

BENNINGTON COLLEGE

REPORT TO THE

COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

of the

NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS & COLLEGES, INC.

FEBRUARY 2003

INTRODUCTION

The following report is submitted in anticipation of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) team's March 2003 focused visit to Bennington College. As requested, the narrative focuses on five key institutional issues: (1) implementing a comprehensive financial plan; (2) evaluating institutional effectiveness; (3) multi-year curricular planning; (4) general education; and (5) diversity. A core team of senior staff members—including the Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer, the Vice President for Planning and Special Programs, the Provost and Dean of the College, the Dean of Studies, the Director of Communications and External Relations, and the Assistant to the President—drafted the report in consultation with the President and other members of the senior staff. Barbara Brittingham, Deputy Director of the Commission, reviewed an early draft of the report.

The report is organized as directed by the Commission, with a brief institutional overview preceding the primary section of the report, which addresses the five areas of focus identified for the focused evaluation. A summary appraisal and appendices follow.

INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

From its earliest beginnings—well before the groundbreaking ceremonies in 1931—Bennington College has had a clear sense of mission and purposes. The men and women who brought the College into being aimed to found a school, as noted in a 1929 prospectus, that would emphasize “the individual student and her developing interests,” learning “by activity and living,” a community life designed to “break down artificial barriers between teacher and student and between curriculum and extracurriculum,” and “a conscious elasticity in educational plans.”

As befits an institution whose founders believed strongly in progressive education, the principle of learning by practice underlies every major feature of a Bennington education: the close working relationship between student and teacher, the insistence on self-determination, the commitment to learning across the disciplines, and the field work term, which gives students work experience and connects them to a greater community. Also key to Bennington’s philosophy is the conviction 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.

In 1993, in response to intense financial pressure on the institution, the Board of Trustees led the College through a sustained and complex self-examination that resulted in a restructuring of the institution. The Symposium report, which describes this process, began: “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.”

Today, within 10 years of the restructuring, Bennington has indeed reanimated its mission and restored its distinction as a pioneering institution. Total undergraduate and graduate enrollment is at record levels. Last year, the College received a \$5 million unrestricted gift, the single largest act of philanthropy in Bennington’s history. A recent story in the higher education journal *National CrossTalk* (available in the workroom) stunningly affirms Bennington’s achievements. Beyond its very special life, intensity, and excellence, Bennington is seen now as an institution “in the vanguard of progressive education.”

AREAS OF FOCUS

I. FINANCIAL PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

OVERVIEW

Over the last five years, Bennington has substantially improved and stabilized its financial operations. By all measures, Bennington's fiscal year (FY) 2002 results and FY 2003 forecast [*see Appendix A (i)*] reflect a continuation of the last five years' consistent turnaround in the College's financial condition. The cash reserve afforded by a recent \$5 million unrestricted gift underpins Bennington's ability to continue toward its objective of attaining an undergraduate enrollment of 640 with a high degree of confidence. As important, the College believes it has the momentum to achieve the relatively modest increases in enrollment needed to attain its enrollment objective, and is now in a position not only to sustain but significantly enhance its fundraising activities. Nonetheless, the College does not believe its current situation warrants any relaxation of efforts to ensure financial health over the long run.

In recognition of the College's strengthened capacity to deal with short-term needs and its long-term need to decrease its dependence on tuition revenue, the Board of Trustees has initiated the preliminary stage of a major comprehensive institutional campaign to provide the fiscal and physical infrastructure that will ensure the College's future. A primary objective of the campaign is to raise an endowment capable of providing an enhanced level of support for the operating budget from non-tuition sources. Current campaign activities completed include the appointment of a Trustee Campaign Steering Committee; the retention of a campaign consultant; the assessment of long-term institutional needs; the development of *Case for Support* documents; the planning for leadership solicitations; and the initiation of preliminary planned-giving solicitation and stewardship for the Pioneers (classes of 1936–46) with an emphasis on endowment support.

FY 2002 SUMMARY

Bennington met or exceeded all of its key plan projections in FY 2002. Highlights include:

- FY 2002 undergraduate gross revenue was up 14.5% over the prior year. It is forecast to increase 12.8% this year to \$18.3 million, 2.5 times greater than the low point in FY 1996 and 1997. This improvement reflects a doubling of enrollment combined with increases in student charges over this period. Although student charges have been increased, Bennington currently ranks 83rd among the country's most expensive colleges.
- Institutional financial aid decreased for the sixth consecutive year, and at 32.4% in FY 2002 it was the lowest in a decade. FY 2003 aid is forecast at 32%.
- As a result of these two factors, net undergraduate revenue was 15.1% higher than in FY 2001 (FY 2003 is forecast to increase 13.5%).
- A record \$9.3 million in unrestricted gifts was raised in FY 2002, including the single largest gift in the college's history, \$5 million. Bennington received \$26.3 million in unrestricted gifts during the five-year period FY 1998–2002.
- FY 2002 operating expenditures were \$374,000 less than projected in the College's 2001 NEASC report. The College spent \$306,000 more on capital expenditures than budgeted, based on management's decision to accelerate planned projects.
- The College placed \$900,000 in Bennington Bonds during FY 2002, versus the \$2 million anticipated. In view of the highly successful gift fundraising results, the College decided to limit the amount of Bond borrowing. (Bennington Bonds continue to be very advantageous to the College as a fundraising mechanism, having attracted to date \$1.6 million of related philanthropy in the form of forgiven principal and interest.)
- Operating cash was \$4.8 million at year-end, compared to \$425,000 the year prior. The College continues to have a \$1 million unsecured bank credit line available, but has not used bank debt in more than five years.

FY 2003–2008 INSTITUTIONAL OPERATING FINANCIAL PLAN

The following plan projections are based on normal operations and fundraising activities. *They do not take into consideration any future institutional campaign contributions that may allow the College to fund new or expanded programs or accelerated or additional capital projects.*

It should be noted that Bennington prepares its budgets, forecasts, and financial projections on a cash-flow basis and does not include non-cash items such as depreciation. Projections do include all cash uses during the fiscal year, including capital expenditures, debt repayment, and extraordinary payments. References to “NEASC 2001” projections refer to those submitted with the December 2001 ARFE. Some items have been reclassified in the FY 2003 report format; these are reflected in the revised 2001 reference copy attached [*see Appendix A (ii)*]. No changes have been made, however, that alter any net figures contained in the December 2001 report.

ENROLLMENT. The current projection for undergraduate enrollment includes a 5.7% increase from 577 to 610 for Fall 2003, followed by a leveling off at 640 in Fall 2004 (4.9% versus 2003) for the remainder of the projection period. Such a growth assumption is considered conservative, based on the College’s consistent five-year track record of increased enrollment (cumulative 66% through Fall 2002) and the modest additional number of students required to reach 640 undergraduates within the next two years. To achieve this enrollment, the College need only bring in 180–190 freshmen and 25–30 transfers each year, while holding attrition at the present 35%. Overall, annual new student totals in the 205–220 range will sustain enrollment at 640, compared to the 195–206 attained during the last three years.

TUITION AND FEES. Bennington’s Trustees have approved an 8% increase in total charges for FY 2003–04. For planning purposes, the College currently assumes implementing annual increases of approximately 6% for FY 2005–08 in tuition and other fees and room and board. To put this in perspective, Bennington’s undergraduate charges were held to an aggregate 2.3% increase over the four-year period 1994–95 through 1998–99 in line with a goal established by the Board of Trustees. During that period, most other colleges increased charges well in excess of inflation. As a result, Bennington had dropped to the least costly among the country’s 100 most expensive four-year institutions by 1997.

From FY 1999 to date, the College increased annual charges 5.3–5.9% (while increasing enrollment 44% during the same period). Bennington presently ranks 83rd in total charges. Based on the College's current relative position, it is in a position to increase charges as projected without significantly altering its competitive situation or adversely impacting either new enrollment or retention.

Undergraduate net revenue presently contributes 85–90% of total institutional income and covers approximately 80% of operating expenses. Although graduate and other academic programs, currently providing \$1.9 million annually, continue to be developed and expanded, undergraduate education is expected to remain the predominant source of revenue in the near future.

FINANCIAL AID. For internal management purposes, Bennington calculates financial aid on a basis somewhat differently from that applied to financial statement reporting. It includes only institutional aid extended directly by the College, not from or through other sources (e.g., federal programs); revenue includes tuition, mandatory fees received by the College, and room and board. It believes this approach to be a more useful, consistent, and precise way to view aid for management and forecasting purposes. In addition, Bennington very conservatively categorizes all loans to international students as 100% institutional aid at the time such loans are extended, with revenue being reflected only as cash payments are made in future periods. This calculation method currently increases the aid ratio by approximately 1%. (International student loans currently are booked on the College's financial statements with a conservative 37% reserve.)

The FY 2003 institutional undergraduate aid ratio is presently forecast to be 32%, versus 32.4% in FY 2002. The College anticipates being able to reduce further its undergraduate aid in one-half percent increments per year to reach 30% over the next four years. Based on analyses of the amount of aid provided by comparable colleges, Bennington believes it can continue to lower institutional aid to at least the 30% level without negatively affecting its enrollment objectives. This primarily can be accomplished though increasing the proportion of students not requiring need-based aid, presently less than 20% of total enrollment.

OPERATING EXPENSES. FY 2002 operating expenditures were 6.8% higher than FY 2001. The College currently projects increasing base operating expenditures approximately 6% per year during the projection period, assuming annual inflation averages 3–4%. This is somewhat lower than the 6–8% range over the last four years but remains above projected inflation rate because some additional operating and deferred maintenance expenditure adjustments above the present level continue to be warranted.

CAPITAL EXPENDITURES. The College is undertaking a record capital expenditure program this year, totaling \$1.5 million. This reflects management's decision to accelerate some facilities projects considered critical to the College's needs. A detailed, comprehensive needs assessment has been made of all campus facilities, and will be continuously updated and refined. The College's present plan incorporates an annual capital investment program of \$1.0–1.2 million during the projection period, a range considered to be a base level for the next several years. These expenditures are intended to meet the College's highest priority plant replacement and improvement requirements during the period, but the actual amount of expenditures will be adjusted lower or higher in response to fundraising results and ongoing reevaluation of project needs and priorities. The projection expenditures do not reflect any funding associated with the institutional campaign, which, to the extent obtained, will allow acceleration of projects.

DEBT SERVICE. In 1999 the College issued \$8.2 million of 30-year privately placed debt to fund construction of three new student houses to accommodate increased enrollment. Debt service on this revenue bond is \$574,000 in FY 2003, rising to approximately \$650,000 per fiscal year thereafter reflecting full annual principal sinking fund payments.

The only other long-term debt consists of notes issued under the Bennington Bond private placement. As of year-end 2002, \$4.8 million of these bonds were outstanding. The College issued only \$900,000 of the \$2 million anticipated in the NEASC 2001 projection because the additional amount was no longer required. The College expects to issue \$500,000 in Bonds during the current fiscal year. While the College continues to view the Bennington Bond as an alternate source of funds, no additional borrowing is anticipated after 2003.

The Commission's April 8, 2002, letter expresses concern about the College's issuance of debt in support of its activities, in particular the Bennington Bonds. (Please note that the repayment schedule for FY 2006 calls for principal payments totaling \$1.8 million, not \$3 million as cited in the April 8 NEASC letter.) The Bennington Bond has contributed significantly to the ability of the College to bridge through a difficult financial period and to sustain its operations at an appropriate level. The College continues to believe that the Bennington Bond has been a key element contributing to attaining financial stability. It is the only debt the College has issued in recent years other than the 1999 30-year student housing bonds. The College has used the Bennington Bond over the past five years to supplement its fundraising, and in doing so has benefited in timely funding support for operational and capital expenditures, as well as transforming a portion of bond obligations into gifts. While the Bonds constitute a debt obligation, the funds are available on a long-term basis (principal payments on each bond run from the fifth through the eighth year) and represent a demonstrated potential source of gifts. To date, 64% of all interest payments and \$530,000 of the principal amount (about 10% of that which has come due thus far) of the issued bonds have been gifted by bondholders to the College. Currently, \$4.8 million is outstanding, of which \$882,000 principal is due during FY 2004 and 2005, with a peak requirement of \$1.8 million in FY 2006. The College projects that it will be able to meet all Bennington Bond payments in the normal course of operations, including the peak FY 2006 principal repayment. *While it anticipates bondholders will continue gifting Bennington Bond interest and principal, it does not assume this in our plan projections.*

No other borrowing presently is contemplated, other than possibly periodic, temporary use of the College's bank credit line for short-term working capital management. Although the College has an unsecured \$1 million bank credit line available, it has not utilized bank debt since 1997.

FUNDRAISING. The College's regular annual fundraising program (the Annual Fund, focused on alumni and other regular contributors) is expected to increase from the current forecast of \$1.2 million to \$1.5 million during the next four years based on programs now in place to accomplish this objective. By the end of the projection period, it is expected that the College will be able to achieve full coverage of operating expenses from its operating revenue and Annual Fund sources.

The College will continue to have funding requirements to meet near-term operating needs, capital expenditures, and debt service—in reducing amounts—during the projection period; projections include major gifts and grants totaling \$3 million annually during FY 2004–08. These amounts represent fundraising consistent with Bennington’s actual results over the past five years.

Of the total funding need FY 2003–08, more than \$5 million is attributable to payments of interest and principal on currently issued Bennington Bond debt. Based on experience to date (as noted above), it is expected that a significant portion of these payments will be gifted to the College. Also, while the \$5.5 million of capital expenditures projected over the next five years is very important, the timing and amount can be adjusted depending on year-to-year fundraising success and available resources.

EXTRAORDINARY PAYMENTS. The final payment related to the settlement of the faculty suits was made in January 2003. As of this time, no extraordinary payments are anticipated during the projection period.

CASH POSITION. The receipt of a \$5 million unrestricted gift in May 2002 has provided the College with a significant reserve to meet temporary cash management needs, to cover potential fundraising shortfalls, and/or to fund incremental operational and capital expenditure programs determined to be in the institution’s best long-run interests. In the meantime, the College will hold these funds in liquid, conservative investments.

ENDOWMENT BORROWING REPAYMENT. The College currently expects to repay endowment borrowings consistent with maintaining unrestricted cash reserves sufficient to meet and anticipate operating, debt-service, and capital requirements. The Board will make a determination each year as to the amount of actual repayment, if any, based on annual cash flow and projected needs.

In FY 2002, \$272,000 was repaid (not budgeted or projected). As indicated in NEASC 2001, the College presently forecasts repayments of \$250,000 in each of FYs 2004 and 2005, and \$500,000 in FY 2007. The current projection also includes a \$500,000 prospective repayment in FY 2008.

II. EVALUATING INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

In many critical respects, the College collects an abundance of information that is used for individual and institutional academic planning and evaluation. To begin with, as a relatively small institution, Bennington's scale and its pedagogy provide hands-on and multi-dimensional modes of evaluation and feedback to faculty and staff on an ongoing and intensive basis, including:

- Detailed evaluations by faculty of each student's performance in each class;
- An extensive and intensive advising system; and
- An ongoing oversight process by faculty panels over and above advising with every student to review his or her academic progress.

To provide some perspective: 10% of the faculty are members of the Academic Policy Committee—a faculty/administrative committee that is in continual dialogue about policy pertaining to curriculum, evaluation, and oversight of student performance.

The College, in addition, recognizes the need to collect and effectively use more traditional core “summary” data in evaluation and planning. This essential need is being addressed in the following ways: building an information infrastructure and systematically analyzing core data.

INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Bennington still lacks an adequate technological infrastructure to make the management of data what it should be for optimal effect. The College is addressing this need in several ways.

COMPREHENSIVE SOFTWARE INITIATIVE. The College is in the process of implementing a comprehensive institutional software package developed by Jenzabar. The QX product line it has purchased includes Deans' Office, Admissions, Student Life, and Business Office modules. This software will greatly enhance core data management by providing one central system for information. The College has installed the Admissions and Business Office modules and is in the process of incorporating the Deans' Office and Student Life modules. In addition to providing general business process efficiencies, the system will allow the College to:

- Track the institutions students transfer to or from;
- Track the concentrations of students and over time provide data that can be used for determining faculty needs, library needs, and demand for certain concentrations; this information will be useful in evaluating new applicants and developing marketing strategies;
- Develop and maintain a comprehensive history of courses and registrations offered;
- Access a variety of online reports regarding housing, student extracurricular activity, and registration as a way of evaluating factors in retention.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AUDIT AND STRATEGIC PLAN. The right technology and the right configuration of technological know-how is critical for every institution, particularly so for a small one. Is it, for example, wisest in Bennington's case to centralize technological savvy or should it provide every major operation with internal capacity in this regard. To assist in making these decisions, the College has retained a consultant to conduct an institutional audit of systems, software, processes, and departmental and overall institutional needs. A detailed written report has been recently reviewed by the staff, revised where necessary, and is now in the process of being implemented. Key recommendations follow.

- Academic Computing—It was recommended that the College develop an academic computing leadership position to design and put into place a comprehensive plan to use technology to support the curriculum; expand technological support staff; and upgrade equipment and software in all campus computer labs.
- Administrative Computing—A project team should be organized to oversee the development and use of administrative systems; each administrative area should manage its own data entry and reporting and develop its own systems specialist who can work with the IT staff; a group should be formed to define institutional reporting needs.
- General Information Technology—It was suggested that the College develop a training plan for desktop productivity applications as well as administration applications and design a work station upgrade/replacement plan by defining the performance needs for desktops in all areas.

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH COMMITTEE. The Institutional Research Group continues to meet regularly to track data collected in each administrative office. Chaired by the Dean of Studies and the Vice President for Planning and Special Programs, the group's membership has changed slightly from the College's last report to reflect changes in office staffing and responsibilities. It consists now of representatives from Information Technology, the Business Office, the Admissions Office, the Registrar's and Deans' Office, the Development Office, and the President's Office.

The goal for the group over the past year was to review information collected in each office, create a comprehensive list of the relevant data, compile the data, and produce an annual report. This "Fact Book" (available in the workroom) compiles current data on admissions (inquiries, acceptance rate, yield rate, demographics, test scores for each cohort, areas of academic interest); undergraduate and graduate enrollment (by concentration, degrees conferred, graduation rate, retention and attrition); faculty statistics (FTE status, race and ethnicity, degrees earned by faculty, student/faculty ratio); financial aid (requests, awards); student life (student activities, participation in co-curricular activities); alumni (donor participation rate, geographic distribution); library (number of volumes, staff, usage, hours open, new acquisitions, total holdings); facilities (deferred maintenance, capital expenditures, major projects). This initial phase of the group's work will serve as a model for continuing annual analysis and future expansion of the project.

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH POSITION. A new staff position—Management Information Analyst—was recently filled to provide centralized information and core data analysis. This person will be responsible for compiling and analyzing institutional data. She will work with staff to gather requirements and data for the purpose of developing processes and reports for internal and external reporting and planning.

CORE DATA ANALYSIS AND PLANNING

While the College continues to address the need for strengthening its core data collection and use, the following are examples of how the College is already using data in planning and addressing key institutional issues.

ATTRITION AND ADVISING. After completing an analysis of key attrition data two years ago, which revealed an increased trend (however modest) in freshman attrition, the College began a series of in-depth conversations to address the issue. Out of these conversations, the issue of advising was identified as a key to helping entering students successfully transition from high school to Bennington. Two new groups were formed to enhance the advising structures already in place: a standing faculty committee and a peer advising program, which consists of selected upper-class students trained to assist entering students. One of the most striking quantitative measures of the effectiveness of these programs has been the decline in freshman attrition last year from 25% to what we project will be less than 20% this year.

While the College is pleased with this progress, efforts are being redoubled to understand better why students leave Bennington prior to graduation. Starting this year, the histories of all students who leave prior to graduating are reviewed by a group of senior administrators from all the major administrative and academic offices. Following that review, those cases in which students lack the necessary academic ability expected by the College will be reviewed by the Admissions Office; those in which the advising process seems to have failed will be further reviewed by both the Dean of Studies and the Faculty Advising Committee; those in which there seems to be insufficient academic challenge will be reviewed by the Academic Policy Committee. The intention is to use these cases as a way to understand better the patterns of attrition and, where appropriate, to make adjustments—in short, to use this data to improve continuously the quality of a Bennington education.

TRANSCRIPT ANALYSIS. The College is concluding a major project in transcript analysis prompted by a discussion with Barbara Brittingham at NEASC and NEASC assessment expert Robert Froh. The Deans' Office retrieved the transcripts of every graduate in the last six years and analyzed them to get a clearer picture of what students are studying throughout their years at the College. In addition to gathering information specific to individual disciplines, the College was able to assess its efforts in general education [*see Appendices B(i)–B(iii) for relevant charts from the study; a complete copy of the assessment will be available in the workroom*]. With the completion of the Deans' Office data software module, this analysis will be part of the College's ongoing and routine data analysis.

GRADUATE PROGRAMS EVALUATION. The Center for Creative Teaching has completed a substantial analysis of its programs using core data (such as course registrations, enrollment statistics, cohort data, and graduate tracking data) to review programmatic effectiveness and make necessary adjustments (*see Appendix C*). Evaluation of the Masters Program in Writing and the Masters Program in Teaching a Second Language also occurs regularly. Detailed questionnaires were developed and are distributed to all students in these programs. Completed surveys are reviewed by the directors of the programs, the Vice President for Planning and Special Programs, and the President. The responses have so far been so overwhelmingly positive that they have provided no basis for making adjustments.

CAMPUS SUBSTANCE ABUSE. In 2001, the College participated in a nationwide survey of 200 colleges and universities by The Core Institute, the Core Alcohol and Drug Survey. The resulting core data has been used by the College's Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention (made up of students, staff, and faculty) to create programs to respond to student needs.

As a result of the data collected, the Coalition created a team of trained substance abuse peer assistants (SAPAT) in spring of 2002 to provide confidential information and resources to anyone on campus who has concerns about drug and alcohol use. The Coalition also brought to campus an alumna who is a substance abuse expert to confer about how best to help students with substance abuse problems. She will return to campus next term to meet with individual student houses at their coffee hours and will continue to advise House Chairs and students in recovery. The Coalition is also considering designating one of the campus student residences as "substance-free" for the fall of 2003.

III. MULTI-YEAR CURRICULUM PLANNING

Bennington's pedagogy is profoundly connected to the model of apprenticeship as an especially compelling way for students to pursue areas of interest in depth. A Bennington education takes place in the context of the rich intellectual relationships between individual students and faculty. From the College's inception, this model has been at the heart of a Bennington education, and serves as the institution's most powerful process for multi-year academic planning. Because of the apprenticeship model, Bennington students concentrating in disciplines where there has historically been only one faculty member (e.g. architecture, philosophy, clinical psychology, anthropology) are nonetheless prepared to go on to graduate school and routinely do so. Bennington students are well prepared for graduate work because this model not only allows for a very strong focus; it also places a premium on developing the capacity for independent work. The apprenticeship model is designed for students to move progressively away from the need for a mentor and more and more toward being a colleague.

The academic progression through the apprentice model does not readily manifest itself in curricular terms of conventional multi-year progressions. Moreover, the very flexibility that is of the essence in the individual shape of the apprentice model (for both teacher and student) would be severely constrained if forced into more traditional curricular models.

The complex relationship between the needs of sustaining flexibility in the College's pedagogy and supporting successful multi-year curricular planning is considered seriously and thoughtfully at Bennington. The College recently has developed several additional strategies to expand its planning infrastructure for managing these dynamics.

DISCIPLINE-BASED FACULTY CURRICULUM COORDINATORS

The Provost/Dean of the College has announced the establishment of eight new discipline-based positions beginning in the Fall 2003 Term to help plan and coordinate the curriculum both within and across conventional disciplines. These curriculum coordinators, as they are called, will be drawn from the faculty and will be given either release time from one class per year or a stipend. To ensure continuity, coordinators will serve for a minimum of two years.

Their responsibilities will include:

- Facilitating discussions in each discipline group about curricular content as it pertains to specific courses and levels of courses;
- Reviewing proposed courses;
- Meeting as a committee, called the Curriculum Planning Committee, to review and develop a college-wide perspective; and
- Enabling and strengthening engagement and responses across the disciplines to curricular initiatives.

ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

This newly created position will report to and work closely with the Provost/Dean of the College primarily in the area of curriculum development and review. The Associate Dean will co-chair the newly formed Curriculum Planning Committee composed of curriculum coordinators. The Associate Dean also will be responsible for faculty development and course evaluation, the orientation of new faculty, and the scheduling of courses.

MULTI-YEAR CURRICULUM MODELS

In response to several curricular and academic issues—including marrying individual teacher-practitioner curricular concerns with the interest in generating college-wide “shared” experiences—the following multi-year curricular projects are being launched.

LITERATURE AND THE CANON. Over the past year, the College’s literature faculty has had continuing discussions about long-term curricular needs, with a particular emphasis on their desire to teach the canon. Out of these discussions came a series of canon-focused courses, the first to be launched in the Spring 2003 Term. To be offered on a rotating basis over several years, courses include: “The American Canon”; “The French Novel”; “Poetry: Epic, English, and American Lyric”; and “The History of the Novel.”

In addition, the faculty have developed a two-year curricular exploration of the works of William Shakespeare called “The Shakespeare Project,” which will begin in the Fall 2003 Term. The

curriculum will be organized around four courses consisting of weekly group lectures and class discussion sections. All literature students will be expected to take at least three of "The Shakespeare Project" courses. The project is planned to be ongoing after its initial launch and will involve members of the literature faculty on a rotating basis. Two to three faculty members will teach each course as follows:

Fall 2003 Term	"The Tragedies"
Spring 2004 Term	"Romances and Comedies"
Fall 2004 Term	"Poetry and Prosody" (long poems and portions of plays)
Spring 2004 Term	"History Plays" (including a study of the plays' "real" historic periods)

THE EMBODIED MIND TRANSDISCIPLINARY STUDIES PROJECT. This project, which began with an international conference organized and hosted by Bennington in 2000, centers on recent groundbreaking work in the understanding of the brain (e.g., Nobel Laureate Gerald Edelman's biologically based, global theory of the brain). Faculty members ranging from the sciences to the visual and performing arts are developing a curriculum informed by principles emerging from this work. Beginning classes establish issues, approaches, concepts, and a vocabulary that is rooted in a transdisciplinary perspective. Advanced classes focus on more particular areas depending upon faculty and student interests. Work at the advanced level will also include tutorials and research projects by students who have completed work in one or more advanced classes.

ART HISTORY PROJECT. The subject of art history is a rich and fascinating one at Bennington. During the 1950s and 60s, the College was a central player in making art history, specifically serving as one of the primary loci for the founding of the color field school. Today, the College not only continues its commitment to the making of art, but also has been wrestling with the challenge of how best to provide a powerful art history experience in an institution focused on the making of art and a faculty made up of teacher practitioners.

Beginning last spring, Bennington's President invited a group of faculty from a wide range of disciplines to confront the challenge. Over the last year, the group developed the following strategies:

- Art History Study Groups/Tutorials—Several faculty members have begun to work with clusters of students using seminal texts, including *The Story of Art* by E.H. Gombrich and Robert Hughes' PBS video series *The Shock of the New*. These tutorial offerings will be ongoing over the next two years.

- Visiting Experts—Each year, the College will host four to eight visiting lecturers prominent in the field of art history who can provide an overview of the range of this complex and multi-faceted discipline. The intent is that these lectures will be for the entire Bennington community—students, faculty, and staff—pointedly making this a college-wide experience. Study groups will be created that use these lectures as organizing centers.

SURVEYING THE DISCIPLINES

This year, the Academic Policy Committee initiated a comprehensive examination of what the College should expect from students as substantial work over the course of a Bennington education. This process includes every faculty member and discipline group. It consists of ongoing discussions and meetings and will result in a series of statements to be circulated to the Committee and entire faculty for further discussion. By the end of the Spring 2003 Term, the College anticipates that there will be an agreed upon set of statements to be used in curricular planning. Here too the college must seek a delicate balance between assisting students in taking responsibility for the design of their education, and, in effect, designing it for them.

IV. GENERAL EDUCATION

While the academic path for each student at Bennington is individual, every Bennington education shares the same basic hourglass shape. A Bennington education starts out broadly, narrows in the middle two years, and then opens out again for the senior year. During their first year, students experiment with a range of courses in various disciplines looking for what matters most to them. In their second and third years, students are expected to immerse themselves in particular disciplines and to focus their intellectual and artistic pursuits. Students start their last year at Bennington by turning their answers into questions—exploring the ways in which their own disciplines relate to others and considering how their deepening understanding of a subject or a craft or a question might matter to the rest of the world.

Bennington believes that this hourglass design positions the fundamental values of general education much more powerfully and effectively than the conventional pyramid structure, which makes the capstone of a liberal education the highest degree of specialization rather than an integration of the values of the general and the special. This hourglass structure is especially reflective of Bennington's commitment to the importance of general education and even more to the complex interrelationships between depth and breadth.

To support and oversee the design of individual hourglass-shaped courses of study, the College has in place intensive and dynamic systems of advising and academic planning. These systems are fundamental to a Bennington education and are at the center of educational policy discussions at every level of the College.

ADVISING

Bennington uses an intensive advising system rather than a set of externally defined distribution requirements to assure an appropriate blending of the general and the special. Students meet with faculty advisors at least twice a month during their first year and regularly throughout the remainder of their education. Advisors are critical in steering advisees through the academic planning process, as well as in approving the selection of courses each term. In this way the process of curricular selection can be tailored to meet the particular needs of students—those

who have difficulty focusing, being pressed to discover the power of immersion; those with too much focus are urged to explore a wider world.

THE PLAN PROCESS

In addition to this overall pedagogical design and advising, Bennington addresses the balance and totality of a Bennington education in what is called the *plan process*. This process is the one in which students progressively assume responsibility for the design of their education. This process is inseparable from the advising process at Bennington and is supervised by faculty panels, called *plan committees*, throughout the entirety of a student's education at Bennington. In addition to insisting on a balance between intellectual focus and breadth, the plan process places a premium on the general education skills of writing and critical thinking by requiring that students discuss their unfolding education both prospectively and retrospectively in a series of essays beginning at the completion of their first term and ending at the completion of their final term. These essays are read not only by advisors and plan committee members but also by the Dean of Studies, the Dean of Admissions, the Provost/Dean of the College, and the President; a representative sampling of the senior reflection essays is read by the Trustees. Moreover, students discuss at length with their plan committees, and ultimately defend orally, the courses of study outlined in their essays.

To refine its capacity to monitor general education effectiveness through the plan process, the College has taken a number of actions since NEASC's last visit in 1999.

PLAN EVALUATION CRITERIA. The Academic Policy Committee of the College decided to incorporate the criteria established by NEASC—that a program of study have a coherent design and be characterized by appropriate depth, breadth, continuity, sequential progression, and synthesis of learning—as guidelines for writing and evaluating these papers.

PLAN EVALUATION FORMS. New evaluation forms, again using the NEASC standards, have been developed to provide a more detailed record of a student's work throughout the oversight process [see *Appendix B(iv)*].

PLAN PROCESS AND OVERSIGHT. The College clarified and elaborated the plan process and its oversight. The plan process is now organized as follows:

- The Prospective Essay—After their first exploratory term at Bennington, students outline their initial thinking about the direction of their future academic work. While students are beginning to think of a more focussed exploration, they are encouraged to continue to explore during the second term.
- The Initial Plan—In their second term, students plan the design of their sophomore and junior years with an emphasis on immersion.
- The Revised Plan—At the end of their sophomore year, students evaluate and reconsider the shape of their plan and the direction their academic work has taken them.
- Plan Evaluation/The Senior Proposal—In the second term of their junior year, students evaluate the work they have done so far, and are asked to consider how that work might expand outward as they enter their final year at Bennington. This is also a critical moment of academic accountability when faculty committees decide whether a student has achieved a coherent and substantive level of work.
- The Senior Reflective Essay—This essay is designed to enable students to reflect on the totality of their Bennington education. Its value is as much to the institution as it is to the student.

ROUTINE ANALYSIS. The College has instituted a procedure for the routine analysis of transcripts. Such an analysis has just been completed covering a six-year period. On average, 43% of coursework is taken outside areas of concentration [*see Appendix B(iii)*].

V. DIVERSITY

With an academic mission rooted in a respect for the individual and for diversity of opinion, Bennington is and always has been committed to nurturing a culture deeply respectful of difference. It is evident in the curriculum: more than 20% of courses offered in 2002–03 explore multicultural themes. It is what drives the use of financial aid dollars to make a Bennington education affordable to students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. It is perhaps what prompted a peer institution to approach the College for insight on creating a healthy environment for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. Bennington takes great pride in this history and has every intention of maintaining it.

STUDENTS

While the College recognizes diversity of every form—race, ethnicity, religion, sex, national origin, sexual orientation, disability—it acknowledges that achieving a campus racial balance more reflective of the country as a whole is a particular challenge. In the Fall 2002 Term, almost 13% of Bennington's student body was of a racially or ethnically diverse background—4.5% non-white, 8.3% international. Its efforts to expand its reach to minority populations continue [*see Appendix D(i)*].

In the fall of 2001, the Admissions Office began an initiative to contact alumni who are involved in the education and guidance of minority students as a way of building its network among people of color. Although in its infancy, alumni connections with Prep for Prep and Theater in the Schools—both in the metro-New York area—offer interesting possibilities for recruiting minority students for the undergraduate program. On a national scale, similar contacts have been established with NAIS Students of Color and the National Hispanic Scholars Recognition program.

Bennington offers a special grant to talented students transferring from community colleges into the Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in Teaching (BA/MAT) program. The Bennington Teaching Grant was designed to make the cost of a Bennington education roughly comparable to that of a community college. The Admissions Office mails information about this grant, along with nomination forms, to counselors at 150 community colleges across the country. Since the fall

of 2000, the College has funded 16 students through this program and awarded almost \$150,000 in grants. The Director of the Center for Creative Teaching (CCT), the Dean of Admissions, and the Director of Financial Aid continue to refine the strategies for this recruiting program.

The College also extends its reach to prospective minority students through student coursework and volunteerism in regional schools. A program called Quantum Leap trains Bennington students, faculty, and staff to mentor and tutor at-risk youths and, in so doing, introduce the College and its pedagogy to students who may not otherwise have considered college at all, let alone Bennington. This program generated two students of color in the Fall 2002 entering class. Bennington students also volunteer in an early college awareness program coordinated by the Foundation for Excellent Schools; Bennington is considering hosting a "College Day" as an extension of that program.

FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION

Just under 5% of the Bennington undergraduate faculty was comprised of people of color in Fall 2002, and another approximately 6% was from outside the United States [*see Appendix D(ii)*]. Members of faculty and administrative search committees are routinely asked to think about ways of generating applications from underrepresented groups with each new search. Faculty search committee members are also asked to consider scholars whose expertise crosses racial and ethnic lines. A diversity committee has been appointed in the MFA in Writing program for the purpose of expanding the network of minority candidates.

The College does not discriminate against candidates on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, place of origin, sexual orientation, or disability in terms of criteria for appointment or compensation.

CURRICULUM

Bennington has had striking success in integrating into its curriculum multicultural themes—64 courses in the 2002–03 academic year, up from 42 in 1998–99 [*see Appendix D(iii)*]. Examples are seen in courses across the disciplines—from the visual and performing arts to literature and languages, the social sciences, the natural sciences, and even mathematics. Several multicultural

curricular offerings have become the center of interdisciplinary work: For example, in the Fall 2002 Term, an anthropology course on the "Peoples and Cultures of Africa" is coupled with an African film series.

The Regional Center for Languages and Cultures (RCLC) reflects the College's belief that language learning and teaching are most effective when embodied in a cultural context. Instruction is currently offered in six languages: Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish. In addition, RCLC faculty members work with their colleagues to create courses that enrich and inform disciplines across the College curriculum. In 2002-03, for example, the RCLC faculty is collaborating with the social sciences faculty to explore the issue of capital punishment within various cultures. The RCLC also works with the College's Early Childhood Center (ECC) to teach Spanish to children ages two to six. The success of this approach to the teaching of languages is noteworthy: 40 percent of all students elect to take foreign language courses; of these students, 70 percent continue their studies beyond their first year. The Center also provides tutoring courses to non-native speakers of English in the local community and area schools.

In the College's mediation and conflict resolution curriculum, a companion to the Quantum Leap program, students practice tolerance and respect, by learning how to establish common goals through mediation. Currently, more than 20 Bennington students have been trained as mediators through this curriculum.

SUMMARY APPRAISAL

and PLANS

Since NEASC's last visit and evaluation in 1999, Bennington has substantially improved and stabilized its financial operations and enhanced its systems for supporting the collection and use of core data, long-term curricular planning, and the oversight of individual courses of study to ensure balance. The College has remained firm in its commitment to nurturing a culture deeply respectful of difference.

Bennington has laid out a conservative financial plan for the next five years, given the College's performance over the last five. It projects an increase in enrollment to 640 by Fall 2004, followed by a leveling off for the remainder of the projection period; a decrease in financial aid by no more than one half percent per year to reach a 30% "discount rate" by the end of the projection period; adjustments in student charges that will place Bennington in line with peer institutions; and fundraising consistent with its actual results over the past years.

Institutional research, curricular planning, and student plan oversight will continue to be enhanced during this period, as they have been over the last five years, with an emphasis on strengthening the infrastructure supporting these activities. The completion of the comprehensive software initiative, the establishment of the Curriculum Planning Committee, and the refinement of the plan evaluation process are just a few examples of the ways in which the College is designing structures to ensure ongoing advancement. Likewise, Bennington will continue its efforts to expand its reach to minority students, faculty, and staff. All of these efforts, by design, are intended to support the approaches to learning so central to the College's mission, to make more systematic that which has been critical to its success.