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REPORT ON A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION OF

**BENNINGTON COLLEGE**

An Evaluation Committee representing the  
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education  
of the  
New England Association of Schools and Colleges

**APRIL 1994**



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by

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Prepared after study of the institution's  
self-study report and a visit to  
the campus on April 24-27, 1994

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This report represents the views of the evaluation committee as interpreted by the chairperson. Its content is based on the committee's evaluation of the institution with respect to the Commission's criteria for accreditation. The report is prepared both as an educational service to the institution and to assist the Commission in making a decision about the institution's accreditation status.



BENNINGTON COLLEGE  
ACCREDITATION REPORT  
APRIL, 1994

INTRODUCTION

The many components of the standard set for accreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges rest upon two fundamental elements: the clear articulation of institutional purpose appropriate to education and the adequate organization of resources necessary to meet that purpose both now and in the future. Of these, Bennington College historically has excelled in the expression of a pedagogy and style of learning which was once unique in American liberal arts education and which is still highly distinctive. Bennington is recognized throughout the nation for exactly what it aims to provide: participatory education in which the teacher-practitioner and the student collaborate in projects which both create and instruct.

In its marshaling of resources to provide this sort of experience, Bennington has struggled over the past decade and more. After making notable progress at the end of the 1980s, declining student population coupled with increased need for financial aid have, since 1992, precipitated a financial crisis at the College. It was within the strictures of this crisis that the visiting team was required to make its evaluation. Our conclusions, therefore, are based upon observation of current conditions in the College and cannot reach to possible outcomes of the crisis planning now underway, the results of which would be announced in June, 1994.

I. MISSION AND PURPOSES

Bennington College is a liberal arts college which has a series of mission statements that includes the Ten Founding Principles devised by the College's first president, Robert de Vore Leigh; a statement that has been delivered at every commencement since the first in 1932; and a restatement of the mission in a trustee document of 1993. The mission consistently calls for a commitment to personal responsibility for learning; an education that focuses on the individual student; and a commitment to cultivating social responsibility. Other elements mentioned in one or two of these sources, but not all three, are the importance of an esthetic that leads to the view of liberal learning as a performing art; a strong commitment to creativity; a focus on active learning; the primacy of depth over breadth; and the integration of intellectual and of personal development.

These expressions of mission translate into the purposes of Bennington's education as expressed by President Coleman and quoted in College publications. "The interests and imagination of individuals -- both teachers and students -- . . . drive the educational process."

The mission and set of purposes of Bennington College are appropriate to an institution of higher education. Taken together, they confer a distinctive identity of the College, an identity that has defined Bennington since its founding.

The reaccreditation team sensed widespread understanding of a commitment to the Bennington model of education by faculty, students, trustees and the administration. The mission statements function well to describe the College's educational philosophy that, in turn, provides direction to the curriculum. For example, the commitment to personal responsibility for learning leads directly to the student-prepared Plan as the centerpiece of a Bennington education. Individually-focused education results both in each student following a unique program of study and in the extraordinarily large number of tutorials offered.

Neither the mission statements nor their interpretations in College publications identify the students the College seeks to serve. For example, it remains slightly ambiguous as to whether Bennington seeks to enroll students who are already capable of assuming responsibility for independent study or whether developing this capacity is a goal of the undergraduate education provided. This ambiguity is crucial in the retention of students at the current moment. Fifty percent of the students who matriculate at Bennington fail to graduate. Of those who transfer or drop out, the President estimates that perhaps half were not appropriate students for the College in the first place. If the profile of appropriateness were clearly drawn into the mission statements of the College, the educational focus of the institution would sharpen considerably, and students would be better served.

In its self study, the College argued that its own goal of developing social responsibility and civic concern does not adequately inform its curriculum or its functioning. The Visiting Team concurs in this perception and would add that, in addition, student understanding of the interrelationship of freedom and self-restraint seems to fall short of the mission statement's intention.

Although the College does periodically reexamine its mission, the reaccreditation team could not identify self-conscious ways in which the results of that reexamination are regularly used in planning and resource allocation.

## II. PLANNING AND EVALUATION

The standards for accreditation call for systematic, broad based and interrelated planning both for the short and long term to insure that the mission and purposes of the College can be accomplished in a manner which is both fundamentally stable and inherently dynamic. At this moment in Bennington's history great pressure is being brought to bear upon the Board of Trustees and the President to plan for a transformation of the College which will rectify a deep seated crisis which is both financial and educational. The decline in student numbers attributable both to admission and retention coupled with a sudden increase in financial aid requirements brought in 1992-93 an abrupt reversal of the fiscal progress made at the end of the 1980s. The College will have an actual shortfall of \$2,000,000 in its operating budget this year and at least an equal deficit in 1994-95, no matter what actions are undertaken. With an endowment of no more than \$7,900,000, no cash reserves, and a line of credit of only \$1,000,000, there is a sharp imperative to plan for a change of course.

Such planning has been undertaken in a crisis mode, mandated and designed by the Board of Trustees. The entire campus, and the key constituencies outside Bennington were invited to participate in a harvesting of ideas to improve the educational program of the College and thereby to strengthen retention of matriculated students, while appealing to increasing numbers of freshmen. Formats for gathering ideas varied from public meetings to private conversations and were intended to be as open as possible. The season for proposing new ideas lasted from April through December 1993, and is now closed while the President and the Board assess the suggestions which have emerged and determine how they will use them to renew and redirect the energies of the institution while eliminating the budget deficit. Decisions for redesign of the College will be made by the Board in June and will be enacted immediately. The visiting team saw no documentation which would detail the new plans but it was apprised by the Board of its intention to reduce significantly the size of the current faculty and to abolish the divisional structure of the academic program.

The visiting team recognizes the pressures which make urgent decision making necessary and it lauds the energy and determination of the Board and the President in addressing the crisis. Nonetheless, it does not consider this process, known at Bennington as the "Symposium," to constitute planning under the meaning of the standards for accreditation. On the contrary, the Symposium makes manifest a failure of coherent, systematic, broad based and coordinated planning over time at the College. Indeed there are some constructive contemporary planning initiatives going on: in the past two years there has been an excellent Dean's study of academic governance which was achieved by consultation and collaboration, and there has been a similarly serious though less sweeping study of residential life. In the Divisions there have been some serious reviews of the educational program and, especially among the science faculty, a commendable plan for teaching at varying levels of staffing.

However, despite the fact that they have been reported, the outcomes of these planning initiatives have not been taken back to the community for thoroughgoing review and on-going negotiation. In the case of divisional budgets, there has been no coordination with the budget office to determine feasibility, nor in the current hiatus while Board decisions are made, has there been any confirmation of plans for the coming year which would clarify matters on a departmental level.

In its planning and evaluation, Bennington is well aware that problems in the fabric of the College are manifested in the high rate at which students withdraw. Graduation rates are one time honored method of assessing the realization of an institution's educational objectives. By reorganizing the administration to provide an office of Admissions and First-Year Studies, with responsibility for institutional research, the President has signaled her own interest in evaluating the effect and effectiveness of a Bennington education. The visiting team, however, did not see the sort of detailed analysis of the experience of exiting students, or of ones graduating, which would give confidence that there is a verifiable means of demonstrating the attainment of its purposes and objectives.

In regard to Bennington's serious long term problems: attrition, ballooning financial aid, inadequate freshman matriculation, unrealistic faculty-student ratios, high per student overhead costs, inadequate educational capitalization (notably in library

and computer facilities), there is a notable lack of sustained analysis over time. There is, therefore, a corresponding inability to predict a range of future eventualities that would make comprehensible judgments about future strategies possible. The absence of such reliable data compromises the ability to plan systematically and openly.

Recognizing that the College is free to reject its advice, the visiting team urges the administration to establish an effective program for institutional research which will design and maintain longitudinal studies in sufficient detail and sophistication to enable them and their public to benchmark Bennington's financial, demographic and educational progress against that of other appropriate institutions of higher education. Such an initiative is vital to provide any measure of the College's effectiveness in accomplishing its mission and it is the prolegomena to decision making around which consensus can build.

### III. ORGANIZATION AND GOVERNANCE

Bennington College has a clear set of by-laws which locate responsibility for the College and its educational mission in the Board of Trustees. The Trustees are an unusually able and dedicated group of individuals who have understanding of the meaning and importance of the Bennington mission to educate which is nothing short of stunning. The College is currently served by a President who has the full confidence of the Board, who is in her second 5-year term and who is herself a gifted and articulate interpreter of Bennington education. Her dedication is a great deal more than full time and she inspires those who work with her to heroic effort.

In a good faith response to the visiting team report of 1982, the College addressed a lack of educational leadership in the faculty by creating an Academic Council with the participation of faculty, students and Deans, chaired by the President, with wide ranging authority to advise on the allocation of resources, the effectiveness of the academic experience and the advisability of new initiatives. This is the principal body constituted for academic governance and, in the past 10 years it has come to replace, in good measure, the faculty meeting as the locus for discussion of educational policy.

The Academic Council, by its own assessment, has enjoyed only qualified success. It is in need of a formal and regular agenda structure, of continuing discussion of essential issues and of a regular mechanism for engaging wider faculty discussion of the issues before it. There has been a tendency to use the Council for short term, operational matters, thereby depriving the College of its best representational policy planning instrument.

However, even under the best of circumstances, there is an issue at Bennington of the acceptance of any policy making by representation. There is in the culture a deep commitment to individual self determination which is massively resistant to any form of central planning. Frustration with the persisting reality of such resistance may have helped to lead the Board to its planning initiative known as the Symposium. Nonetheless, the stability, collaboration and vibrant sense of community necessary for a newly energized Bennington College will depend upon the ability to create a mode

of governing which includes faculty and students in policy and planning decisions and which communicates all stages of that policy making to the community at large so that they can participate in the process. Typically, in a liberal arts college, this is one of the President's highest priorities.

The organization and governance of Bennington College have been severely hampered by turnover in personnel in key administrative positions, most notably in admissions, in recent years. Furthermore, the structure for selecting deans from the faculty for short periods of office (currently 3 years), has significantly weakened those offices. The Dean's study has recommended a single position of Dean of the College which will entail a five-year term. The President intends to act on this recommendation. The visiting team hopes that she will use this occasion to build a senior staff of skilled administrators, some of whom have experience outside Bennington College, to whom specified responsibilities for the governance of the College can be delegated. The College at present suffers from a concentration of authority in the President's office which is unrealistic for her and which does not serve the goal of participatory governance well. A council of senior officers would provide the first planning body for the College and could function in close collaboration with the Academic Council.

The faculty, which is expected by the New England Association standards for accreditation to assure the academic integrity of the institution's educational programs, is not specifically charged with these matters in Bennington's by-laws. The faculty are, of course, active members of the Academic Council, and with the deans, are the ultimate judges of each student's individual program. Where their voice was less easy to hear in April, 1994, was in the planning for divisional programs for the coming year, in the reshaping of personnel after downsizing, and in any reorganization of individual student programs which might be necessitated.

Student views are deeply and conscientiously considered at Bennington, and structures exist for their participation in governance.

#### IV. PROGRAMS AND INSTRUCTION

Bennington College has had a sixty-year tradition of intimate, intense, and enthusiastic interactions between faculty and students. These close student-faculty interactions are a hallmark of the institution of which it can be justifiably proud. An educational process that focuses on student learning through direct engagement with the subject matter is entirely consistent with the mission of the institution, and there is general agreement that the outcome of the process is highly valued by the entire academic community.

Bennington College portrays itself as a liberal arts college in which the arts have no less a "position" than the social sciences and natural sciences. To ensure that students are exposed to a range of disciplines and approaches to knowledge within the liberal arts, distributional requirements of courses in at least four of the seven academic divisions with further course work in three of these are required for the BA degree. It is of some concern that, even though academic counselors are unlikely to approve narrowly focused student plans, the distributional requirement in

fact could be met entirely with courses drawn from within divisions that form a humanities cluster (i.e. drama, dance, visual arts, music, and literature). The reaccreditation team was unable to find any systematic data on the diversity patterns of student course selections, other than divisional enrollments.

While the educational processes at Bennington appear to be well-stated and embraced by the academic community, the essential intellectual components of a liberal arts education appear to be less clearly defined. We suggest that the institution would be well served in developing means of clearly stating and regularly assessing the educational objectives of the undergraduate (and graduate) program. Particularly at issue is the substance of the general education requirement and the agreed upon role which it currently has in a Bennington program.

The flexibility of academic programs tailored to the individual goal statements of Bennington students is a major strength of the College. Not only is there benefit in the execution of a well-designed customized curriculum (The Plan), the act of developing an individual Plan is an educational experience in itself. This process, highly dependent upon individual student counseling by faculty members, is by its very nature an uneven one.

The quality of academic and curricular advising, especially the early years in the development of a Plan appears to be uneven. Self-directed students who are highly motivated, intellectually mature, and savvy to means of successfully exploiting the system seem to thrive. However many less-sophisticated students mention a floundering process as they grapple early on with the definition and construction of the tentative Plan, especially if the faculty has not been appropriately proactive in providing some sort of structures that enable and empower a student to define her/his goals. While the definition of an academic Plan may well involve appropriate degrees of difficulty, there may be a point at which the frictional costs are high enough to lead to disenchantment with the institution. In an era of financial uncertainty and high student attrition, the College would be well served to consider means of facilitating the educational growth of these students. The new initiatives to redesign the freshman year experience should prove a positive step in this direction.

The design and execution of the individualized Plan is the keystone of the academic program at Bennington. General expectations of various divisions for designing Plans are typically elucidated both in the student handbook and in divisional handbooks for majors. The process of approving the Tentative Plan at the end of the sophomore year and a revised Confirmation of Plan (including an outline of the required Senior Project) at end of the junior year give opportunity for feedback between student and faculty in fine-tuning individual academic programs.

The options of constructing a Plan within a single division or blending several divisions together provides a flexibility that is an important element in the vitality of the institution. Recently the design of interdivisional and thematic Plans have been among the most popular options exercised by students. The inter-divisional Plans appear to be consonant with the growing enthusiasm for interdisciplinary collaborations among the faculty and students, a trend embraced and encouraged by the administration and trustees. Courses and interactions between disciplines such as dance and music or biology and history or chemistry and ceramics serve to enrich the educational opportunities of faculty and students alike.

However, interdivisional Plans require the interpretation of divisional guidelines by two members of each division. The guidelines for the construction of such interdivisional plans are often fairly ill-defined, division-centric, or multi-divisional. Rather than being facilitated by divisions, the perception among a considerable proportion of the Bennington community is that the process of designing interdivisional plans is one of bureaucratic impediments and resistance. An outsider might even inquire why two separate senior projects are required, rather than a synthetic one, if the plan is truly interdivisional (rather than multi-divisional). There is a further need to provide equity in treatment of interdivisional majors that extends to such issues as interdivisional senior projects in visual arts lacking studio space and senior exhibitions.

The diversity of interests on the part of the faculty and the willingness of the faculty actively to enter collaborative teaching efforts with the students is a strength of Bennington College. However in the process a relatively small-sized faculty has been stretched to disciplinary limits as many divisions attempt to maintain a diversity of academic and intellectual options. It is not infrequent for a single faculty member to be the sole representative of a discipline, e.g. economics, chemistry, mathematics or physics. This situation raises both a 'critical mass' issue of having a sufficient number of faculty to provide minimal depth in various fields and a structural issue of even short-term stability in meeting the needs embodied in student's Plans. We have concern regarding a Science Division with a single chemist and a single mathematician providing the range of courses and tutorials necessary for a viable liberal arts undergraduate experience.

The "thinness" of the faculty is a situation exacerbated by the perception of relatively high turnover rates in the ranks of adjunct faculty. Many students and faculty alike have expressed frustration with a lack of programmatic stability (whether courses will be given over a several year period and by whom) that makes it difficult smoothly to complete their academic Plans. The outcome and implementation of the restructuring of Bennington College over the summer may have a considerably disruptive impact on a large proportion of existing tentative and confirmed plans.

The curriculum is enriched and kept vital by the emphasis on tutorial teaching formats, particularly in the Junior and Senior years. These tutorials are among the most cherished experiences of both faculty and students. With a faculty that appears to be stretched to the limit with classroom teaching and advising duties, the College needs to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of offering the number and range of tutorials. This is not to suggest that tutorials are not an important feature of the Bennington educational process, it is a call for evaluation and introspection regarding the most useful means of providing education to students with limited faculty resources. It is unknown how the restructuring of the College may impact the ability of the faculty to respond to student requests for the diversity of tutorials in the future.

## FIELD WORK TERM

The two-month, non-resident term has been a fixture of the Bennington College program since the college's founding. As with many aspects of non-traditional calendars, the Field Work Term presents many exciting possibilities as well as some

difficulties. For advanced students involved in their Senior Projects or Theses it represents a block of uninterrupted time to immerse themselves in work without the other academic or social distractions. Some first-year students have even adopted this model, staying on campus and working collaboratively with faculty on research projects. For other students it is an opportunity to make money to help defray the costs of their college educations and for still others an opportunity for hands-on experience in fields that are newly opening to them. On the downside, there appear to be a significant number of students, especially early in their Bennington careers, who default into some off-campus activity not directly related to either their intellectual growth or increasing their diversity of experiences. We encountered a frequently expressed desire for the College systematically to address the potential for the Field Work Term to enhance the educational programs of all students here.

## EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES AND EXPERIENCES

The quality of the educational experience of many Bennington students appears to be quite high, as judged by continuation on to post-graduate studies, career routes of alumni, and testimony of faculty and students alike. However, the *Self Study* expressed concern that academic standards were not uniformly applied across all courses, disciplines, and divisions. The visiting team found it very difficult to obtain quantitative information regarding this concern and full assessment of the academic quality/rigor issue was not possible during our short visit. In retrospect this was not a surprising situation in an institution that uses descriptive narratives in lieu of grades and generally eschews course examinations. It would appear from our anecdotal information that students who bring a high degree of motivation to their courses are greeted with high standards and expectations by the faculty, while those who display lesser degrees of educational enthusiasm or intellectual curiosity may drift along less challenged. Our difficulty in assessing this general issue points to the needs for Bennington to define the educational objectives of its courses clearly and develop means of evaluating the issue of standards.

## GRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAMS

Bennington has instituted Master of Fine Arts, Master of Arts in Liberal Studies, and Post-Baccalaureate Science programs. The presence of these students and programs at Bennington provides an opportunity for further enrichment of the academic life of the community as well as a means of contributing to the revenues of the College. The impacts of these programs on the undergraduate programs have not been entirely positive. The number of Post-Baccalaureate students in introductory science courses is often greater than the number of undergraduates, and some of the latter have expressed a sense of intimidation by the mass of older, more mature students in the classroom. Greater attention to the academic and social interfaces between undergraduate and graduate programs might well reduce this anxiety. A more difficult issue to work on is the real or perceived feeling of competition of undergrads with students in graduate programs for studio space and faculty attention.

The MFA and Post-Baccalaureate programs are administered by the academic divisions that provide the educational experience, while the newer, interdivisional MALS program is administered by the Dean of Studies' Office. While there has been great enthusiasm for the educational experiences of the small number of MALS students, the administrative and counseling aspects of this program appear to need greater attention.

## THE FUTURE INTEGRITY OF PROGRAMS

The process that is leading to the restructuring of Bennington College after 1 July 1994 appears to be causing a "political distraction" of the educational process this spring. Both faculty and students seem to have a high degree of angst as they anticipate an uncertain intermediate future. Lacking specific proposals, we find it difficult to predict specific impacts of a restructuring plan on the integrity of programs of instruction at the College. However we expect that they will be significant. In the interim the current anticipatory environment detracts from the educational mission of the college and planning process.

## ADMISSION AND RETENTION

As the Bennington Self Study (March 1994) indicates, enrollment has dropped dramatically since 1989 "from an annualized enrollment of 579 to a current annualized enrollment of 425." This fact has had tremendous implications for the Bennington budget and the critical mass of students on campus. What is key in this decline is not a drop in the applicant pool (in 1989 there were 546 applicants compared to 584 in 1993), but rather a change in the yield of accepted students. Since 1989, Bennington has made a conscious effort to improve the quality of its classes by accepting fewer students. To its credit, the fall of 1993 showed an increase of 55 points in median SAT's over 1992. However, as it competes with more selective institutions, the yield on accepted students has declined from 47% until fall term 1992 to 39% in 1993, having dramatic implications for the size of last fall's entering class of 132 (from projected 180).

If Bennington intends to continue to enroll smaller classes, thus maintaining the quality of its entering classes in the future, it will have to increase its applicant pool to have a broader base of students to draw from. In fact, the administration would like to see a student population of 600 on campus by 1996. Small entering classes in 1993-94 will have a ripple effect through subsequent years on tuition driven revenues. Given the climate of admissions nationally, this is no easy task to achieve.

Coupled with these problems is a clear trend toward an increasingly needy population at Bennington. The Admitted Student Questionnaire for 1993 indicates that Bennington is losing too many middle and high income students who chose not to enroll at the college. Eighty per-cent of those who are admitted and do not enroll come

from these families compared to 64% in 1992. More attempts need to be made to convert these accepted students to enrollees. Last fall, the financial aid budget rose to 37% of comprehensive fee revenue due to smaller enrollments and a needier student body.

In order to address some of these issues, the Admission Office has recently undergone restructuring. For more than 5 years, there has been constant turnover in the position of Director of Admission. Under the leadership of a new Dean of Admission and the Freshmen Year attempts are being made to stabilize the office in order for Bennington to move forward in its recruitment of new students. A search firm is currently looking for a new Associate Director of Admission who will manage the Admission Office while the new Dean oversees admission, the first year experience, the July Program, the summer writing workshops, and institutional research.

To date, the new Dean has targeted the transfer population and full pay international students as viable expanded markets for Bennington. The Visiting Team understands these priorities for Bennington, since transfer students tend to be more independent than recent high school graduates and make an easier transition to the self-guided study required by the institution. However, it did not see the policies and procedures that will be enacted in a new program of attracting such students which will safeguard appropriate credit exchange.

The Dean also hopes to use the summer July Program which currently offers high school students a rich month long experience in dance, drama, music, writing, language, the visual arts, social sciences and sciences as a tool for attracting applicants for the first year. In doing so, and in concentrating cultivation on particularly promising "feeder" schools, she hopes to reverse an image of the College as relatively unselective. Bennington will expand its travel program beyond its traditional markets on the East Coast and California. It will also further develop its alumnae admission volunteer program to provide increased contact with prospectives in the field.

Marketing Bennington more effectively will be a key factor as the institution moves in new directions. The Bennington viewbook and prospectus give an accurate picture of the mission and purpose of the institution at this time. They are well designed and capture the ethos of the College. Plans are currently being made in redesigning the viewbook to deal with changes brought about by June decisions of the Trustees. The visiting team could not determine in April how current prospective students who may have seen existing recruiting materials may react to the changes soon to take place in the college.

In reviewing the Admitted Student Questionnaire (1992), it is clear that the vast majority of students enroll at Bennington for reasons of personal attention and availability of majors. However, some of the negative images associated with the college have to do with academic reputation and a perceived lack of an environment of excellence. As Bennington brings in more selective classes, and initiates new programs associated with the Symposium, it will need to do a great deal of marketing work to reflect its new image through media, press, publications, and correspondence with counselors.

Bennington not only faces an admission problem. Retention is a major issue at the college. The College needs to verify the President's intuition that a significant

portion of their drop outs never belonged at Bennington, and study in detail the profiles and experience of those who stay and those who leave. The results of such a study should be a major element in ongoing review of the effectiveness of the educational program, as well as that of the admission office.

The position of Dean of Admissions and the Freshman Class was created to deal directly with retention. The office is now responsible for institutional research, which hitherto seems to have relied upon pockets of data to be found in different offices such as admission, financial aid, the registrar, and student affairs. The visiting team stresses the urgent need to undertake longitudinal retention studies immediately. Exit interviews have been collected since the fall of 1993 and should prove an important first element in building a research program.

As a result of the Symposium, new courses are being proposed for the Freshman year that will bring students together in new ways and bond them more effectively to the institution. The visiting team did not see any plan for such courses. The Dean is also proposing group counseling sessions, in addition to one-on-one academic advising sessions, to bring students together and create a greater sense of cohesiveness in the first year. Faculty with special advising strengths have been targeted to work with freshman students.

In addition to traditional and transfer students, there is a small graduate population on campus. Applications submitted to the Admission Office are reviewed by faculty in the divisions. The Master of Fine Arts Program exists in dance, music, the visual arts, drama and writing. There is also a Bennington Bank Street Education Program leading to a BA from Bennington and an MS from Bank Street after 5 years. The Admission Office publishes requirements for these programs. It is unclear whether these programs will be further developed as enrollment initiatives.

It is the visiting team's assessment that the road ahead will be a difficult one. There is danger, with the changes about to take place, that the college may lose more of its current students, and that the process of change with its attendant instability may turn away prospective students who are unsure what the nature of Bennington will be in the future.

## V. FACULTY STANDARD

The self-study asserts that "by far the most precious asset of Bennington is its faculty." We found much strength in the faculty who appear to have a strong consensus about the mission of Bennington and the kind of philosophy of education that is at the heart of the institution. Both faculty and students speak eloquently and passionately about the distinctive Bennington model of education.

All of our discussions, however, were clouded by the uncertainty regarding the future of the institution and the belief that in the face of severe fiscal pressures major restructuring was imminent. It is fair to say there is tremendous anxiety and disquiet within the faculty. Since we have only a vague outline of what the future might bring, we can only present divergent views on campus at the present.

Everyone seems to recognize that change must happen and that the faculty are central to that change. The question in dispute is how to go about it. Issues regarding the faculty standard become inevitably intertwined with issues of organization and governance.

## FACULTY GOVERNANCE

There is a confusing sense of power, authority, and jurisdictional responsibility and pronounced tension between the faculty and the administration.

The strong traditions of individualism, at their best, yield creative energy that infuses the highly individualized Bennington education and decentralized faculty self-governance. But this individualism can degenerate into self-interestedness and turfism, and there is a weaker sense of how to tie the individual faculty member to larger institutional purposes and responsibilities and how to develop faculty governance structures and policies that work. At its worst, anarchic individualism reigns and collective action is blocked.

There have been positive steps, such as the Dean's Study, towards strengthening "the understanding of the relationship between freedom and responsibility, the individual and the group, and the group and the larger community." We are encouraged by the collaborative processes and the wide consultation that engendered that document. While we do not believe it appropriate to comment on the viability of the particular proposals, the proposed reform is clearly an attempt to begin to address deficiencies in academic governance and processes.

Proposals in the Deans' Study include: stabilizing the leadership of Division Chair, consolidating and strengthening the position of the Deans, clarifying the functioning of the committees, creating a separate Curriculum Committee to give more systematic oversight to the curriculum, encouraging greater collaboration across the divisions, drawing faculty into institutional leadership positions, establishing guidelines for searches and hiring, instituting a residency requirement, strengthening the evaluation of teaching and the evaluation of junior faculty, clarifying faculty review processes, and commissioning an ethical conduct policy statement.

In short, the document offers constructive suggestions about ways to strengthen faculty responsibility and accountability. We were also impressed with the positive attitude of many faculty about engaging in reflective thinking concerned with reform of the curriculum at the divisional level.

The principal vehicle for planning and change currently underway at the College is the Symposium. Initially this process invited the community to forward their ideas for the future of Bennington, but this solicitation of opinion failed to generate a collaborative planning process and the process became closed in its latter stages. In this break with processes of open communication and collaboration, it failed to model the kind of shared responsibility for academic direction that is its alleged goal. The

Board has decided to eliminate public disclosure of its planning in process because of the likelihood of significant reduction of faculty positions. They have suspended business as usual and have assumed centralized planning. Their intention is to return appropriate power to the faculty once the institution has been restructured. The wisdom of this strategy is yet to be tested.

The visiting team can draw no conclusions as to the effect of the Symposium process on faculty governance at this time because planning had not advanced by the time of its visit to a point at which documentation could be shared with it.

### Faculty Roles: Teaching, Scholarship, and Research

We were impressed with the impassioned testimonials from many students about the effectiveness and commitment of professors to their teaching responsibilities. We were also impressed with the engagement of students in the evaluation of teaching through the SEPC.

The model of faculty responsibility at Bennington is to combine teaching with professional practice or scholarship. Emphasis is given to the practitioner model, and it is not clear whether traditional measures of research productivity are applied consistently. While there are clearly many accomplished artists and scholars on the faculty, the criteria of evaluation in this area of faculty responsibility are murky, and there are concerns on the part of the Board that the faculty, through the Faculty Personnel Committee, has not exercised sufficient rigor in its evaluation and judgment of faculty. We are not in a position to judge the accuracy of this allegation; however, we do wonder if the criteria for reappointment and for presumptive tenure could be clarified and the relative importance of the five stated criteria explicitly stated. We further wonder whether the renewed emphasis on faculty presence and greater interdisciplinarity is compatible with the desire to bring more active practitioners onto the faculty.

We are concerned with the inattention to issues of faculty development and mentoring. Bennington seems to be quite cut off from national discourse about curricular issues, pedagogical developments, and especially use of technology in instruction. Leadership and resources need to be dedicated to this area.

While there is a general recognition that salaries are low in relationship to comparative institutions, concerns were expressed to us particularly about work-load equity and compensation and benefits especially for part-time faculty.

Perhaps our greatest concerns with respect to the faculty are the lack of trust between the faculty and the administration and the failure of the institution to develop and to tap faculty leadership and to build collaborative processes that work.

## VI. STUDENT SERVICES

Bennington College seeks to provide an environment which fosters the intellectual and personal development of its students consistent with its mission and purposes. Faculty and students praise the academic experience which characterizes the unique nature of the College. Exploration and discovery through the intimate, often intense, and highly individualistic academic programs are valued not only for what they contribute to the student's academic growth, but to his/her personal development as well.

Faculty and students agree that the major strength of a Bennington education is its academic programs and activities. As one student eloquently expressed it : "The teachers are the jewels of the College." In its many conversations with faculty, students and administrators, the visiting committee heard testimony that the College should seek to encourage an environment where students and faculty work together in a partnership to foster the academic and intellectual growth of students and support the College's central educational purposes. We also heard that the College should strive to create a safe, healthy, educationally and socially stimulating residential community; that it should articulate, affirm and maintain standards of conduct for responsible behavior within the College community; that it should sponsor a rich variety of co-curricular opportunities for the student's intellectual, physical, social, emotional and moral growth and development; and that it should encourage students to be self-aware and to make informed decisions in shaping their college years and subsequent lives.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a significant disconnection between the academic and social lives of too many Bennington students. While lively intellection undoubtedly exists on campus, it would be difficult to describe the College environment as contributing to what might be called a student intellectual community. To a certain extent, the entrepreneurial and self-directed values that characterize much of the student community contribute to the absence of a strong intellectual student culture. Students describe their experiences at Bennington in familiar terms: "We work hard and we play hard." This is a refrain heard on most of our nation's campuses. Yet, there seems to be at Bennington College a prevailing view that this gulf between academic work and social engagement is especially wide. However, there are other significant factors that seem to mitigate against sustaining an intellectual milieu.

In particular, life outside the academic experience has suffered because the College has lacked strong and continuous student life administrative leadership for several years. The visiting committee agrees with the Self Study observation that discontinuity in the leadership of that office is a primary concern. The visiting committee encourages the College to continue its active search for this significant senior appointment. It is important that this person be someone of vision whose experience, training and background will permit the creation of a student life program that continues to support an individualistic student culture within the context of a shared sense of community. It is important that this person be much more than someone who has student activities or programming experience. The numerous issues which affect the life of students outside their academic experiences require the distinctive leadership of an individual with vision and maturity.

The next student life director must also bring experience in planning and evaluation. At present, the student life office does not have a sufficient database about student life in order for the College to make informed decisions, design programs or plan for the future. In particular, the new director must work with the appropriate offices to develop a more detailed examination of the retention problem which confronts the institution. Who is leaving? At what point in their Bennington careers are they leaving? Why are they leaving? The answers to these questions are critical to the long-term viability of Bennington and must be fully comprehended in ways other than the anecdotal. At present, the institution does not do a very good job of systematically identifying the characteristics and learning needs of its student population in order to make provisions for responding to them. While Bennington does seek to resolve students' personal and physical problems, this effort is principally local --- student life counseling and psychological and health service ---rather than broadly programmatic.

The new director must also engage the student life office in a process that will clarify and strengthen its objectives and goals. Its mission must be clearly articulated to students and faculty. Expectations of student conduct must be clearly expressed in the rules, regulations and policies which govern student life. Finally, the next director of student life must be a strong individual who understands the process of communication and the social dynamics of an institution like Bennington.

The residential nature of Bennington College is, of course, a significant feature of the undergraduate experience. Residential experience should be understood not only to signify where students live, but how they live as well. It has reference to their social lives, dining experiences, how they study and work, how they engage one another intellectually, how they spend time with faculty and how they organize their so-called free-time. These activities give significant shape to their academic experiences.

It is in this spirit that the visiting committee supports generally the recommendations of the Residential Life Committee. The Residential Life Committee is an ad hoc committee composed of faculty, students, staff and administration who were appointed by the President in the Fall term, 1993-94. According to the Committee's report, its primary mission was to make recommendations to enhance the quality of residential life at Bennington, improve student self-governance, and facilitate better lines of communication throughout the College community. The visiting committee believes that the Committee has fulfilled, to a large extent, the President's charge. Nevertheless, the process of implementation of the report's recommendations had not yet borne fruit by the time of this visit. We are concerned that College community has not been fully engaged in discussions concerning the broad implications of the report's findings and recommendations. While we understand the sometimes difficult task of engaging students and faculty in these issues, it is crucial to the success of the report's recommendations that the College senior administration bring these matters to the attention of the community in significant and meaningful ways. We also appreciate that this engagement may require a level of untested creativity. While recognizing its freedom in this regard, the Committee urges the College to develop a coherent plan to ensure that faculty and students have ample opportunities to discuss and debate the report. In particular, a notable passage in the report requires the community's attention: "We have found the quality of residential life

to be greatly effected by the quality of academic life. Responses to our questionnaires and conversations with students have indicated two main concerns regarding

academics: lack of academic rigor and the lack of integration of residential life with academic life. A rich residential life requires a rich academic life. We feel that there should be a more formal assessment of the intellectual climate on campus, as well as a stronger faculty presence."

The visiting committee believes that the College would benefit by an audit of the student intellectual climate. This audit should help the College respond to important student life issues within the context of a well-defined student life philosophy which is disseminated and reviewed on a regular basis..

Further, the visiting committee recommends that the College explore the possibility of creating a student life committee as a permanent feature of the faculty governance structure. The purpose of this committee should be to advise the Director of Student Life and the Dean of Studies regarding the social, residential and intellectual life of Bennington undergraduates. The committee should be composed of faculty, students and administrators; it should be chaired by a member of the faculty. The committee should annually report to the faculty on its activities. The visiting committee believes that the establishment of such a committee will permit the faculty to become appropriately engaged and involved in the non-academic lives of undergraduates, an aim which the College itself cherishes.

Special attention must be paid to the College's housing programming. While it has become clear through conversations with students and administrators that the student house governance structure is critical in maintaining the integrity and vitality of student life, significant aspects of this structure are no longer effective. In particular, the House Chairs system has cease to function. The Self Study states that a primary responsibility of the House Chairs is to "serve as the link between house members and the Student Life Office, the Security Department, the Maintenance Department and student government." It is clear from the Residential Life Committee report and discussions with students and administrators that House Chairs no longer effectively fulfill these responsibilities. Student Life staff report that House Chairs are often elected without regard to their leadership capacities and that they do not participate fully in the orientation and training programs organized by that office for the benefit of the undergraduate community.

Bennington seems to be an institution without a sufficiently large core of strong student leaders. Student leaders help to shape student opinion, promote community and serve as an important link between College policy and student conduct. The absence of such leadership on campus is a significant problem. Yet, it is unclear whether this inadequacy results from values inherent in the student culture or from a failure of student life planning and initiative.

Additionally, the visiting committee believes that the College should examine the potential role that faculty who live in campus housing might play in sustaining a healthy and lively intellectual environment in the student housing. We agree with the Residential Life Committee report's observation that faculty represent a valuable resource in helping to shape student life.

Student life staff have identified alcohol and substance abuse as a serious problem. The staff point to the history of vandalism and damage that has characterized the behavior of students in some of the houses. The visiting committee is encouraged by the programs which have been funded by the FIPSE grant awarded two years ago. The committee urges the College to continue to fund the program at the conclusion of the grant.

Finally, the visiting committee must acknowledge the anxiety and stress that students expressed regarding the future of the College. Students worry about the outcome of the Symposium discussions. It is important that whatever plans and actions that emerge from the Symposium process should be shaped by considerations of student concerns and with an eye towards transforming the College's student life programs so that they might be more effective in helping to fulfill the College's mission.

It must be said in closing that the visiting team did not see evidence of any clearly articulated goals for diversity within the student body, nor were there programs staffed primarily for the benefit of under represented or differently abled groups.

## FINANCIAL AID

Student financial aid is delivered through a well organized program subject to periodic audit. The Director of Financial Aid has been at Bennington for 10 years and has moved up the ranks from an assistant director to her current position. She reports to the VP for Finance and Administration. Her office is located across the hall from the Admission Office and there is a great deal of collaboration between the two.

Whereas 71% of the incoming class is on financial aid, only 57% of the sophomore class qualified for aid. Bennington may find itself replacing cheaper with more expensive classes in future years.

## VII. LIBRARY AND INFORMATION RESOURCES

The team visit occurred during a promising moment in the development of library and computing services at Bennington: both a new Librarian and a new Coordinator for Technology recently were appointed and each brings a new vision for harnessing information and computing resources to enrich teaching and learning at Bennington. Nonetheless, the team has serious concern that neither department head will receive adequate resources to translate his vision into reality.

### The Library

Evaluation of the library must begin with mention of the death this past January of the previous librarian.

This report describes the library at the time of the team visit, recognizing that the new librarian will bring fresh perspectives and experience gained at a technologically developed university.

This is an exciting time in the development of libraries as technology is transforming how information in all formats is stored and retrieved and how scholarship is conducted. However, the team is seriously concerned that the College is not providing the necessary resources -- in budget, facilities or staff -- to enable the Library adequately to support the curriculum. The team has further concern that instruction in use of information resources is not an integral part of a Bennington education.

It will be important for the new librarian to evaluate services and staffing patterns and to engage in some type of planning process involving both library staff and faculty members to set out short-term and long-term goals for the Library, to determine how in the face of severely limited funds, staff and facilities, the Library will progress with the many challenging projects it faces. Currently, the library staff is smaller by two positions than at the last Self-Study, yet the workload has increased, necessitating that each staff member "wear several hats".

It also will be important for the new librarian to establish a strong and collaborative relationship between the library and computing services and to provide needed direction and expertise in forging connections among the various information technology resources on campus -- library, computing center, audio visual services, and satellite dish technology -- and to help shape a plan for integrating information and computer literacy into the curriculum.

Size never is a complete measure of the ability of a library to support a teaching program. However, by any standard measure -- number of books, number of periodicals, annual budgets, Bennington's support for the library falls far short of other institutions. "The Campaign for Bennington" presents telling library statistics for comparable colleges: of ten selected institutions, Antioch has the smallest enrollment of 536 and Bennington is next smallest with 567 students. Antioch has more than double the volumes, receives more than twice the number of periodicals, and added a third more books. In the year the Self-Study was written, the book budget had increased by less than \$10,000 since the previous self-study ten years earlier and the library budget as a percentage of the total college budget had slipped from 3.0% in 1982-83 to 2.2%. Since other liberal arts colleges fund their libraries in the vicinity of 4-5%, the concern of the visiting team should be evident.

Faculty appraisal of the ability of collections to support teaching needs is mixed. All faculty members who met with the team expressed admiration and appreciation of library staff efforts to use creatively very limited funds to provide needed materials through purchase or inter-library loan. However, others expressed deep anger at the continued erosion of budgeted funds for all types of instructional materials. Given the openness and flexibility of the curriculum, library resources may be used in some non-traditional ways. However, the summary view of the team is that no matter how the curriculum may be reshaped as a result of the Symposium, library collections and technological resources can provide only the most minimal support in size, depth or currency. This is especially true for masters level programs.

In light of the small size of the library's collections and its small staff, providing students with first-rate access to collections through an integrated library system

should be a high priority of the institution. As is true with other technological initiatives on campus, Bennington is far behind peer liberal arts institutions because of its failure to have a library system in place. However, the library staff deserve praise for deciding to mount a CD-ROM catalog as an interim solution. Outside funds should be sought to complete the on-line database. Fifty percent of the book collection is still in Dewey and also has to be added to the database. Students don't know they should consult both the CD-ROM and card catalogs, so ILL requests are placed for items already in the collections. The institution also should give the library administrative support to make the library catalog the central listing for all information resources on campus, including any videotapes and books held by Divisions, and most notably, Music Library holdings. Serious consideration should be given to moving administration of the Music Library, including its cataloging practices, to the new Librarian so that it is managed according to professional library standards. Currently, a full time staff member is being paid to "catalog" music materials into a card file instead of over OCLC when OCLC is available on campus and could be made available in Jennings.

The team also is concerned about the failure of the College to offer training in computing to faculty or any assistance in technological applications to teaching and learning. Such training is not the responsibility of the library staff alone, but must include them to be fully effective.

In light of limited resources, staff have judiciously selected the three CD-ROM periodical citation databases that are most appropriate for the curriculum: Infotrac, a general periodical index, Modern Language Association Bibliography and the ERIC database to support the Bank Street program. However, at Bennington as in other libraries, their use has resulted in greatly increased demands for periodical articles which has led to a staggering increase in the need for inter-library loan borrowing. Requests to date this year already match total requests placed in all of 1992-93. The College should recognize and support the hidden costs of ILL and consider providing additional staff for this fast growing aspect of library operations.

The recent increase in ILL requests also highlights the need to consider integrating a critical thinking skill component into future library skill instruction to train students to give careful thought to which resources are actually needed for a research paper.

While faculty are generally pleased by ILL services, most libraries today are enhancing those services by utilizing electronic document delivery services, some of which are commercially based and others which are integrated into OCLC ILL requesting.

Today, every academic library faces the challenge of finding the right balance between print and electronic resources to support the institution's educational mission. Whatever Bennington's choices are, they will require additional funding beyond the present library budget, as well as access to the Internet.

The most pressing technological need of the Library is Internet access. The new librarian recognizes the centrality of Internet access to library services today and doubtless will give this need immediate attention. With such access, the Library must conduct on-line database searching for faculty and students. Here again, the team urges the college to provide the library with needed funding.

Mention of on-line database searching leads to the general observation of the team that the college should consider imposing some limitations on allowing Divisions to order instructional services and materials without the college-wide coordination that is standard on other campuses. Many cost-savings might be realized by consolidating such requests into the library or into a centralized audio-visual budget. The library lacks needed funds to support on-line database searching, a service that should be available to all faculty and students, yet a few privileged faculty members have this access through division budgets or research grants. Other instructional materials also are acquired by individual faculty members or Divisions in similar fashion.

Consideration also should be given to consolidating audio-visual services. Over the years, divisions have ordered various pieces of equipment e.g. VCR's in the absence of any campus-wide standardization guidelines. This is not a recommendation that all A-V equipment should be housed in one place. It is sensible that each building house hardware continuously demanded by faculty in that building. But without a central inventory of equipment there usually is needless and expensive over-purchasing and an inability to have equipment shared among Divisions when equipment breaks down or needs change. The lack of a centralized A-V department and the disconnectedness of the satellite dish facility in the language department from the library or an audio-visual services department is emblematic of the lack of broad planning initiatives that the team observed throughout the college.

The library staff appear to have done little or nothing in the area of evaluation of services. In light of the small size of the staff this is not surprising. The staff wisely has not expended limited energies in this area when they barely are able to meet rising service demands.

Acknowledgment by the College of the severe inadequacies of the Crossett library building is clearly stated in "The Campaign for Bennington". There is insufficient space to accommodate existing print and technological resources and no expansion space. Staff and reader areas also are inadequate. The building's award-winning elegant design is still evident but the overwhelming feeling is uncomfortable crowdedness. The staff have taken sensible measures to make the most effective utilization of existing space, tightly shelving Dewey classified collections and adding space efficient moveable stacking where floor loading is sufficient. The plans for an addition to Crossett as outlined in the Campaign are indefinitely on hold until the College resolves its financial crisis. The building no longer provides an atmosphere that encourages the serious inquiry, study and learning among students and faculty that are central to Bennington's educational mission. Hopefully, funds will become available in the future to bring to reality the building expansion design that is on hold. At that time, should the New Media Center exist, it should be determined if it would be appropriate to relocate it in the library; centralizing administration of audiovisual services there as well also could be discussed.

The team is especially concerned that there has been no faculty development initiative to engage faculty members in discourse about the role information literacy can play in teaching and learning and about the responsibility of the College to teach students information literacy to prepare them for lifelong learning.

## VIII. COMPUTING TECHNOLOGY

The Board and the President realize that Bennington has a tremendous amount of catching up to do in the area of computing services. The Apple project to establish New Media Centers and the appointment of a Coordinator for Technology, a new position, represent the college's effort to "leapfrog" ahead, but the team has serious concerns about how this and related activities as announced in an open letter to the Community on the future of computer and Media technology at Bennington (issued during the team visit) will become reality. The Apple project is ambitious and includes training every student in CD-ROM authoring, training every faculty member, and establish a lab of high-end equipment.

The team has many concerns. As of the date of this visit there has been no comprehensive planning effort to integrate the new technology into into the tracking and research programs of the college. By "comprehensive" planning the team envisions not only detailed budgeting but all inclusive faculty participation so that course materials, library research and data base searching in the sciences are provided for both on a current and a going forward basis. As of the time of the vsisit there was no detailed plan to network the campus or to connect to the Internet although a proposal for this purpose is about to be submitted to NSF, and the New Media Centers project and other elements described in the open letter e.g. equipping the faculty and student population with portable computer hardware and software are entirely dependent on soft money. While several proposals have been submitted to major foundations or are about to be submitted, no funds currently are available to realize these extremely far-reaching goals. There also has been no progress visible to the team toward an integrated administrative software package that would enable the administration to capture and manipulate data needed for institutional research.

The team suggests that a coordinating committee for computing services develop a comprehensive computing plan for computing services. On other campuses such committees include the directors of computing services, the library, audio-visual services and faculty members who already are well trained in computing skills. There are numerous policies and procedures that will need to be established as computing technology is introduced on a large-scale effort. The college would do well to begin to consider these now, in a far more formal framework than it has exercised to date.

Any newly hired faculty or staff members will expect to find a computer in their office and Internet connectivity, in the same way they expect to find a telephone. Bennington has a wonderful opportunity to enter the "Computer Age" with thoughtfulness and with its characteristic originality.

## IX. PHYSICAL RESOURCES

With noted exceptions, the Bennington campus appears to be appropriate and sufficient to meet the institution's needs. The self-study recognized the serious concerns as to the adequacy of the amount of Library space and recreational facilities.

Conversely, generous space seems to exist currently in certain other areas, such as the science and music facilities. It should be noted that funds from the current Capital Campaign had been targeted for facilities but unfortunately the current financial exigencies have caused those plans to be deferred. The College has engaged consulting architects who appear to be taking a deliberate approach to correcting space deficiencies which will focus first on adaptive reuse of existing facilities. No new facilities should be considered until financial stability has been achieved, and all possibilities for conversion of existing space has been thoroughly considered. It is recommended that appropriate consultation take place with the campus constituencies if space is to be reallocated in order that the full range of options are explored, the programmatic impact is understood and that the decisions made by the administration gain wider understanding.

The College had increased its funding for reduction of its deferred maintenance backlog in the years 1987-89. That funding has been reduced from \$255,000 in Fiscal Year 1990/91 to the current level of \$150,000. The Vice President for Finance and Administration and Director of Maintenance indicate that there are no acute facilities issues which will not be addressed on a timely basis due to the decreased spending. However, it will undoubtedly result in a deterioration of the facilities over time if the funding is not reinstated. Many of the buildings are in need of paint, both internally and externally, and there is a need for some non-major roof repairs. The College should make the reinstatement of the deferred maintenance funding a priority. Overall, the Director of Maintenance and his staff appear to accomplish the maximum possible with scarce resources, and have recently achieved significant savings through energy conservation efforts.

The consulting architects are also assisting the College in addressing the issues of access and fire safety. The deficiencies in these areas must be identified, the latter addressed with urgency and a plan developed to make the campus accessible on a reasonable basis.

## X. FINANCIAL RESOURCES

At June 30, 1993 Bennington College had combined fund balances of approximately \$7.5 million (\$7.9 million with endowment investments at market rather than cost). Liabilities of the College totaled \$7.1 million. The net positive combined fund balance is an improvement over recent years when the College's liabilities, comprised primarily of long term bonds, exceeded its net fund balance.

The shift to a net positive fund balance is mainly due to Bennington's Capital Campaign, currently in progress, which helped to increase the value of its endowment funds to approximately \$7.5 million at June 30, 1993 from \$3.7 million at June 30, 1989. Unfortunately, during the same period that the Endowment Funds began to increase, the College began to experience operating deficits. Those deficits were largely the result of a decline in enrollment, which began in Fiscal Year 1988/89 and accelerated sharply in Fiscal Year 1993/94. In addition, a higher percentage of the smaller entering classes required more financial aid than had previously been budgeted. The result at this very tuition dependent institution (75% of gross revenues are provided by undergraduate tuition and fees) is that the balanced budget for Fiscal

Year 1993/94 will not be realized. The College now projects an operating deficit of \$2.2 million. That amount will be partially offset by revenues generated by the current campaign, leaving an estimated unfunded deficit of slightly over \$1.1 million. In Fiscal Year 1992/93 the College increased its interfund borrowing, from the endowment funds, in order to provide the necessary cash for current operations. It is now unclear

as to whether the funds will exist to repay those borrowings in order to invest the new gifts credited to the endowment in income-producing assets of those funds. The College also reports that it has liquidated the last of its reserves with the transfer of the entire balance in its quasi-endowment funds to the current fund at June 30, 1993.

Bennington has undertaken a number of measures in recent years to compensate for the decline in net revenues provided by undergraduate tuition and fees. In addition to wage freezes, the size of the faculty has been reduced by 4 FTE's (with 4 more cuts planned), 17 non-faculty positions have been eliminated, instructional capital equipment has been reduced from \$58,000 in Fiscal Year 1990/91 to \$35,000 in Fiscal Year 1993/94 and finally, the budget for funding of the College's deferred maintenance has been reduced from \$255,000 in Fiscal Year 1990/91 to a current level of \$150,000. It appears that costs have been minimized where possible.

In 1991 Bennington embarked upon a multi-year, \$30 million Capital Campaign. The College reports that it is now over halfway (\$18.1 in gifts and pledges) towards achieving its goal. Of the amount raised approximately \$4.3 million is in the form of bequests and life insurance for which the timing of receipt is obviously unpredictable. To date, the Campaign has been dependent to a significant degree on the College's Board of Trustees. The Vice President for Alumni and Development Relations estimates that 35-40% of the Campaign's current total has been provided by members of the Board. The fundraising goals listed in "The Campaign for Bennington: A Reaffirmation of Principle" are:

Endowment	\$ 15,000,000
Investment in Faculty	3,000,000
Investment in Students	3,000,000
Facilities and Equipment	4,000,000
Library	5,000,000

In the words of the Campaign Case Statement "the purpose of this campaign is for Bennington College to achieve an order of financial stability and strength commensurate with its educational purposes and a match for its educational potential." The Statement quotes John W. Barr, chairman of the Board of Trustees: "From being driven by events we have arrived at a moment where it is possible to drive events. For the first time in years we can ask, not "what will become of the College," but "what can this College become?". Having achieved nearly 60% of its campaign goal and while continuing to credit gifts to the Campaign, the College finds itself in the difficult position of being significantly less fiscally stable than in 1991. Much of the resources originally envisioned for enhancement have now been consumed to fund current operations.

The question now focuses on how the College will continue to finance its operations with no flexibility for internal financing or the ability for further significant reductions in expenditures. By the College's projections, an increase in net student revenues does not appear likely in the short term. Enrollments are expected to decline

in Fiscal Year 1994/95 and remain at or below the Fiscal Year 1993/94 level (436 FTE's) for the following two years. Although the College's financial projections provide for only a modest increase above the current financial aid levels (39% versus 37% of undergraduate student revenues), the decline in enrollment could cause financial aid expenditures to be higher than projected. However, accepting the College's

assumptions, operating deficits of approximately \$10 million are projected to accumulate over the next four years. It should be noted that one-time extraordinary restructuring costs of approximately \$650,000 are included in Fiscal Year 1994/95. As a result of deliberations, and recognition of the implications of the financial projections, the Board of Trustees and President have indicated that a restructuring will take place at Bennington as early as the summer of 1994. Although reportedly the current direction of the restructuring is aimed at providing a significant measure of financial benefit to Bennington, there are also reported to be offsetting costs for new initiatives which will be undertaken. Increased investments in environmental science, film studies, and computer technology appear to examples of the latter. The net cost or benefit to Bennington of the restructuring, in financial terms, is impossible to speculate since specific items are not yet reported to have been specified and therefore the costs able to be estimated with any precision.

In conclusion, it is impossible to draw any positive recommendation as to the financial viability of Bennington College as an independent institution. At this juncture in its history the College is completely dependent upon fundraising in the range of \$9 - 15 million in realized gifts in the next four to five years. The ability to raise that amount of money in itself will be extraordinary. Alternatively, maintaining the status quo assures Bennington of no viable fiscal future.

It is extremely difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the budget process, financial control measures, and overall fiscal management at Bennington since the College is effectively operating in a "crisis mode". Funding for new initiatives has been grant dependent and appears to have been determined in response to specific requests without a clear relationship to an overall set of institutional priorities which were part of a longer term plan. That perception, if accurate, does not generally facilitate the setting and acceptance of institutional priorities, nor lend itself to a coherent budget process.

Finally, the institution has not demonstrated the capacity for sophisticated financial planning and modeling in order to explore the range of impact that a decision or set of decisions could have. Although it may exist, there is not a demonstration of a clear understanding of disaggregated financial data which is essential for accurate financial modeling. For example, the trend in changes of the many variables underlying the composition of financial aid expenditures did not appear to have been analyzed, and an obvious, though not believed to be material, error in the footnotes to the audited financial statements had not been detected. The understanding of what lies behind the "gross numbers" will be crucial if the extent of the restructuring and new program initiatives is to be fully understood, planned for, and managed.

## XI. PUBLIC DISCLOSURE

The Office of Communications at Bennington College is staffed by a Director of Communications, two full time staff members, a contract designer, a half-time copy editor and three students. The Director of Communications has been at the College for 1 1/2 years, having brought a wide breadth of experience to the position as well as a high degree of professionalism. The Office of Communications is responsible for all of College's publications as well as managing Bennington's relationship with members of the internal and external media. Responsibility for conveying institutional representations lies with this department which appears to have a clear understanding of the College and its mission. That understanding is consistently reflected in the College's publications. All publications are updated at least every two years.

The College's viewbook (The Book of Bennington) is currently being revised to reflect the anticipated restructuring changes. The restructuring will cut across many of the College's publications in the next year and the Office is carefully planning and beginning to execute a strategy to disseminate the information in an accurate and timely manner while reflecting positively on the College. Particular attention is being paid to appropriate disclosure in materials directed towards students. The Book of Bennington 1992-1994, supplemented by the annual schedule of courses, included the necessary information for students to make informed decisions about their education, as well as obtain the requisite information on Bennington's mission, faculty and programs. The revision of that publication will need to fully reflect the changes which evolve from the restructuring. Timely and accurate communication of the significant changes to incoming and returning students is a matter of serious concern. Since the extent of the changes are not yet known, no public information was available for review in order to form a judgment on the adequacy of the disclosures.

A project conceived by the Office, and currently in process, is the development of files for recent alumni on graduate school and employment data. The Office reports that this information is not systematically available, which is a concern from a development standpoint.

A media consultant has been retained, at the initiative of the Director of Communications, to assist the College in the development of opportunities to publicize the College positively, and also to refine the strategy for distributing the information regarding the restructuring at the College. Media kits are in the preparation stage and the effort appears to be well organized and anticipatory in nature.

The Office of Communications appears to function well within the College and regularly seeks input from the academic divisions, administrative department and students. The quality of the work produced by this department is no doubt enhanced by those collaborative efforts.

## XII. STANDARD ELEVEN INTEGRITY

The reaccreditation team found that, in the management of its affairs and in its dealings with internal and external constituencies, Bennington College operates with goodwill and attempts to be forthright and truthful. It allows faculty and students unusual freedom to teach and study what interests them. The self-study prepared for reaccreditation honestly and openly discusses the College's strengths and weaknesses.

With the information available, the team was unable to verify that Bennington's situation was stable enough to guarantee continuation of its educational programs next year. Although the team received assurances that provisions would be made to maintain the integrity of student learning plans, no substantiating evidence was available during the site visit. In addition, the team was unclear how the College planned to handle the educational expectations of students who were recruited for the entering class of 1994 using this year's admissions publications.

Vigilance is urged to guarantee free and open dialogue on the policies about to be undertaken. As indicated in Standard 11.2 and in the spirit of on-going self evaluation, the College could examine the application of its policies for fairness. Well articulated criteria for reappointment will help assure consistent personnel decisions.

## XIII. STRENGTHS AND CONCERNS

1. Bennington College has a distinctive mission as a liberal arts college in which the arts play a role at least equal to the sciences and social sciences in the curriculum and in which students learn independently by doing.

2. There is a dedicated faculty whose effectiveness in teaching is widely attested by students and alumnae.

3. The educational process at Bennington, and its individual contracts for learning are well understood by students, faculty and staff.

4. Members of the staff, from President throughout the organization, including the library, are distinguished by dedication and extraordinary effort on behalf of students and of the enterprise as a whole.

5. Within severe funding constraints, the physical plant has been carefully maintained to date.

6. Anecdotally, it appears that many students are inspired by their Bennington education to go on either to graduate school or to creative careers.

7. There is a dedicated and informed Board of Trustees.

8. On the other hand, Bennington is suffering an acute financial crisis which it may or may not survive.

9. There is a rift between the administration and many of the faculty which impedes planning.

10. The College suffers a marked problem of retention, losing some 50% of the students who matriculate before graduation.

11. Student residential life raises question about the quality of life and the atmosphere for learning.

12. The library is in need of initiatives in collection building, cataloguing, and digitizing of records. It also requires significant additional space.

13. The College has not yet participated fully in the information revolution and will find its educational resources seriously compromised if it does not systematically bring all faculty and staff, as well as its library, science laboratories and audio visual function into a well articulated electronic information system.

14. At this writing, Bennington is about to launch a new plan of organization affecting faculty and curriculum. The impact of that restructuring on the College's curricular reach, particularly in subjects where there are now only one or two faculty to cover a broad range of material, is a real concern. The question of critical mass in a faculty responsible for a liberal arts education may have to be raised in the future.

15. The Bennington education currently involves an almost unlimited array of tutorial opportunities to students. The capacity of faculty to continue such expenditure of time on individual teaching, should their span of curricular responsibility increase, is of concern.

