intellectual focus; responsibility for insuring that a discipline flourishes has shifted from divisions to individual faculty members working with colleagues and visiting faculty.

The continuing commitment to vigorous teaching in the established disciplines along with the new programs generated by the College-wide initiatives, faculty program groups, and developing and collaborative programs, described below, constitute the

Bennington curriculum. Responsibility for its coherence and quality is jointly held by faculty and administration. (The fall 1995 and spring 1996 curricula are included in the Appendix.)

College-Wide Initiatives

New Media Center (NMC): Following its selection in March 1994 as a flagship site in the New Media Centers Initiative (a consortium of companies led by Apple Computer), Bennington appointed faculty member Ruben Puentedura to direct the Center. In the summer and fall of 1994, a suite of rooms in Dickinson Science Building was renovated, and 12 multimedia workstations and peripheral equipment were installed and equipped with software permitting the flexible integration of text, sound, and image. Training sessions for faculty, staff, and students began in March 1995 and were extended to area public school teachers in summer 1995. The installation of an Internet router in the NMC through a National Science Foundation grant brought additional capacity to the Center in fall 1995. The adjacent Center for Language Technologies opened in fall 1995, which permits faculty to author multimedia language-learning materials and helps students acquire language proficiency with the aid of multimedia software.

Bennington required all fall 1995 entering students to purchase a multimedia-capable computer. Systematic training for faculty and students in both multimedia and Internet technologies continues as a means of producing a curricular culture informed by the potential of these new technologies. Already, faculty in disciplines as diverse as ceramics, ecology, history, and stagecraft are integrating computers into their teaching. Increasingly, students will create portfolios of their work on CD-ROM. While the place of technology is expanding in Bennington's campus culture, the College does not regard computers as shortcuts to learning, but as tools for discovery, for the integration of knowledge and the expansion of the uses of imagination.

One project exemplifies the possibilities inherent in the new multimedia technology. During winter and spring 1995, as part of their FWTs and a tutorial, five Bennington students and a recent alumnus conceived and produced a CD-ROM view book of the College the first such student-designed view book in the country. The project was multimedia and cross-disciplinary and involved students whose studies at Bennington focused not on computer science, but rather on sculpture, literature, electronic music, architecture, writing, and video. The result featured in August 1995 at Mac Expo, a national computer conference in Boston has been used by the Admissions Office for recruitment. This production is expected to become a biannual project for interested students.

(For a fuller description of NMC progress to date, please see Appendix for the Winter 1996 alumni magazine article written by NMC Director Ruben Puentedura.)

Regional Center for Languages and Cultures (RCLC): Probably the most ambitious of the new programs is a regional rather than an institutional approach to the teaching of foreign languages. Headed by director Isabelle Kaplan, whose accomplishments in the field of language instruction are nationally and internationally recognized, a faculty has been assembled whose expertise spans special training in language instruction, including technology, a range of cultural interests and expertise, and an interest in working with students from kindergarten through graduate school and training teachers of language. Languages offered have expanded to include Chinese (previously only available on a part-time and ad hoc basis) and Japanese, along with French, German, and Spanish. The College plans to add Russian and Italian (both now offered on

a tutorial basis), with Arabic and Hebrew to follow. (See Appendix for vitae of RCLC director and faculty.)

In its most revolutionary aspect the Regional Center has forged a teaching partnership with Vermont's Manchester Elementary/Middle School in which Chinese and French language and culture are taught to seventh graders. In addition, Center faculty act as professional development specialists, training Manchester teachers in methodology and curriculum development. Ultimately the intent is to extend this model throughout the system from kindergarten on and throughout the region, and to involve Bennington College students as assistants in the teaching of elementary school children. At the other end of the spectrum, employees from a local Japanese/American company are studying Japanese language and culture with the Center's faculty.

A fall 1995 film and cultural festival, *Echoes of Africa*, initiated by RCLC Director Isabelle Kaplan, also benefited both the College and the greater community. The Festival encompassed three graduate-credit workshops aimed at elementary and secondary school teachers in the region and supported by the Vermont Council on the Humanities; a lecture series covering history, economics, politics, and aesthetics; an African music concert; an African dance class in collaboration with faculty and students from Williams College; and, at the heart of the program, the 1995 African Film Festival, a film series cosponsored with the Film Society of Lincoln Center.

(For a more in-depth progress report on courses and activities of the RCLC, please refer to Isabelle Kaplan's report in the Appendix.)

Faculty Program Groups

By eliminating academic divisions, Bennington intends to reemphasize the structural importance of the College as a whole in shaping curriculum. In addition to teaching specific disciplines, the faculty is organizing itself into faculty program groups (FPGs) in which scholars, artists, and scientists with converging interests create programs of study for students and faculty. Established and emerging groups are described below.

Media Studies: The goal of the Media Studies FPG is to provide students with an opportunity to explore the impact of media on contemporary society and culture. Courses within this program provide a historical perspective on media in society and culture as well as opportunities for practical experience with various communication media. The process of developing critical skills in media literacy engages students with current problems and issues affecting the communities of Bennington, Vermont, and New England, and builds on a basis of conceptual breadth and the synthesis of critical approaches and practical experience.

Gender Studies: Gender studies thus far is a student-initiated group discussion, in which faculty members are invited to participate in informal discussion with students. This student-driven FPG is generating new curriculum and the engagement of faculty across disciplines. (See Appendix for Stories interview with Lani Iacovelli '97, which provides a student perspective.)

Mediation Program: BRIDGES: Bennington Resolution for the Individual Through Education and Support is a program that promotes communication, develops and supports constructive dialogue, and helps students resolve differences and conflicts among themselves. Ranging from formal mediation to informal conflict resolution skills, BRIDGES is intended to be

a for-student-by-student program. Faculty will set up an in-house training program and train ten students per year.

Community, Culture and Environment: The purpose of this program group is to foster curricular and other approaches to the study of environmental perspectives in the context of the relationship between society and the material world. This program's themes include environmental policy and justice, conflict resolution in environmental disputes, population issues, environmental design, and conservation. The program draws perspectives from history, biology, politics, psychology, art, and movement studies.

Other faculty program groups currently in formation or proposal stages are Brain/Mind/Behavior Studies (see page 9) and Urban Studies.

Developing Programs

Bennington is engaged in three other major program initiatives at various stages of development: public service, environment, and an exploration of the relationships among mind, brain, and behavior.

Public Service: The goal of the public and community service program is to create an environment in which the most fundamental ideas about citizenship can be explored and experienced by all members of the College community. Ronald Cohen, a social psychologist and long-time member of the Bennington faculty, directs this program. Aiming to involve students, faculty, and staff in a wide range of courses and research, volunteer service in communities, and critical reflection on the relationship between them, the program organizes opportunities for voluntary service that respond to the needs of communities both on- and off-campus and assists faculty members in developing courses that address academic and artistic issues related to those needs. These activities are intended to have a direct impact on the College's curriculum and its ethos.

During its initial year, two courses were taught each term, and at least two are planned for each of the following two terms. All courses integrate work in the classroom with voluntary service at off-campus sites such as local schools, the Vermont Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired, Project Independence (a program for developmentally limited adults), Head Start, Bennington Area AIDS Project, and the Sunrise Family Resource Center. (For more information on the Public Service Program, please refer to Ron Cohen's report in the Appendix.)

Environment/Ecology: As with service, Bennington's intent is to treat this idea as transforming of the entire enterprise, rather than located in specific areas of the curriculum. Also, as with the Regional Center for Languages and Cultures and the Public Service Program, the relationships between the College and the wider community are essential elements in planning programmatic directions. Kerry Woods, a biologist whose specialty is ecology, is at the center of this project.

Integral to this initiative is the College farm. A joint project developed by the College and members of the greater Bennington community, the farm will be a part of the College's biology/ecology/botany program and will also provide vegetables for a community-supported agricultural project (CSA). It will offer students and the community an opportunity to learn, in a participatory way, the value of land stewardship and to experience and explore the cultural, geographical, and environmental context in which the College is situated. The farm will provide organic produce for the College food service and be part of a larger effort to "green" the campus. A farmer was hired in January 1996, and the farm is slated to begin operation in spring.

Elizabeth Courtney, recent past chair of the Vermont Environmental Board, taught a fall 1995 seminar, "Exercising Leadership in the Development of Resilient Communities," which explored the interdependence among the ecological, social, and economic aspects of community life and examined ecological principles of sustainability using specific sites in Vermont. Another residency is under consideration for spring. As noted earlier, an environmental program group is now in the formation stage.

Brain/Mind/Behavior: The fundamental value of this subject in an undergraduate setting is its promise to expand significantly the understanding of what it means to be human. It has an added significance for the College because of its capacity to make the strategies of scientific inquiry come alive for a broad array of students, to integrate the traditional arts with the visual and performing arts, to exhibit the risks as well as the opportunities of engaging cutting-edge subjects. This project is currently being advanced by a faculty program group in a cluster of courses that focus on concepts of "mind" and "body" and their treatment in philosophy, science, medicine, and aesthetics; how "mind" and "body" are perceived and expressed in various cultures; the role of active perception in education and in the arts, as discussed in the writings of John Dewey and others; and human and evolutionary development. These courses attempt to balance and integrate cognitive and experiential learning, communicating the material through several modalities of intelligence.

Collaborations

Bennington is committed to expanding and deepening the relationship between the reflective character of the college experience and the world by forging cooperative partnerships. In fall 1994 the College teamed up with New York City-based performance space The Kitchen for a collaboration during which more than 40 students interested in everything from music, acting, and writing to costume, lighting, and set design worked on an in-progress musical theater piece called *The Negroes Burial Ground* with its composer, librettist, and director. In spring 1995, 22 Bennington students joined the Equity actors of Bennington's Oldcastle Theatre to present Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*. In addition to acting, students participated in design, stage management, and construction.

In the sciences, several partnerships have emerged. Bennington was selected in 1995 as one of four Vermont sites to hold a regional science, mathematics, and technology summer institute. Sponsored and funded by the National Science Foundation and the Vermont Institute for Science, Math & Technology (VISMT), the program offered graduate level courses to elementary and middle school teachers in southwestern Vermont. More recently, biologist Michael Mishkind, also with the help of a grant from VISMT, created a collaboration among area high school teachers and College science faculty and students during fall 1995. Five Bennington students, working with College and high school faculty members, created individual two-week teaching units in genetics, which they taught at two area high schools in November. A geneticist from Williams College was invited to critique the program. (See article from the Bennington Banner in Appendix.)

Other faculty members have pursued similar alliances. As part of his "Dramatic Literature Seminar," Michael Giannitti brought six prominent directors, artistic directors, and playwrights to campus throughout spring term 1995 to share their perspectives on works of dramatic literature; director William Reichblum's Kadmus Theatre Studio will be in residence on the Bennington campus during spring 1996; students in Janis Young's *ÒSpoken Word* course

read and performed in the community in tandem with the public service program; Ida Faiella's voice class students presented music to the Mount Anthony Union High School chorus class.

Academic Structure

From the student perspective, Bennington's academic structure depends upon the Plan process and the attendant advising system.

The Plan: The Plan, reemphasized in the Symposium Report, continues as an essential element in a Bennington education. The plan process is a progressively elaborated and formal articulation by the student of his or her objectives and how those objectives will be implemented. Currently, fourth-term students are expected to propose a Tentative Plan and sixth-term students a Confirmation of Plan to be approved by the College for their future work and graduation. This process continues to be explored and discussed, in particular the desirability of requesting written proposals at the conclusion of the second term.

Procedures and processes for filing a Plan were adopted by the faculty in spring 1996. Changes in the process by the Plan Committee include the requirement that students meet directly with the Plan Committee to determine both their Tentative Plan and Confirmation of Plan. In addition, a faculty member from outside a student's major area of study sits on the Committee, providing a broader perspective in determining that a student's work reflects the appropriate depth and breadth.

To ensure uniform understanding of the Plan process, the Dean's Office produced a booklet, "Guide to the Plan at Bennington College," which was distributed to faculty and students in fall 1995 (see Appendix).

Academic Advising: The faculty-student model of advising has been modified to incorporate a more comprehensive and structured approach. Faculty remain the primary advisors. In addition, personnel from the Deans' offices, Student Life, and Psychological Services constitute an advising team assigned to each class (e.g., freshman, sophomore). These teams consult and work with faculty advisors to address the needs and progress of all students, thereby providing an expanded network for the advising process. A draft of an advising handbook is currently under review by the Academic Policies Committee for implementation in 1996-97.

The Dean of the College, Associate Dean, Assistant Dean, and Dean of Admissions and the Freshman Year hold weekly open hours so that students may stop in informally to discuss their concerns. In addition, one day in the fall and two days in the spring term are allocated to the Plan process.

A proposal for the formation of the Committee on Academic Progress (CAP) is now under consideration by the Academic Policies Committee (see Faculty Governance, page 15) and the Office of the Dean of the College. It is proposed that CAP replace what was formerly the Educational Counseling Committee to review satisfactory progress towards the degree, to determine a student's academic standing, and to approve exceptions to academic policies. The Guidelines for CAP will provide an ongoing forum for articulating educational expectations and measuring progress.

FACULTY

In accordance with programmatic changes set forth in the Symposium Report, the size of Bennington's faculty has been reduced from 62 FTEs to 51.2 FTEs, including seven RCLC

faculty members. The resulting student-faculty ratio more than meets the standard of 10:1 that Bennington intends to maintain.

Under the new system, the College offers no new presumptive tenure contracts. Each contract is negotiated individually in response to the needs of the institution and of the individual. The faculty, the Dean of the College, the President, and the trustees periodically assess the College's priorities and the competencies of the faculty in meeting those priorities. (See Faculty Review Committee, page 16, under "Faculty Governance.")

The Teacher/Practitioner: Bennington's place in American higher education was won in large measure by the distinction of its teacher/practitioners, teachers like W.H. Auden, Stanley Edgar Hyman, Ben Belitt, Erich Fromm, Martha Graham, Kenneth Burke, Paul Feeley, Howard Nemerov, Theodore Roethke, Kenneth Noland, Bernard Malamud, and Peter Drucker. Reinvigorating this tradition has begun with the College taking aggressive steps since June 1994 to restore that level of distinction to its faculty.

Of all the new faculty appointments, one is emblematic of the aspirations and potential of a revitalized Bennington: that of Mary Oliver, poet, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, and author of several volumes of verse as well as a book about the making of poetry. She joins the faculty in fall 1996, after a year as the William Blackburn Visiting Professor at Duke. Carlin Romano, who combines a career in journalism with the teaching and writing of philosophy, is another appointment indicative of Bennington's commitment to building a faculty with diverse interests and competencies.

Notable among new faculty appointments in music are composer Tobias Picker and composer/performer Reggie Workman. The shift in the teaching of musical instruments from regular faculty appointments to an hourly contract system means that Bennington now provides instruction in 11 musical instruments, compared to the five previously offered, while containing costs. The quality of that instruction is reflected in the hiring of pianist Daniel Epstein and cellist Semyon Fridman, both soloists with leading orchestras, members of distinguished ensembles, recording artists, and recipients of numerous awards.

Another new faculty member is distinguished choreographer Dana Reitz, whose most recent work was choreographed for Mikhail Baryshnikov and premiered at the 1995 opening of Jacob's Pillow. Poet/critic/translator Anne Winters, poet/editor Steven Cramer, and essayist/scholar Verlyn Klinkenborg now teach literature, in addition to Bennington's pre-Symposium faculty in literature: poet Stephen Sandy, essayist Edward Hoagland, and fiction writers Roland Merullo and James Lasdun. Psychologist Susan Engel joined Bennington's faculty to teach developmental psychology and is actively engaged in helping to form the mind/brain/behavior faculty program group; playwright William Reichblum, founder and artistic director of the Kadmus Theatre Studio, taught dramatic theory and literature as well as acting during fall term 1995; his company will come to Bennington in spring 1996. Visual artists Louisa Chase, Susanna Heller, and Peter Waite began teaching during 1995-96. Ahrin Mishan, winner of the 1994 Distinguished Documentary Achievement Award, teaches film at Bennington, while veteran Hollywood director James Goldstone directed a Menotti opera at the College in December 1995.

Continuing faculty members also set the pace at Bennington within the arts and sciences. Composer Allen Shawn won the 1995 Goddard Lieberman Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; Edward Hoagland's essays appeared recently in Harper's, New York Times Magazine, Esquire, and Civilization; Stephen Sandy's Thanksgiving Over the Water

was one of three books of poetry chosen recently for review in the daily New York Times; RCLC Director Isabelle Kaplan won the 1995 American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Nelson Brooks Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Culture; biologist Kerry Woods was appointed chair of the Professional Ethics Committee of the Ecological Society of America.

Residencies have provided a steady stream of fresh ideas brought to campus by professional practitioners. In 1994-95 writers Jamaica Kincaid, Margot Livesey, and Elizabeth Frank taught intensive residencies; fall 1995 residencies included videographers Lauryn Axelrod and Margot Starr Kernan, environmentalist Elizabeth Courtney, African dancer Sandra Burton, and photographer Kevin Bubriski. Fall term 1995 artists-in-residence included sculptor Jon Isherwood and artist-architect Shin Egashira, both of whom created installations in Usdan Gallery. In dance, choreographers Dominique Zeltzman and Selene Colburn taught intensive workshops and presented a performance last October; in November MRX/Movement Research Exchange brought New York City choreographers Mia Lawrence and Linda Austin to work with students on campus, along with dance artist Lisa Nelson. (For faculty vitae, see catalog in Appendix.)

Faculty Governance: Bennington's faculty is integrally involved in developing and addressing its own governance. Over the last year-and-a-half the faculty has adopted a governance structure based on three elected faculty committees responsible to the faculty as a whole. The first of these, the Academic Policies Committee (APC), is responsible for facilitating development of academic programs and curricula, overseeing faculty searches, and generally responding to the directions and needs of the faculty in academic affairs. The APC is chaired by a member of the faculty elected by faculty colleagues. It consists of the members of two elected faculty committees, Curriculum and Budget, the Dean of the College, the Vice President for Administration and Finance, and the President.

An elected Faculty Review Committee is in place for reviewing faculty performance, and the Faculty Grievance Committee responds to alleged violations of faculty review procedures and alleged violations of academic freedom. Revised sabbatical and leave policies have been developed by the APC, approved by the full faculty, and adopted by the Board of Trustees. Ad hoc faculty committees are currently developing proposals for rethinking the academic calendar and reviewing the current system of evaluating student work.

In the 1995 spring term, the APC Curriculum Sub-Committee met with small groups of faculty to discuss curriculum. From these meetings, the Sub-Committee identified areas of discussion for the entire faculty during the faculty orientation and to place on the agenda for faculty consideration in spring 1996. Topics currently on the table include an in-depth review of curriculum for cohesion, relevancy, and timeliness, and the role of the faculty in relation to the curriculum; a delineation of the teacher/practitioner concept; how to use the College's resources more effectively; how decision-making can be balanced between administrative offices and faculty to ensure experimentation and stability; expectations of students' performance that balance rigor with flexibility and freedom; a set of academic standards agreed upon throughout the College; defining faculty teaching and work load.

(For details on the structure and mission of faculty committees and the outline of the 1995 faculty orientation, please refer to the Appendix.)

STUDENT SERVICES

Since the issuance of the Symposium Report, significant progress has been made in improving the quality of student life at Bennington, particularly in terms of linkages between academic and student life. Changes to the first-year orientation program and advising systems resulting from strong administrative and faculty collaborations have yielded a revitalized orientation program and more effective structures for tracking each student's personal and academic development, while the existence of an organized recreation program has added needed vitality to cocurricular offerings. Areas in which work is ongoing include student governance redesign, enrichment of cocurricular activities, and a formalized method of assessing student needs.

The need for strong administrative leadership in the Student Life Office was addressed by the appointment of an experienced student affairs practitioner in the director's position and the addition of support staff. The Office of Student Life now has four full-time professional staff members: the director, an associate director, an assistant director, and a recreation coordinator. (Please refer to the Appendix for full resumes.)

First-Year Orientation: Orientation for first year students has been redesigned and elaborated. In 1994 eight student orientation assistants joined faculty and staff to serve on an Orientation Committee. The program they designed and implemented in fall 1995 included, for the first time, an overnight trip to an outdoor center in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom; a series of discussions of readings assigned over the summer, led by faculty and administrators; and interactive workshops led by current students.

The Dean of Admissions and the Freshman Year plans to continue working closely with the office of the Dean of the College and with Student Life to integrate the freshman year experience with the academic life of the College. Specifically, efforts will focus on the development of a freshman reading seminar and the "Beginnings" courses as delineated in the Symposium Report.

Convocation: In fall 1995 Bennington held its first community-wide convocation to open the academic year. In conjunction with this ceremony, a seminar series on intellectual and interdisciplinary collaborations was held for students the first weekend of term. Subjects included culture and the environment; gender studies; and language, movement, and technology. A second seminar series, which will be a collaboration among the Associate Dean of the College, The Dean of Admissions and the Freshman Year, the Director of Student Life, and faculty, is planned for fall 1996. Proposed topics include library research skills, managing transitions, rhetoric and public speaking.

Links to Academic Life: A priority has been to develop greater faculty participation in the work of the Student Life Office in terms of governance issues, retention, trouble-shooting, advising, and the quality of cocurricular life.

In accordance with the Symposium Report, all former student and faculty governance structures were suspended in order to create new governance structures that support a less atomized, more collegial culture. A transitional council composed of five students and five faculty members formed for the purposes of overseeing the redesign of student governance, serving as an advisory council to Student Life, and making recommendations regarding community issues. In November 1994, the faculty voted to institute the transitional council as a standing faculty committee on Campus Life; this committee meets weekly. One emerging proposal suggests the creation of a Community Council comprising 15 members, five each from the faculty, student body, and administrative staff. The Council as proposed would be chaired by a faculty member and would replace the Campus Life Committee.

The formation of advising teams has increased collaboration between Student Life staff, the Deans' Offices, and faculty members regarding students' academic progress. Collaboration between faculty and Student Life has also been successful in improving the quality of cocurricular life; for example, the Student Life Office worked with Muriel Palmer, coordinator of music, to create a new Friday night music concert series that enlivened weekends during fall term 1995.

Student Governance: The Symposium Report recommended that the College give major emphasis to developing ideas for new ways of linking and distributing obligations and authority. To that end, some forms of student governance continued on an interim basis, while others were suspended until appropriate committees could redesign structures. Governing bodies that continued were House Chairs and the Judicial and Recreation Committees.

During this transition period, students initiated an Interim Student Panel (ISP) to manage many of the functions once handled by Student Council and to create a forum for new ideas related to governance. Once initial ideas were generated, a proposal was made to create Field Work Term (FWT) internships for students to work on student governance ideas. Four student interns drafted a document during the 1995 FWT that is the foundation for work now being completed by the Campus Life Committee. This Committee is responsible for presenting a final report of the recommendations to the entire community, after which it will be forwarded to the President and the trustees.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the House Chair system took center stage in the overall call for a reexamination of student governance structures. House Chairs are students elected from each house (there are 16 houses) who are critical to the governance of residential life. The Campus Life Committee held several community forums in spring 1995 to discuss the House Chair system and remains immersed in the task of developing a plan to address long standing concerns. The central issues are how to enable self governance to continue as a realistic option for assuring a civil and secure quality of life for all students, and whether there needs to be a more active role by non-students. The Committee expects to submit recommendations in time for the Board of Trustees April 1996 meeting.

Student Activities: Eight to ten student organizations are active each term, ranging from groups producing the literary/arts magazine, student newspaper, and radio station programming to those involved in the Women's Issues Study Group or the film society. To increase student awareness of and participation in organizations, the Student Life Office sponsored a Resource Fair at the beginning of fall term 1995 in which heads of student organizations displayed information and recruited members. In addition, the Office works closely with student leaders to initiate diverse program offerings involving greater numbers of students. Bright spots in fall 1995 included a student-organized literary reading in the Cafe that was attended by almost 100 people, about 10 percent of those faculty members. Also, a "Soiree," organized by a student as a December showcase for visual arts students and supported by faculty members, had a strong, enthusiastic turnout.

In addition to student-initiated events, the Office has worked to widen the range of cocurricular activities; two examples are the institution of weekly ballroom dance classes for all members of the community and a spring 1995 residency by performing artist Holly Near that included a masters class in voice and a community concert. Student Life initiated several events to support the fall 1995 African Film and Culture Festival, including inviting the New Nile Orchestra to provide African music and dance and organizing a special African feast in the

Dining Halls. Student Life also sponsored AIDS Awareness Day programs, hosted guest lecturers on contemporary societal issues, and arranged for the downstairs Cafe to be open every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evening during fall 1995, a change made at the recommendation of the Campus Life Committee.

Recreational Opportunities: In fall 1995 a full-time recreational coordinator was appointed to expand recreational opportunities. New outdoor programs offered in fall included several hiking and rock climbing outings, a caving trip, and a canoeing expedition. Tennis clinics met with a favorable response from students, as did a self-defense class. Other recreational activities included tai chi and karate classes and semi-annual pool tournaments. A fall highlight was the reinvigoration of the soccer program; Bennington competed in the Crossroads Athletic Conference, a league of colleges in southern Vermont and western Massachusetts. Portable basketball and volleyball equipment is now being used to transform a space exclusively devoted to concerts into a multi-purpose use.

Housing: The Residential Committee, a sub-committee of House Chairs, has been established to assist the Student Life Office with the procedures and policies of the housing assignment process. During fall 1995 the housing assignment process was computerized to improve efficiency and accuracy of records. New housing options instituted in 1995-96 include the creation of graduate student housing in Welling Town House, an off-campus facility, and a change in the residency requirement so that seniors can choose to live off campus.

Ways to evaluate and respond to student needs continue to be explored. During fall term 1995 the Offices of Student Life and Admissions and the Freshman Year facilitated a focus group in which a small number of first-year student volunteers characterized their academic and social experiences. More systematic exploration of assessment and response mechanisms will become a priority.

ADMISSIONS

The Admissions Office has created and implemented new strategies that are designed to increase the size and quality of the applicant pool. In February 1995 the Office began to revamp recruitment and admissions strategies to take maximum advantage of a reanimated educational intensity. Early in the process the new mission was articulated: "To ensure that from the moment of inquiry on, the student engages in a dialogue with the College that embodies the principles of a Bennington education."

The next step was to implement that mission. A series of mailings was designed to focus as much on what prospective students revealed about themselves as they learned about the College. The response has been extremely encouraging: Five days after the deadline in February 1996 the College had received 500 applications, compared to 234 applications at the same point in 1995. This process has also involved students, faculty, and non-Admissions staff in unusual ways.

Admissions has also focused on the campus visit, tailoring it to the individual visitor. Its view book likewise reflects an attention to the individual: student stories, told in their own words (see Appendix for 1994-96 Stories; a similar view book for 1996-98 is in process). Most importantly, Admissions counselors have strengthened and intensified the interview experience by initiating multiple interviews based on the substance of the interests and previous work of prospective students.

In terms of graduate studies, the low-residency MFA Program in Writing and Literature, initiated in 1994 with 20 students, met its enrollment goal of 80 students in 1995, several years ahead of schedule. The success of that program is testament to the quality of its faculty and curriculum. The program graduated its first class in 1996.

Finally, as the first step in its commitment to lower the cost of a Bennington education through reducing tuition over a five-year period, adjusted for inflation, by 10 percent, the comprehensive fee for 1995-96 remained at \$25,800. At a time when the average tuition increase nationally was six percent, the fee represented a real dollar reduction of nearly three percent. The Board recently announced that the 1996-97 comprehensive fees will again hold at \$25,800. As a result of this and previous efforts to limit increases, Bennington has shifted from being first on the list of most expensive colleges in the early 1990s to being 53rd in 1995.

CONCLUSION

Intrinsic to Bennington's philosophy of education is a commitment to continual self-evaluation, reassessment, and change—a commitment that had perhaps received only superficial attention for many years prior to 1993. By engaging in the Symposium, Bennington asked difficult questions and confronted issues at the heart of its own educational pedagogy. By implementing the changes the Symposium engendered, the College set in motion a process aimed directly at remaining “a pioneering liberal arts institution, continually cultivating ideas on the vanguard.” While that process is far from finished, indeed, by its very nature, it cannot ever be truly finished it is begun in earnest.