

**Report to the
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, and Students
of
Bennington College
Bennington, Vermont**

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

**Prepared after Study of the Institution's
Self-Evaluation Report and a Visit to
the Campus on November 1 – 4, 2009**

The Members of the Team:

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This report represents the views of the Evaluation Team as interpreted by the Chair. Its content is based on the committee's evaluation of the institution with respect to the Commission's criteria for accreditation. It is a confidential document in which all comments are made in good faith. 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.

COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION
New England Association of Schools and Colleges
Preface Page

Date form completed: November 4, 2009

Name of Institution: Bennington College

1. **History** Year chartered or authorized 1925 Year first degrees awarded 1936

2. **Type of control:** ☐ State ☐ City ☐ Other; specify: _____
☒ Private, not-for-profit ☐ Religious Group; specify: _____
☐ Proprietary ☐ Other; specify: _____

3. **Degree level:**
☐ Associate ☒ Baccalaureate ☒ Masters ☐ Professional ☐ Doctorate

4. **Enrollment in Degree Programs** (Use figures from fall semester of most recent year):

	Full-time	Part-time	FTE	Retention ^a	Graduation ^b	# Degrees ^c
Associate						
Baccalaureate	613	5	616	79%	61%	133
Graduate	112	22	123	N/A	N/A	60

(a) full-time 1st to 2nd year (b) 3 or 6 year graduation rate (c) no. of degrees awarded most recent year

5. **Number of current faculty:** Full time 62 Part-time 30 FTE: N/A

6. **Current fund data for most recently completed fiscal year:** (Specify year: 2008-9)
(Double click in any cell to enter spreadsheet. Enter dollars in millions; e.g., \$1,456,200 = \$1.456)

Tuition	\$13.649	Instruction	\$11.916
Gov't Appropriations		Research	
Gifts/Grants/Endowment	\$6.031	General	\$14.391
Auxiliary Enterprises	\$5.151	Auxiliary Enterprises	\$2.221
Other	\$4.480	Other	
Total	\$29.311	Total	\$28.528

7. **Number of off-campus locations:**
In-state _____ Other U.S. _____ International _____ Total _____

8. **Number of degrees and certificates offered electronically:**
Programs offered entirely on-line _____ Programs offered 50-99% on-line _____

9. **Is instruction offered through a contractual relationship?**
☒ No ☐ Yes; specify program(s): _____

10. **Accreditation history:**
Candidacy: None Initial accreditation: December 1935 Last comprehensive evaluation: Fall 1999
Last Commission action: Progress report accepted Date: September 20, 2007

11. **Other characteristics:**

NEASC Comprehensive Evaluation of Bennington College

Evaluation Team Report

Introduction

The 2009 review of Bennington College was a comprehensive evaluation of the institution, following the standards set forth by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges for accreditation and reaccreditation. Under the leadership of President Elizabeth Coleman, the College began in summer, 2007, to compile its Self-Study, a compendium of factual data and observations that served as a base for the work of the Evaluation Team. The Evaluation Team, comprising eight professional educators, visited Bennington on November 1 – 4, 2009, to conduct an in-depth site visit to test the extent to which the College has achieved its goals over the course of the last five years and to assess the College's efforts to plan effectively for moving forward toward fulfilling its mission. The Evaluation Team met with representatives from every constituency on campus, from the Trustees to students. The Self-Study and the information provided in advance of the visit were generally satisfactory, with the notable exception of certain financial data and detailed information on the teaching faculty. The College was nevertheless both forthcoming with additional information when asked and flexible in accommodating the Evaluation Team's request for meetings with additional on-campus groups during the visit.

A comprehensive review of Bennington at this juncture is germane. In recent years, the College has moved with focus and intentionality to stabilize its financial situation following an extended period of fiscal uncertainty. The pool of applicants has been growing, and retention seems to be on the rise. At the same time, the College has consolidated recent curricular changes embodied in the experiential design lab workshop courses and three-week modular first-year courses. With greater predictability in its finances and in its core business, the College has begun internal conversations about the future, particularly with regard to how the highly individualized Bennington education can be more firmly coupled with the College's traditional mission of preparing students for engagement in positive social change. This dialog has centered on the issue of establishing a Center for the Advancement of Public Action (CAPA).

Against this backdrop, many of the strengths and challenges of the institution were highlighted in ways that were particularly useful to the Evaluation Team. Clearly, the College can be fairly evaluated only in terms of its progress relative to its recent history. To treat the current situation as static—that is, to focus exclusively on the College's recent financial ratios or the present state of its planning processes, for example, or on its existing competitiveness for qualified students and faculty—would be to ignore the solid progress that the institution has made on many fronts in recent years. To the extent that the observations in this Report suggest the need to improve operational aspects of the College, they should not be construed as underestimating the tremendous progress that the College has made over the last decade under its current leadership. Bennington stands at the forefront of the movement to return higher education in our nation to its liberal arts roots, not by parroting the traditional cant about the value of general education, but by making liberal learning a pervasive, dynamic reality in the lives of everyone associated with the College. This Report seeks in its way to encourage the College along its path to fulfilling that distinctive mission.

Narrative

Standard I. Mission and Purpose

Since Bennington's last comprehensive accreditation visit a decade ago, the Board of Trustees and Administration have worked diligently to strengthen the institution in fulfilling its original purpose of providing a highly personal style of liberal education. That purpose was first expressed in the Commencement Statement of 1936 and has served as a source of strength for the College ever since. To a degree unequalled at other, similar colleges and universities, Bennington insists that students engage individually and intensively in the design, examination, and implementation of their own educational experience and that the formal elements of their education be integrated with rigorous, relevant, and recurring engagement in the world outside the academy. At the same time, the College from its inception has upheld the premise that it is the obligation of every educated person in some way to serve the common good. The imperative to give of oneself in improving the lot of humanity is integrally bound up in a Bennington education. Everyone at Bennington—Trustees, faculty, administrators, staff, students, parents, alumni—understands and embraces this mission and subscribes to it. The extent to which this mission suffuses every aspect of institutional life is truly remarkable and sets Bennington apart from the mainstream of liberal arts colleges in this country.

Standard II. Planning and Evaluation

Planning: Broad-based participation in planning activities at Bennington has generally been limited to the short-term planning associated with the annual budgeting process. Even so, budgeting has in the past been a relatively centralized activity at the College, with no institution-wide budget committee and no consistent method for communicating major budgeting decisions to the broad community. Long-range planning at Bennington College has historically been a relatively informal process led by the President and the Board and including members of the Senior Staff. Everyone within this leadership group reported to us that they have discussed in depth and detail the College's many opportunities and constraints, from global economic health and fundraising to curriculum development and deferred maintenance. This process has been interspersed with frequent if informal communication with members of the faculty, staff, and student body. The ad hoc nature of planning at Bennington is slowly giving way to a model of broader participation and communication about institutional priorities. As a starting point, the Administration has developed a Strategic Planning Framework as a white paper for broader dialog concerning long-term objectives and how budgeting and resource allocation decisions can serve to achieve them. At the same time, a senior officer has been appointed with broad responsibility for both academic planning and evaluation, the Associate Provost for Planning, Research, and Assessment. If successful, these initiatives to broaden participation in planning the strategic direction for the College will surely bear fruit over the course of the next few years.

Each year, the College follows an efficient, well-defined process in planning the annual budget. Staff begin with assumptions provided from the Office of Business Affairs, based on their work with a five-year budget plan. Each Vice Presidential area has regular communication with the Office of Business Affairs, follows a clear timeline for building a budget proposal, and considers

prudent use of resources as well as newly identified needs. The Vice President for Business Affairs and the Vice President for Development communicate regularly about funds raised that will be used for operational expenses. The Office of Academic Affairs, which supervises many smaller departments, employs an Assistant Dean who serves as the hub of communication about all aspects of academic budgets. Individuals outside the Senior Staff usually participate only in those areas of budget planning which relate to their respective departments. Decisions about priorities are vetted informally in each area and a group of Senior Staff typically make decisions about resource allocations. This system, while efficient and nimble, carries the disadvantage that few members of the community discuss and understand the larger issues of resource allocation. The Evaluation Team heard from students and faculty whose questions about resource allocations seemed to be uninformed by the kind of discussions that a campus-wide budget committee might facilitate.

In facilities management, planning efforts have successfully been used to inform sound budget decisions. At the beginning of the decade, the College commissioned a professional Master Plan for facilities, which was completed in 2004. The Vice President for Planning and Special Programs reports that the Master Plan continues to guide the College and that more modest updates of the Master Plan since 2004 have helped shape decisions about the facilities. The Vice President keeps an up-to-date list of priorities based on the Master Plan, for the eventuality of funding. Accordingly, the pleasant surprise of a larger-than-expected student body in fall, 2009, required rapid action to upgrade classroom technology. The College was able to move very quickly because staff had already considered which classrooms would be most appropriate. The College's achievement of its strategic priorities in any given year is based on this pattern of informed but at times opportunistic planning.

Beyond the annual budgeting process, the President, Trustees, and Senior Staff have begun the process of strategic planning and completed a Strategic Planning Framework as a prelude to creating a comprehensive strategic plan. This Framework remains a broad-brush outline of priorities at this point. As such, it still lacks a clear structural connection to budgetary and other short-term decision-making processes. Senior Staff report that ad hoc meetings of staff and faculty have begun for the purpose of discussing the implications of the Framework. Although the strategic planning process began in 2007, discussions with staff, faculty and students have been uncoordinated and few in number. As a result, the Evaluation Team spoke with some students and faculty who were still unclear about the purpose of the institutional Strategic Planning Framework, and more concretely, about the Administration's plans with regard to growing the size of the College and about the financing decisions concerning the new building to house the Center for the Advancement of Public Action.

The Crossett Library has been a site of focused internal planning. Using a 2004 consultants' report, the Library staff, with appropriate input and supervision from the Provost's Office, have identified priorities (mold remediation, for example) and successfully implemented many improvements. As discussed in Standard VIII, effective planning for increased library space has begun, but concrete actions have been postponed for financial reasons. The missing structural connections among the strategic planning process and the budget and the lack of a formal mechanism for staff input into strategic planning may be hindering a unit such as the Library in realistically furthering its own internal planning.

In ever increasing measure, planning efforts at Bennington benefit from a growing body of information and hard data about the state of the College, especially data resulting from the work of paid consultants. As noted above, the Facilities Master Plan has been illuminating concerning the condition of the physical plant. Other studies have been conducted to determine the reasons why non-matriculating admitted students enroll elsewhere and to assess the state of information technology on campus. By the same token, the College has increasingly been participating in national data collection processes, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Higher Education Data Sharing consortium. These data can further inform the planning process as it evolves.

Evaluation: Bennington College has begun the process of regularly and systematically evaluating progress in its many manifestations. All constituencies participate in assessment to some extent and most are increasing and improving their assessment efforts. Evaluation is most pervasive and effective where practiced at the individual level; narrative evaluations of students, the election in every course of a student who leads the evaluation of teaching in that course, committee evaluations of student plans, and evaluations of faculty performance are all conducted systematically and with clear guidelines.

Most offices have begun assessing their work with students. Many use surveys or individual reports; some have conducted focus groups or monitor usage patterns. The Dean of Students' staff members assess all outdoor programming for student satisfaction and ask each house member to evaluate the house chairs, to give just two examples. The Director of the Field Work Term (FWT) reads every student's reflective essay upon completion of the FWT, as well as reports from the FWT supervisors. She is also working with the Associate Provost for Planning, Research, and Assessment to develop categories for generalizing these results, in order to assess students' achievements overall. The Director of Psychological Services used a survey by a student about usage of those services. The librarians use multiple opportunities to learn students' and faculty's needs and preferences. In all these cases, staff have already made or plan to make changes in programming, the better to meet student needs.

The College is also moving increasingly towards high-level assessment of the achievement of educational objectives. The faculty have thus far completed reviews of three of the College's discipline groups—there are no traditional discipline-based departments at Bennington—and have plans to review all discipline groups over the course of the next ten years. Faculty members commented on several occasions that the preparations for these peer assessments have included very useful reflection and reformulation of mission statements and goals. Some reports from outside evaluators have encouraged curricular improvement. The process of reviews is currently on hold, while the faculty develop guidelines for future reviews to make them even more helpful. As soon as those guidelines are completed, the review process will resume, providing an on-going opportunity for faculty reflection and important external assessments.

The creation of a new position, the Associate Provost for Planning, Research, and Assessment last year signaled the increased importance Bennington places on understanding its achievements and areas for improvement. The Associate Provost will lead institutional research, in cooperation with the work of a staff person in the Office of Business Affairs. The Associate

Provost has the opportunity to evaluate the College's achievement of its mission for students. The reports created so far, based on data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Wabash Project, and the Teagle Consortium, for example, look across discipline groups towards goals for all students. Evaluations of modules and design labs have created conversations among faculty about student learning. At the same time, the Associate Provost can help faculty in discipline groups evaluate their large amount of individual-level data by creating categories for comparisons of achievements within discipline groups. As the Associate Provost is aware, Bennington has a wealth of information already about student performance and educational effectiveness, including plan documents and narrative assessments of students. The difficult but essential task is finding ways to link that information to the achievement of the College's mission.

The response of many different offices to NSSE data showing that Bennington students rated the campus environment as less supportive than students at comparable institutions indicates that the campus culture can be effective at utilizing assessment data. The College undertook a series of initiatives to encourage more supportive interactions: windows were added to some office doors to make the office more welcoming; facilities staff learned effective practices for interacting with students; the Dean of Students' Office created new kinds of programming, and the Office of Academic Affairs hired two new first-year advisors, to ensure early identification and resolution of problems. The Evaluation Team heard very positive comments from students about the supportive staff in all offices. Clearly, the College is prepared and able to assess its current situation and to respond swiftly and creatively in addressing areas needing improvement.

Institutional Effectiveness – Planning and Evaluation Standard

Although the Evaluation Team noted the lack at the institutional level of a comprehensive and systematic method for evaluating institutional planning, the effectiveness of assessment efforts is increasingly being evaluated by individual offices and departments. Efforts are underway to coordinate the processes to assess planning and evaluation, and the recent appointment of an Associate Provost for Planning, Research and Assessment is an important first step in that effort.

Standard III. Organization and Governance

The organization and governance of Bennington College are unique to the institution and reflect its traditions and history. A supportive and involved Board and an innovative and action-oriented President work closely together to provide exemplary vision and leadership to the institution.

The College's organizational chart, By-Laws of the Corporation, and committee structures make clear the lines of authority and responsibility. The Board of Trustees has broad responsibilities for the academic integrity and fiscal soundness of the College. The organization and procedures of the Board are clearly laid out in the By-Laws. The Board consists of a mix of alumni and non-alumni with diverse backgrounds, and notably includes two recent graduates. Board members are well aware of their stewardship responsibilities and take an active stance toward the College, typically meeting four times per year. In 2008, the President invited the Trustees to

participate on three strategic planning task forces. The By-Laws were recently revised to expand effectiveness by adding a Facilities Committee and a standing Subcommittee on Investments. The President sits ex-officio on the board and all of its committees; the six standing committees of the Board are augmented as needed by ad hoc committees. The Board has no student or faculty representation, but on occasion, it does invite representatives of those groups to its discussions.

The President is widely recognized as a leader whose vision is instrumental in setting goals and directions for the College. She is highly engaged with and visible in the College community. She holds weekly open hours, presides over faculty meetings, serves on the Academic Policies Committee, and has regular interactions with students. She is also the highly visible “face” of Bennington to external constituencies.

The Senior Staff of the College is a collaborative team led by the President that meets weekly and works closely together on both operational and strategic matters. The Provost serves as chief academic officer and reports directly to the President. The position of Provost was recently converted from that of Dean of Faculty. In addition to overseeing academic staff and programs, the Provost is responsible for a broad set of support services and offices including Student Life, the Registrar’s Office, the Library, and Information Technology. Since the Provost’s arrival, she has overseen the reorganization of faculty governance, implemented a number of academic and student support positions, and worked to enhance the effectiveness of academic operations and policymaking.

In particular, the Provost has worked in a productive way with faculty to create a governance system that better supports Bennington’s unique academic program and structure. In the absence of chairs or department heads, an appointed Curriculum Planning Committee (CPC) serves as liaison between the faculty and Provost and among faculty discipline groups, and oversees operational aspects of the curriculum. The appointed representatives of each discipline group that together constitute CPC serve as a mechanism for disseminating information to the faculty and for implementing the academic program. A faculty-elected Academic Policy Committee (APC) meets regularly to discuss matters of academic policy and faculty resource allocation. The President, Provost, and Executive Vice President/CFO sit ex officio on APC, which makes recommendations to those individuals as well as to the faculty as a whole. The APC meets on occasion with the Student Educational Policies Committee, but has no student representation.

The Provost also works closely with the Faculty Performance Review Committee (FPRC) to ensure the integrity and effectiveness of reviews of faculty contracts. The processes of the FPRC, clearly articulated in the Faculty Handbook, have been revised and clarified in recent years, and appear to serve the College well.

The President presides over Faculty Meetings that are held monthly and are well-attended. APC reports regularly at faculty meetings about its deliberations. In addition, a monthly Faculty Forum serves as an alternative venue for the faculty to consult with each other about the College and curriculum. Administrative officers, including the President, are excluded from the deliberations of the Faculty Forum.

The staff handbook clearly lays out policies, procedures, and benefits. A voluntary Staff Organization serves to represent the interests of staff to the College, and also provides a mechanism for supporting staff development and morale. In a well-attended open meeting, staff described the College as a supportive and engaging community, and exhibited a sense of empowerment and commitment to the ideals and improvement of the College.

The expectation that students at Bennington will assume a great deal of responsibility for their education is reflected in the active ways in which they participate in self-governance. House Chairs play an important role in fostering community development and cooperative living and directing residents toward campus resources. The elected Student Educational Policies Committee (SEPC) meets regularly to discuss student opinions regarding academic matters, which they convey to the student body in regular “Coffee Hour” meetings. SEPC also implements the process by which students rate the effectiveness of faculty teaching. SEPC representatives are invited to join some discipline group meetings for informational purposes.

Institutional Effectiveness – Organization and Governance Standard

During Bennington’s recent growth, the College has made substantive changes to its organization, and has taken steps toward a more shared model of governance. The organization of the senior staff and the committee structures and practices of the faculty have been revised to enhance communication, collaboration, and effectiveness; these changes constitute positive steps. The visiting team encourages the College to continue promoting collaborative approaches toward shared governance that facilitate the involvement of student and faculty voices in discussions about academic directions. In particular, the Administration is encouraged to take the opportunity of using the Faculty Forum to increase the exchange of ideas about the future of the College and to improve generally the communication among different constituencies within the College community.

Standard IV. The Academic Program

The academic programs of Bennington are well-considered and well-established manifestations of the Mission and Purposes. The Self-Study and other College documents confirm that the mission continues to drive the curriculum and guide its programs, faculty, and staff. The curriculum reveals a spectrum of courses and programs that “*balance stability with relentless innovation.*” The disciplines and courses, as described and sampled in the Self-Study, confirm a level of inquiry appropriate for a college degree program. Interviews with faculty and administrators show a recently fortified layer of administrative and academic oversight structures largely initiated and coordinated by the Provost/Dean, which incorporate new and existing faculty committees in the process of review and recommendation.

Learning goals are generally published by each program and with course descriptions. Bennington has its own unique set of descriptors, which refer to academic areas as “disciplines” instead of department or divisions. Faculty members in each discipline share the responsibilities for curriculum development, course distribution and scheduling without the presence of a traditional hierarchical leadership structure. As noted under Standard II, Planning and

Evaluation, the faculty are not at present systematically engaged in the process of institutional planning, so that larger questions such as the size of the College have not been incorporated into the process of planning for the academic program.

The traditional disciplines provide courses with familiar boundaries, such as Physics, French, or Drama, and offer a range of courses appropriate to the unique mission of Bennington, yet attuned to the strengths of faculty within each discipline. Most programs participate in the Field Work Term every year, during which students leave campus to work in “real world” situations of professional or service interest. Students are provided a good introduction to information resources and technologies largely through the library support services. English competency at all levels is very high as students use their verbal and written skills as a primary means of designing, describing, presenting, revising and navigating their own unique academic plan.

The Plan Process is the centerpiece of each student’s academic path. Preparation for the individualized Plan begins with the student’s application essay, continues to develop through the first year, and is formally presented to the advisory committee during the third, sixth, and last terms. This document lays out the rationale for the course of study and guides the integration of the final semester’s work. The addition of two new First Year Advisors last year brought critical support to this process of self-designed education. Even in these difficult economic times, the addition of the First Year Advisors won general accolades as a justified new expenditure.

The College has instituted a system of external Program Reviews that seems to have had a beneficial effect on those programs reviewed, but it is not clear how effectively the programs have been able to use the reviews to affect their direction or what follow-up was expected from the College. Three programs and the Library have had such external reviews in the past six years but the planning of the visits has not resulted in a team visit, but usually a series of individual visits and individual reports without a common matrix of criteria or reporting methods. Currently there is a hiatus in external review process while the entire program of external peer review is analyzed with the intention of clarifying criteria and methods.

Undergraduate Degree Programs: The core of the undergraduate program is dedicated to the exploration of human experience and knowledge, from Greek classics to “America and the Middle East,” with layers of student selected coursework culminating in senior projects. Advisory faculty panels guide the rationale and review these integrative study plans three times in the course of the four years.

The components of general education are well-incorporated aspects of the undergraduate curriculum, which includes and integrates a range of “competencies” and practices early in the four year curriculum and have been described in the recently created “Expectations for a Bennington Education,” a document given to all first year students. This was developed by consensus of the faculty and reflects a very broad and general set of criteria that we appreciate but feel could be more rigorous and explicit. The process of faculty advisory committee reviews of Plans provides an appropriately formal filter for identifying approval, conditional approval and non-approval of student Plans and provides explicit information to students about the various requirements to bring such plans to a stage of “Approval.”

The Major or Concentration: Bennington has its own well known approach to such categories generally identified as Concentrations. Students design their sequence of studies drawn from the following discipline areas: Art History, Dance, Drama, Environmental Studies, Foreign Languages (5 languages), Literature, Music (8 areas), Science (6 areas), Math (4 areas), Social Science (6 areas), Visual Arts (11 areas). Each student chooses a primary discipline as an academic “home” and selects a range of other courses that support their stated vision through their Plan, with the support, advice and approval of their individual Plan committees.

Graduate Programs: Bennington has three distinct graduate programs that have very little connection with each other, little or no mutual interests or communication, and only minimal institutional oversight. As stand-alone entities, the graduate programs are respected within their respective niche constituencies. They appear to be well-managed and do not detract from the central undergraduate focus of the College. The M.F.A. in Writing is a well-established program attracting 20-25 candidates who come to campus for two residencies during Field Work Term and during the summer. It has three programs in Fiction, Non-fiction, and Poetry, a clearly designed structure, expectations and a range of faculty mentors with defined roles. This program seems to be thriving and enjoys strong, experienced leadership.

The MAT and MATSL also have clearly defined structures and expectations. The MAT program meets the accreditation standards for K-12 teaching within the State of Vermont. It has about 7 students per year. The MATSL is a non-licensure degree program that is offered during summers. It has a clearly structured approach to preparing teachers for K-12 language teaching, which requires research projects and involves external review. The program does have difficulty attracting appropriate faculty who share the Bennington approach to integrated learning. It has relatively low numbers but seems to fill a viable if very small niche.

The College offers an M.F.A. in both Dance and Music. Currently there is one graduate student in Music and two in Dance. Although these disciplines are well staffed with faculty who have ample professional practice, it is hard for the members of the team to conceive of these as graduate “programs” in the absence of a cohort of other graduate students, graduate courses, or other opportunities for a high level of exchange and interaction with other peer students. The “program” involves individual tutorials, participation in undergraduate classes with enhanced coursework and expectation, plus a demanding sequence of performances and recitals. The rigor of these two programs is above question, inasmuch as the faculty members provide an intensive experience. The clear lack of graduate community, graduate-level course sequences, supplemental coursework, and such low numbers prompt us to suggest serious re-examination of the M.F.A. in its current form. The dance and music graduate programs have far greater potential that cannot be realized in their present configuration.

The post-baccalaureate certificate program offered through the Sciences provides a twelve-month preparation program for students seeking entrance into medical school. The program is the equivalent of an undergraduate science curriculum for students who have not done such a sequence in their previous undergraduate degree studies. The program provides a rigorous sequence of science courses that fulfill the application requirements. The success rate of students from this program entering medical school is evidence of its success and usefulness.

Integrity in the Award of Academic Degrees: The College has an appropriate level of institutional oversight of its undergraduate programs. Previous paragraphs have addressed the strengths and concerns of the graduate programs. The improved academic administrative structures have been put in place to address, improve, and ensure the quality of this responsibility. There have also been changes in process and staffing designed to improve admissions, retention, and registration.

Despite Bennington's somewhat unusual organizational structures, its distinctive approach to student-generated educational plans, and the particular freedom the faculty have to choose the courses they teach, the content of courses is demonstrably substantive, focused, and rigorous. The academic administration has considerable authority and maintains a generally positive relationship with the faculty and students. The Field Work Term is an important means of preparing students for employment in an area of their interest. A quick review of alumni responses reveals an accomplished alumni body that have continued with graduate education and an admirable array of professional lives. The faculty and staff we met were very involved in the programs of the College, the aspirations of their students and share the vision and values of the school's founding vision and mission. Conversations with faculty revealed that students expect and assume a high degree of integrity of each other, and while there are occasional incidents of plagiarism or cheating, they seem to be fairly well curbed by a general culture of mutual respect and trust.

Assessment of Student Learning: By its very nature, the Plan Process with its sequence of student reflective essays is a highly effective mechanism for assessing progress in student learning. From its very inception, Bennington College has been assessing student learning and using that assessment to sculpt the profile of every student's program of study. At the institutional level, the College has begun to address comprehensively the assessment and evaluation of programs. Several new positions and processes have been created to this end. An Associate Provost for Planning, Research, and Assessment has been hired and is part of various planning teams. The Academic Policies Committee has undertaken a review and refinement of the Plan Process, and student course evaluations are in place and used as a component of the Faculty Performance Review Committee process. These are all positive contributions to an increasingly important and visible aspect of college effectiveness. The Evaluation Team was encouraged by the various ways this assessment is being incorporated into the campus culture. That being said, we also feel there is significant room for more effective assessment at all levels. We have already commented on the external program reviews and re-state our hope that these reviews are soon reinstated as a way to gain valuable perspectives on the programs of the College.

The very process of compiling the Self Study provided an ideal opportunity for the College to create a comprehensive catalog of the means whereby student achievement is documented, how it is made public, and how that information is used for future planning and improvement. Bennington chose Option 3 of the Series E Forms for documenting student success, Institutional Claims for Student Achievement, with Validating Information. The data contained in the Series E Forms were accurate and generally complete. With regard to Column 5 of the Form—that is, the articulation of anticipated changes based on the evidence presented—the response demonstrated that data are not being used as aggressively as might have been desirable. We note

in particular the lack of any anticipated changes within the disciplines as a result of an analysis of the information available. Data in the Series S Forms were limited to IPEDS retention and graduation rates and to licensure and placement data in the graduate education program. The Evaluation Team would have benefitted from the data requested in Series S.2 Form pertaining to students' post-graduate experiences, but the College had not been collecting such information during the time frame used for the Self Study.

Institutional Effectiveness – The Academic Program Standard

The institution is attending seriously to the improvement in its review and assessment of the quality, integrity and effectiveness of its programs. While these efforts are relatively new, they point to a commendable commitment to overall concern on the part of faculty and administrators to ensure the quality and integrity of a Bennington education. The College nevertheless will need to increase its efforts to compile information related to academic program outcomes in ways that are useful to the faculty and administrators in plotting a course for improvement. Without data that are readily available in a reliable and consistent manner over time, the College will have a difficult time using those data in a systematic and predictive manner to enhance the student experience.

Standard V. Faculty

As of last academic year (2008-09), Bennington College had a faculty of 72 FTE, with 62 full-time faculty and 16 faculty teaching less than full-time. In addition, the College hires annually a number of instructors to teach instrumental music classes, writing composition, and dance practice. The MFA program in Writing, the MA program in Teaching a Second Language, and the post-baccalaureate pre-medical programs hire their own faculty on a contract basis. The student-faculty ratio has increased from 7:1 to 9:1, as a result of increased student enrollment over the past three years, and is projected to rise again in the near future to 10:1, according to the College's November 2008 Strategic Planning Framework, 2008-14. While the number of full-time faculty has dropped very slightly since 2005-06, the overall size and composition of the faculty in terms of FTE have remained steady. In general, the faculty size is clearly adequate to fulfill the College's educational mission. Even though Bennington has long operated without a tenure system, there is considerable continuity within the faculty: the median length of service of full-time faculty is ten years, and the number of full-time faculty leaving the College annually for reasons other than retirement has ranged from two to five over the past four years. This appears to be a healthy and appropriate level of turnover.

Teaching and Advising: Bennington describes its faculty as being composed of "teacher-practitioners." The College seeks to recruit and retain faculty who are both committed to Bennington's distinctive instructional philosophy and actively engaged in the professional work of their various fields. Although the term "practitioner" might be more easily applicable to some fields (for example, visual or performing arts or writing) than to academic fields such as literature or natural science, the faculty generally seems to embrace this identity. Of the 62 full-time faculty, 25 hold doctorates and 27 hold terminal master's degrees. 62 per cent of the faculty are men, and 38 per cent women, and slightly more than ten per cent are members of under-

represented groups. The teaching load for full-time faculty is normally five courses per year, although some foreign language instructors have a higher course load. Part-time faculty teaching loads are contracted individually.

Since 2005-06, the College has made 24 regular (i.e. non-visiting) appointments, of which 13 have been full-time appointments. Although the College has emphasized its desire to diversify the faculty, the percentage of full-time faculty from under-represented groups is essentially the same now as five years ago. The progress that the College has made has come primarily in the part-time ranks. The search process, as described in the Faculty Handbook, provides for faculty participation in searches, but in other respects (for example, in regard to strategies for ensuring a diverse applicant pool) is rather vague and non-specific. We commend the College's aspiration to increase racial and cultural diversity on the faculty, and suggest that it might be worthwhile, with this goal in mind, to focus institutional and specifically faculty attention on search procedures.

Faculty members at Bennington demonstrate an impressive dedication to the educational philosophy of the College. This educational philosophy, built around the Plan Process, places heavy reliance on faculty mentoring and advising of students. Each faculty member is expected to advise approximately 14 students each year and, in addition, to participate in another 14-15 Plan committees per term. This work on Plan committees is both time-consuming and rewarding for advisors and advisees alike: students have the benefit of probing and supportive academic guidance, and faculty appreciate the opportunities for collegial and cross-disciplinary dialogue that it opens up. The advising workload for Bennington faculty is a heavy one. In light of this fact, the increase in student enrollment projected by the Strategic Planning Framework raises concerns about the additional advising workload that would be entailed. The faculty has not yet been engaged in a conversation about this particular impact of increased enrollment, and we would encourage that conversation to take place.

The faculty's participation in policy-making, curricular development, and institutional governance is shaped by the particular, perhaps unique, organization of the faculty into "discipline groups" rather than conventional departments or divisions. For the past fifteen years, the faculty has operated a markedly flat and non-hierarchical structure, with colleagues working together in these discipline-defined groupings, without any chairs or hierarchy of ranks. Most of the faculty members to whom we spoke viewed this structure favorably, as one that facilitates the individual's academic and pedagogical creativity, encourages teamwork, and lowers the barriers between disciplines, thus contributing to the College's core educational mission and purposes. At the same time, faculty acknowledged that in the past this organizational structure produced problems such as a lack of curricular coordination and coherence. In recent years, the creation of the Curriculum Planning Committee (CPC) seems to have gone a long way towards correcting these flaws. The CPC enables each discipline group to communicate more effectively with the others and to become more fully informed about the curricular priorities and preferences of other faculty.

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Activity: In addition to this successful adaptation of the faculty's governance structure, we note a number of other respects in which faculty are being more effectively supported in their work. The College has moved to direct financial resources to

ensure Bennington's capacity to recruit and retain outstanding teacher-practitioners. In 2002-03, the College set targets for Bennington salaries based on salaries at other liberal arts institutions. At the time, salaries fell far short of these targets across the seniority range. (Although the College does not appoint faculty into the ranks of professors, associate professors and assistant professors, for the purposes of considering compensation it does categorize them as "senior", "mid-career" and "entry-level".) In the past six years, with annual salary increases for faculty averaging above 5%, the College has made significant progress towards reaching those targets. Senior faculty salaries, which in 2002-03 stood at 64% of the target, were at 78% of the target by last academic year. For mid career faculty, the improvement was from 78% of the target to 96%, while entry level faculty have now surpassed the target. Although the College was forced by the recent financial crisis to freeze faculty salaries in 2009-10, the President has indicated her determination to remove the freeze as soon as possible.

Over the same period, faculty have benefited from a variety of enhancements to the College's support for professional development. The amounts made available to faculty in support of research and conference travel have increased significantly. The maximum amount for which faculty members may apply has increased from \$750 to \$1,200 per semester. The number of applicants for these funds has grown, as has the total amount expended by the College. In 2004-05, for example, the College awarded 26 faculty grants, totaling approximately \$19,000, whereas in 2008-09 it awarded 48 grants totaling around \$47,000. At the same time, the College has introduced two new leave programs – an early sabbatical program allowing faculty to take advantage of professional opportunities at a time when they would not otherwise be eligible for sabbatical; and Bennington studies leaves, during which faculty members are granted teaching relief in order to enroll in other Bennington courses. Both programs are beneficial to faculty members' professional development, and the Bennington studies leaves, in particular, are a strikingly original innovation, not only facilitating an individual's professional development, but fostering cross-disciplinarity within the faculty.

The faculty undoubtedly appreciate the substantial efforts that the current academic leadership has made to bring greater clarity and coordination to the curriculum in a manner compatible with the faculty's organizational culture and to allocate additional resources in support of the faculty's professional work and teaching. In general, the academic leadership is regarded as extremely effective and is widely trusted. At the same time, the faculty's role in institutional governance remains somewhat ambiguous and ill-defined. The College has a large roster of faculty committees (a number of which are elected), and faculty participate willingly and energetically in these committees. The three most prominent of them – the Curriculum Planning Committee, the Academic Policy Committee, and the Faculty Performance Review Committee – meet on a weekly basis and involve very significant time commitments. Nevertheless, at several points in the recent past (including during the last year), faculty members have felt the need to create a "shadow" governance structure of their own, distinct from the established structure of faculty meetings and College committees. The creation of this so-called Faculty Forum (monthly meetings organized and attended only by the faculty) indicates that faculty members do not always feel comfortable discussing important issues – ranging from employment-related matters to curricular innovation – in the company of the College's Administration. There is evidence that faculty distrust of the Administration has abated in the past year and that faculty morale has

improved. Still, the continued existence of the Faculty Forum suggests that there is further progress to be made.

Bennington's Faculty Handbook provides appropriate definition of faculty responsibilities as well as criteria and processes for faculty recruitment, evaluation, appointment and reappointment. An elected faculty committee, the Faculty Performance Review Committee (FPRC), is responsible, in consultation with the Provost, for making recommendations to the President about the renewal (or non-renewal) of multi-year full-time and part-time appointments. In order to make its recommendations, the FPRC considers information from an appropriately broad range of sources and constituencies – student course evaluations, external evaluations of a faculty member's professional work, written evaluations by faculty colleagues and by student advisees, unsolicited letters from students, classroom visit reports from colleagues, and portfolios and personal statements submitted by the candidate him/herself. We were impressed by the current organization of the FPRC and by the various improvements that have recently been made to the review process (for example, the decision to give the FPRC access to prior reappointment recommendations, so that the committee is in a better position to assess the longer-term trajectory of a faculty member's performance.) In general, this process seems to be quite effective and to reflect fairly and accurately the College's definition of faculty responsibilities. In the recent past, in cases where there were significant concerns about performance, the committee has made negative recommendations about renewal and has recommended two-year probationary periods extending an existing contract rather than granting a new one. This suggests that the committee is willing to make hard choices when a colleague is not demonstrably effective in carrying out his/her assigned responsibilities.

The President makes the final recommendation to the Board both about whether to re-appoint and about the length of re-appointments. Initial contracts are typically for three years and most subsequent contracts are for more than three years (with no stipulated upper limit). When a faculty member receives a contract of five years or longer, he or she is reviewed in a mid-contract review by the Provost. This review, which involves consideration of an updated record of activities and course evaluations, as well as a conversation and a written report, seems to provide appropriate safeguards to ensure regular evaluation of faculty with lengthy appointments. The Provost also conducts reviews of faculty on annual contracts.

Faculty members' teaching is regularly evaluated by the students in their courses. The process of evaluation reflects the culture of close and respectful dialogue between faculty and students at Bennington. In each course, one student is elected by the other students to meet with the faculty member at midterm to convey student feedback and then, at the end of the term, to distribute qualitative student evaluation forms. The faculty member receives both this entire set of evaluations (which are placed in his/her appointment file) and a written summary of student feedback compiled by the student representative. While student evaluations at other institutions are often criticized for discouraging risk-taking and experimentation by faculty, we found no evidence that they are having that effect at Bennington. Our conversations with individual faculty and our review of recent years' curricula confirm the Self-Study's assertion that "Faculty members are encouraged to propose new courses that reflect their interests and to refresh ongoing course offerings as their professional work evolves and shifts."

The model of the “teacher-practitioner” assumes active and high-level engagement of faculty members in their research or creative fields. The faculty résumés and publications that we reviewed indicate that most Bennington faculty continue to meet a high standard in this regard. The considerable flexibility that faculty have in the choice of courses that they offer and in the design of their courses gives them ample opportunity to integrate their own scholarly and creative work into the classroom. As noted above, the College has significantly increased its financial commitment to research and creative activity. And faculty contracts establish an explicit expectation that faculty members will integrate professional activity into teaching.

Institutional Effectiveness – Faculty Standard

The College’s Self-Study appropriately highlighted the positive impact that changes in the organization of the academic leadership (especially the creation of the Provost position) and the introduction of the CPC have had on the work of the faculty. It also appropriately noted the increase in faculty compensation levels. We think that the Self-Study would have benefited from more explicit discussion of certain difficult issues of direct relevance and importance to the faculty – the workload implications of increasing student enrollment to 750, the process for developing new curricular initiatives and involving faculty in strategic planning, and the issues that have been aired through the Faculty Forum.

The College has assessed and amended its faculty performance review process in recent years. This process (combined with the provost’s mid-contract reviews) enables the College to evaluate the effectiveness of individual faculty members. A recently initiated series of external program reviews should potentially give the College an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of discipline groups and programs. Thus far, three discipline areas (Drama, Music and Dance) have been reviewed, with an expectation that all disciplines will be reviewed approximately once every ten years. This is a valuable and necessary initiative. Each of the discipline groups that has been reviewed has reported learning valuable lessons, both as a result of its own Self-Study and as a result of the recommendations of the external visitors. More broadly, the external reports provide the Provost and the CPC with invaluable perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of the academic program as a whole. The organization of these reviews could be improved. The development of explicit guidelines about the format and purposes of the reviews and research of best practices in this area would improve the process. The very individualized form of education inscribed into the Plan Process might appear, at first sight, to militate against an overall assessment of student learning within a particular program. Nevertheless, the College could benefit from the development of a method for summarizing and synthesizing the results of all the student plans within the discipline groups and program areas.

Standard VI. Students

Admissions: After a period of turnover in the leadership of the Admissions office, Bennington has seen stability in the past six years. Although Bennington had anticipated reaching a target undergraduate enrollment of 600 by the 2000-2001 academic year, enrollment statistics reveal that they achieved their goal with 618 students in 2008. After achieving a record-breaking number of 1,058 applications, the College experienced a record number of 210 entering students.

The 2009-10 enrolment is 650 students. The admissions team seems poised to continue this trend of growth. The 2008-2014 strategic planning framework aims to increase the applicant pool to 1,400 as the first step in meeting its stated goals with regard to increasing diversity and academic strength of the student body. By creating the new curricular initiative, Center for the Advancement of Public Action (CAPA), Bennington hopes to attract more students who are committed to innovation through civic engagement.

After years of struggling to increase the racial and cultural diversity of the student body, the institution has seen modest increases in racial minorities in recent years—from 5% in 2005 to 7% in 2008; 9% of the incoming class are students of color, and 10% are international students. Admissions officers have altered their recruitment strategies to increase the percentage of racial minorities to 11%. By expanding travel to targeted domestic and international geographic markets, recruiting from charter schools with high numbers of students of color, and targeting community-based organizations that serve multicultural students, they anticipate reaching this goal by 2014. Although the College has been a coeducational institution since 1969, it continues to struggle to achieve gender balance in the student population. Data from 2008 revealed that only 34% of the incoming class was male.

With a current admit rate of approximately 70%, Bennington's ability to exert much selectivity in the admissions process is hampered. In meetings with Trustees, senior staff and students, it was clear that the College is taking measures to expand their undergraduate enrollment to 750 students. Students expressed concern that such an increase would diminish the quality of their education by increasing the student-to-faculty ratio, increasing class sizes, and further limiting their living spaces. The Trustees and Administration, however, view this increase as necessary due to Bennington's heavy reliance on tuition as a primary revenue stream. Additionally, this would enable them to select students who may be better prepared for the rigor and uniqueness of a Bennington education, thereby leading to higher retention rates.

Retention and Graduation: For many years, Bennington has sought ways to reduce its attrition rates. Strong student/faculty relations have always been a hallmark of a Bennington education. The College has continued to strengthen this bond by incorporating more faculty members in activities outside of the classroom. Faculty now take part in running orientation sessions designed to acclimate students to what they can expect of a Bennington education. Such efforts are paying off. The Evaluation Team is pleased to note that for this current fall semester, Bennington reported a persistence rate of 83%, a record for the College. In meetings with the Evaluation Team, students commented that the primary reason they persist in the face of challenging circumstances is due to their deep and meaningful relationships with faculty. Administrators cited a dedicated focus on advising as a reason for their recent success with regard to retention. The message of aggressive commitment to advising is built into the recruitment and training of new faculty. Data showed that students on academic probation and those poised for probation were more likely to leave than others. In response, the College implemented a system whereby those students received more individualized attention and were provided assistance from the Faculty Advising Committee in creating an academic strategy to be removed from probation. The new system of advising at-risk students led to 73% of them on probation last year returning to campus this year in good academic standing.

The creation of two new first-year advising positions is one of the ways that Bennington has responded to entering students' confusion about the requirements of the Plan process. This step is a commendable effort to increase the first- to second-year persistence rate. The first-year advisors made contact with every student before and soon after matriculation. Faculty reported that their engagement with their first-year advisees occurred at a deeper level than in past years because the new positions helped prepare students for initial conversations with faculty about their academic trajectory. In Fall 2009, every entering student was given a brochure called "Executing the Bennington Plan." This was another method employed to reduce confusion about what a structured plan entails.

Advising for sophomores about the Plan process occurred earlier this year and included a panel with upperclassmen who provided insight regarding their experiences with designing their curriculum. Whereas previously faculty only submitted mid-term progress reports for students in jeopardy of failing, faculty are now encouraged to submit Concern Reports at any point during the academic year regarding the progress of any student whose performance is not up to par. The College has addressed students' anxieties about balancing the hourly requirements of the Field Work Term with a need to earn money; within a five year period the budget to support students has more than tripled. Furthermore, Field Work Term staff members have initiated outreach to engage current parents and alumni in providing housing for students on FWT assignments. During focus groups last year, first-year students reported how disruptive FWT was to their transition to college. A pilot service program that will keep 30 first-year students in Bennington during FWT to work with a faculty member has been introduced this year.

Student Services: Throughout the visit, there was clear evidence that the College used data gathered from formal and informal assessments to inform changes they made with regard to enhancing the quality of student services. Their attention to seeking student input in various forms (focus groups, participation in national student surveys, locally developed tools regarding student satisfaction, residence halls surveys and anecdotal evidence) is commendable.

As outlined in the self study, a substantial proportion of Bennington students responding to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reported a general sense of dissatisfaction with student services. Partly in response to information provided by this assessment tool, the College built a student center and hired recreational staff. Limited physical space for intramural activities has led to contracting with local establishments to provide space for Bennington students to engage in sporting activities. This is a creative approach to responding to a need until their plans to build their own facilities come to fruition.

The health care staff made concerted efforts to work with House Chairs to make students aware of the array of services they offer when a 2007 student survey revealed that few upperclassmen utilized their services. Given the size of the College, Bennington's health care program is well staffed with a full-time physician, registered nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, and on-call staff.

During a meeting with student leaders and an open meeting with the general student body, students overwhelmingly reported a great deal of satisfaction with the quality of academic, human, and technological resources available to them. Students seem very pleased with the

amount of resources that are readily available to them—including, but not limited to, faculty, staff, administrators, 24-hour facilities, equipment, technology, library and information services, etc. There are a wide array of numerous academic support structures, including faculty advisors, peer mentoring, writing tutors, and Field Work Term advisors.

Institutional Effectiveness – Students Standard

The College's commitment to participating in several national surveys, including NSSE, the Beginning College Student Survey and others, is evidence that they have incorporated the Commission's recommendation to expand their assessment activities. Additionally the College administers local surveys regarding the quality and effectiveness of orientation workshops, Field Work Term experiences, and residence life, and the results of these assessments have led to enhancements in the delivery of services to students. We applaud these efforts, particularly as they can lead to changes that can improve student persistence to graduation.

Standard VII. Library and Other Information Resources

Library: With increased financial support, renewed staff energy, and a receptive faculty and student body, the Bennington library fulfills well the information needs of the College community. A consultants' report in 2004, prepared by a visiting committee from Bowdoin, Wellesley and Williams Colleges, helped to identify challenges facing the library, and to focus institutional attention on them. The library has successfully addressed many of the issues raised by the consultants, but it may be time now to revisit the recommendations and to articulate a library strategic plan that demonstrates its ownership of an ongoing agenda of growth and improvement.

Although there is no written acquisitions policy, it is widely understood that the libraries (both Crossett and Music) will purchase materials based on requests from faculty and students. In FY2009, the librarian reported that fully 67% of all purchases were in response to those suggestions. The library has acquired a strong array of online resources in the past few years, and continues to evaluate the costs and benefits of both text and visual online resources. Budget increases have been steady and are expected to continue, although the overall purchasing power of the library is still modest. Students are aware of interlibrary loan, and they and the librarians make extensive use of external resources.

The staff is not only qualified and adequate in numbers, but also connected to the students and faculty with an unusual vitality. They make every possible effort to meet the information needs of the College, and there is widespread respect and praise for their service. Staff provides instruction in research methods both at the request of faculty in course focused sessions and to individuals as needed. There is no specific mechanism in place to test or measure students' proficiency in accessing, evaluating, synthesizing, and presenting information, although an examination of student projects quickly reveals their mastery of information literacy skills.

Library use at Bennington is high for both traditional and online resources. For the past two years, students have borrowed 25 volumes per FTE (first circulation, renewals not counted,

reserves not included), a high figure even for selective liberal arts colleges. They have also retrieved more than 50 full text articles per FTE from online databases. Both of these figures ignore the heavy use of traditional and e-reserves and of non-print media, and suggest an intense level of serious research. Interlibrary borrowing has grown by more than 80% in the past two years. Despite its budgetary limitations, the College library clearly is meeting demand and opening opportunities for student and faculty research.

Both the Crossett and Jennings (music) libraries are challenged by space constraints. When the 2004 Campus Master Plan was developed, the library was not specifically included. Nevertheless, the library did undertake a separate effort to develop plans for an addition or other space expansion. That process proceeded to the point of selecting an architectural firm, but no further progress has been made. While pursuit of a library expansion has been on hold, the staff have taken creative steps to free space so it can be reconfigured. Bound periodicals replaced by online subscriptions have been weeded, and the overall collection is being weeded on an ongoing basis. Some microfilm cabinets were removed to make more people space, and in the summer of 2009 the print reference collection and other bound periodicals were integrated with the book collection to free additional space.

The library administers annual student surveys and uses that feedback to modify its programs and services. Students who responded to a 2009 survey reported in significant numbers that they came to the library for “solitude.” Their response may reflect the pressures on housing and other spaces created by increased enrollment, but the important observation is that the library responded by rearranging space and furniture to create “nooks” where students could enjoy comfortable seating while studying. Unfortunately, the library has reached the limits of creative solutions, and the need for additional space cannot be ignored for long.

The music library has made some similar adjustments, and has transferred some print materials to Crossett to free space. Although the conversations about expanded library space have included discussion of integrating music with Crossett, there is an interesting tension to consider. Both faculty and staff note that having the music library in the music program building allows them to access materials, especially recordings, and to introduce them to a class at a moment’s notice. At the same time, the collection may escape the notice of students who frequent Crossett and are not taking music courses, and the facility is open far fewer hours per week than Crossett. Since the possibility of expanding library facilities is still uncertain, there is no immediate need to resolve any contrasting claims about the music library.

The librarian has attempted to address the management of the College’s archives, and a grant allowed some progress in inventorying and documenting the materials. A consultant’s report addressed both archives and records management, and both should be of concern to the College. Three archival collections document the history of the College, the dance program, and the work of the communications office, particularly photographs of the College. In addition to archival materials, stored in multiple locations, there are College records from a number of offices stored in areas that are environmentally and may be physically insecure. Although some relatively recent student records have been digitized, many more are still in storage and there is no immediate plan either to digitize them or to remove them to a more secure location. While archives and records management both have space needs which might be addressed if an

expansion of the library were built, there is also a more immediate need to be sure that the College is complying appropriately with record retention and security requirements, legal or best practices, for its student, faculty, personnel, development and other financial records.

Information Technology: Although the self study was virtually silent under this standard on the subject of technology services, it is clear from the Evaluation Team's conversations that the College's academic program is well-served by the IT staff. While the initiative for instructional uses of technology generally comes from the faculty, the staff assists them in selecting appropriate software, obtaining licenses, and training. The Digital Projects Office prepares material from text, audio and visual sources for classroom use, either in the Moodle course management system or as independent files for faculty to arrange, display, or share with their students.

Faculty members have nothing but praise for the staff in IT, particularly in instructional technology, but do express some frustration with information technology systems. Both the email system and network reliability and bandwidth have caused user frustration. Students also reported that IT staff have been unable to resolve some operating and connectivity problems with their personal computers. IT staff did not specifically mention the email system as an area of immediate concern, but the current web mail application is clearly mistrusted by users; they forward mail to another account, *e.g.*, Gmail or Yahoo, at their own risk, and report messages being lost and irretrievable. To be sure, the network, both wired and wireless, was significantly upgraded in the past year, and new bandwidth and network traffic management tools have been purchased as part of the effort to ameliorate the network problems. Funding for this project was beyond the recurring annual budget. Within the existing budget, IT was able to upgrade a significant number of faculty and staff computers. By standardizing those acquisitions and limiting the range of choices available to faculty, the College has been able to minimize unit costs and increase the number of units purchased.

Clearly, information technology at Bennington is in a period of transition, with the appointment of the College's first chief information officer in spring 2009. Creation of this position resulted from a 2008 site visit overseen by the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education, which reported on major technology challenges facing Bennington. The establishment of the CIO position provides a centralized and high-level advocate for technology issues and resource needs as well as increased capacity to develop an integrated technology plan and vision linked to other campus priorities and initiatives. Enhancements already implemented or in progress include improvement of network reliability and internet access through replacement of the switch and router infrastructure and expansion of wireless coverage from 20 percent to essentially 100 percent of the campus. Installation of a new web-based tracking system for service requests has improved monitoring and status updates to users.

Upgrading and expanding classroom technology is a priority for both faculty and the IT department. Plans call for increasing the number of teaching spaces equipped with projection equipment but as more faculty incorporate visual and internet-based resources in their classes there may be pressure to accelerate the rate of installation beyond the three classrooms per year currently expected. The combined pressure to upgrade existing technology-enabled classrooms and to add more could place another significant demand on the budget.

While faculty are provided one-on-one training in the use of software, and an outside firm provides workshops for staff on desktop applications like the Microsoft Office suite, it is not clear that there is systematic training available for students from IT. Students and staff both report a culture of “teach yourself” and faculty provide guidance to their students in areas like digital arts. Students also report that they use library resources to frame their approaches to digital projects, utilizing both “how-to” texts and other visual and text resources for ideas.

The acceptable use policy for students is deeply embedded in the student handbook, along with a statement on use of the College’s email system. The faculty handbook contains statements on use of copyrighted material and the assertion of the College’s ownership of email and other communications. A similar statement, along with guidelines on use of the internet, appears in the staff handbook. While students faculty and staff are all held responsible for adhering to the standards set out in these handbooks, most institutions have mechanisms which require acknowledgement of the appropriate policies before activating individual accounts on the College’ systems and servers. The CIO is consulting legal counsel on the issue of policies and their administration and may introduce new procedures and/or modify the policy statement(s).

Discussions with both users and technology staff emphasized the immediate need for substantial improvement and upgrade of the College’s administrative software systems. According to the CIO, the current Jenzabar QX system, which is used in the admissions, dean, and business offices, suffers from an incomplete and flawed implementation in the 1990s. The result is a patchwork of fixes and bolt-on applications which inhibit reporting and integration of data to support decision-making. A particular challenge within the administrative systems project will be to address the management of student records. Because of the heavy reliance on text in documenting student progress, the CIO anticipates the need to integrate a portfolio management or other document management system with other administrative systems to allow tracking of student and faculty evaluations and other materials. The College also supports a number of specialized systems, *e.g.*, Raisers Edge in development, which are not actively integrated with other systems. The technology team is reviewing alternative solutions to the administrative systems problems and expects to move forward with a new project within the next two years at a projected cost of \$500,000, with a completion date within the next three years. In conversations with staff, the CIO is developing a needs assessment, and he clearly has the experience and knowledge to shepherd the processes of selection and conversion, but he will of course require support, buy-in, and compromise among the user community for the project to succeed.

Institutional Effectiveness – Library and Information Technology Standard

Library: The library is committed to gathering feedback from its users through mechanisms like surveys, and to using that feedback to modify and improve its services. Staff collect and review a variety of information on collection and facilities use, and apply that information in projects like weeding and collections management. There is no mechanism in place to test students’ proficiencies in information literacy, although staff report that the nature of their training in research methods has evolved over time, and continues to incorporate suggestions from faculty and reactions to student input.

Information Technology: The new CIO's role as a member of the senior staff raises the profile of IT, and should help to focus both attention and resources on the ongoing needs of improving and sustaining IT systems and services. IT is using systems to monitor and analyze activity on the College network, and the CIO is gathering information from all constituencies on their needs and expectations. While measures of the IT department's effectiveness are important, it is vital to note that the implementation of a new ERP system will vastly enhance College-wide data collection and analysis capabilities, and boost overall institutional effectiveness by providing more timely and accurate information on virtually all areas of operations.

Standard VIII. Physical and Technological Resources

Bennington College occupies 360 acres straddling the towns of Bennington and North Bennington in Southwest Vermont. The setting is inspiringly beautiful, with ample mountain vistas and dramatic open meadows. The 60 buildings on campus represent a variety of architectural styles and periods, including Georgian, traditional colonial, and international. The buildings comprise nearly 600,000 gross square feet. The orientation of the buildings on campus to protect views and the quality and quantity of performing arts spaces are particular strengths of the College's physical assets. Space planning efforts have identified moderate-sized classrooms and expanded dining and library facilities as key program needs.

The College is emerging from a prolonged period of neglect of its physical infrastructure due in large part to financial pressures. The significant investment of \$40.7 million into construction and renovation projects, made possible over the past decade through gifts, borrowing and operating surpluses, has reduced the renovation backlog. In contrast, capital improvements totaled less than \$5 million for the preceding decade.

Recent enhancements include construction of a new student center in 2006; improvements to teaching and performance spaces in the Visual and Performing Arts center, and a comprehensive renovation of the Deane Carriage Barn in 2007. Improvements to the Admission building (Cricket Hill) offer a strong example of the College's targeted leveraging of limited resources toward effective projects during this period. Construction has commenced on a \$20 million Center for Advancement of Public Action, representing the largest construction project on campus in decades. The positive effects of the recent enhancements are supported by the findings of consultant reports as well as comments from campus constituents.

At the same time, however, the backlog of deferred maintenance remains evident for almost every building on campus, most notably the Commons, Jennings, student residences, and the Dickinson Science Building. The overall backlog of renovations and improvements totals more than \$40 million. Of this amount, the College's facilities consultant, Sightlines, has identified approximately \$15 to \$20 million as high priority for completion within five years. However, the College has identified funding of only \$7.5 million during this period. As the College seeks to improve its admission position further, attention to the appearance and condition of its buildings and grounds will become an increasingly important factor.

The new biomass facility is expected to produce \$300,000 to \$500,000 in utilities savings annually while accommodating 80-85 percent of the campus' heat needs. These savings provide an opportunity to increase preventative maintenance. Energy consumption declined 10 percent over past five years. While the College is to be commended for its energy consumption reduction of the past few years, its consumption still outpaces peers when adjusted for size. Continued improvements in this area will require a combination of changes in behavior and set points as well as renovation and other improvements (i.e., window replacements) to enhance building efficiency.

Operational support for facilities in terms of budget and staffing compares well to the College's peer group based on benchmarking data from Sightlines, with the exception of custodial services. Despite having the highest gross square footage per coverage per custodian among the peer group, there was no evidence of dissatisfaction with service.

The capital plan presents both strengths and weaknesses. Capital planning has been enhanced by the creation of the Vice President for Planning and Special Projects position and the establishment of the detailed "black book" of committed deferred maintenance and improvement projects. The planning reports provide a valuable historical record of the patterns and level of investment. However, the capital budget reports contain only expenditures without funding sources. Further, they list future year projects at particular dollar amounts and specific fiscal years for which funding are not yet identified. These include several major projects, such as renovations of the library, Commons, and student housing. The College should develop a capital budget that distinguishes more clearly the funding expectations (sources and levels), status (potential, approved, planning, design, etc.), and priority of future year projects.

The College's insurance policy for facilities and contents is written at a value of \$79 million. This would suggest replacement of facilities at approximately \$100 per square foot, perhaps only one-quarter to one-third the actual replacement cost of the buildings. Discussions with the Executive Vice President suggested, but did not confirm, that the actual replacement value may be in the \$200-250 million range, including contents. There may be implications and risks of insuring at a lower value against potential specific building and campus-wide losses.

Institutional Effectiveness – Physical and Technological Resources Standard

The combination of the new Vice President for Planning and Special Programs position, facilities condition assessment by Sightlines, and more systematic tracking of both large and small needs over multiple years have enhanced Bennington's capacity to identify and prioritize capital improvement priorities. The significant investment in construction and renovation projects over the past decade has stemmed a tide of notable deterioration in the physical plant. Like most institutions, Bennington struggles to find sufficient funds to meet the backlog of deferred maintenance and renovation projects, including several of its most visible and prominent buildings. This will require the continued development of a multi-year capital plan, with clear prioritization of projects, including balancing new construction and expansion against renovation; scenarios for funding; and consideration of increased funding for plant as a direct tradeoff against budget needs for general operations given the importance this area will likely play in meeting other goals, such as enrollment growth and enhancement on yield.

Standard IX. Financial Resources

Over the last decade, Bennington has achieved substantial progress in stabilizing and strengthening the financial health of the College, largely through increased enrollment, targeted management of expenditures, and successful fundraising efforts. Evidence of this improvement is found in the consistent operating surpluses, increasing net assets (at least until the investment declines of 2008-09), successful conclusion of a \$92 million campaign characterized both by higher annual giving and major gift flows, and enhanced investment in facility renovations.

The College's operating budget for 2009-10 totals \$29.7 million. Bennington is highly tuition dependent with two-thirds of expenses (\$19.9 million) funded from enrollment-related revenues net of financial aid. Annual giving contributes an additional \$1.2 million, or four percent of operations. The \$10 million endowment contributes only a small fraction toward operation, at about one percent.

The tuition discount rate continues its rise above 40 percent, threatening financial stability. According to the Self-Study, the discount rate has increased from 35.8 percent in 2005-06 to 41.0 percent in 2008-09, and is expected to be still higher in 2009-10. Each percentage point increase is estimated to add more than \$300,000 to the budget gap. College leadership is aware of the challenge but has not yet presented a detailed plan for addressing it beyond aiming for increased application volume and the resulting admission flexibility. This is not a problem unique to Bennington, but there is little evidence that scenarios of a worsening discount rate are considered adequately in financial planning scenarios. For example, the finance committee materials presented to the Trustees in September 2009 illustrated only scenarios in which the discount rate improved from its current levels despite the worsening trend. It was striking that this critical issue received little attention in the Self-Study document, despite its centrality to the continued financial stability of the College.

Projected operating revenues plus annual giving total \$22.2 million for 2009-10, or \$7.5 million less than projected expenses. This gap, as in past years, must be filled with major gifts. While the College has achieved or exceeded this level of giving in recent years, including \$8.3 million in 2008-09, such reliance on major gift flows to fund general operations raises several concerns. First, major gift flows tend to be more variable than annual giving since they rely on a much smaller base of potential donors, particularly at Bennington, and the swing of two or three donors can change the results significantly. Second, reliance on major gifts to plug the operating budget gap constrains the College's ability to target such gifts and cultivations toward new initiatives and program enhancements. Development leadership has identified the goal of increasing the annual fund to cover a share of this gap. While the small number of major donors presents potential vulnerability, the current development leadership team has built an effective infrastructure and strategy to steward existing key relationships, identify and cultivate new major gift prospects, and increase the current 22 percent participation rate for annual giving.

Its very small endowment, approximately \$10 million, means that Bennington has only two legs of the three-legged financial stool characteristic of many thriving liberal arts colleges. As a

result, the College relies upon net tuition and current use gifts to cover spending. This lack of revenue diversification puts the College at greatest risk to variability in enrollment, financial aid, and gift flows--all areas that have presented difficulties in the past.

Due to its small endowment, the College's financial position was only marginally affected by recent dislocations in the financial markets. Still, several endowment funds are currently underwater relative to their original gift values, by a combined \$1 million. The long-term investment pool of the College declined \$2.3 million (18.4 percent), from \$12.5 million during the fiscal year ending June 30, 2009. The endowment spending policy adopted February 2008 sets the distribution for operations at a reasonable 4.5 percent of the average market value during the preceding twelve quarters. The endowment has been managed by an outsourced operation since 2005, under the direction of a long-term fund investment policy outlining asset allocation, management structure, investment guidelines, and performance benchmarks.

The growth in expenditures in recent years has focused largely on academic areas, on addressing key renovation facilities improvement needs, and on strengthening administrative capacity in key areas such as planning, institutional research, academic budgeting, and information technology. Faculty salaries have increased an average of 5.4 percent during the past six years before being frozen in the current cycle due to budget reductions. The College has invested an average of \$2.2 million annually on renovations during the past decade versus only \$400,000 per year during the prior decade. The current budget projects \$1.4 million annually for 2009-10. Over the last four years, the number of administrative positions has increased from 37 to 52.

Despite increased operational expenditures, Bennington has been living within its operating budget. The College has posted operating surpluses for the past decade, including \$3.5 million (cash basis), or more than ten percent of the budget, for 2008-09. The surpluses have allowed the College to accumulate a healthy cash balance of \$6.3 million, or approximately 20 percent of budget, entering 2009-10. This cushion provides unaccustomed fiscal flexibility for the College, as well as a funding source for capital projects and one-time needs.

The additional debt issued in the past year (\$28 million of which \$21 million was new and \$7 million was refinancing) has weakened the College's financial position. More to the point, the recent borrowing for new construction effectively exhausts the College's debt capacity for several years and thereby restricts the College's ability to address the substantial backlog of renovation needs. The new debt also increases debt service expense to the operating budget, and therefore the perennial gap that must be covered by major gifts. Long-term debt increased from \$10.6 million to \$30.7 million over the past year. With the new debt, the College's viability ratio (expendable net assets divided by long-term debt) decreased to 0.74, significantly below the 1.25 target ratio presented by the College's auditors as evidence that the College has sufficient reserves to meet its obligations. In addition to its external obligations, the College owes \$4.8 million from an earlier loan it took from its own endowment in the 1990s. The institution had been repaying the endowment slowly at a pace of \$250,000 per year but chose to defer a repayment this year, given budget uncertainties. This decision serves to highlight a fundamental fiscal predicament for the College, namely how to address pressing contemporary problems—especially for programmatic enhancements and the reduction of the deferred maintenance backlog—while at the same time preserving its inter-generational equity.

As noted in the discussion of Standard II, Bennington's resource allocation process is highly centralized with the President and Senior Staff, without clear opportunities for engagement and buy-in by broader campus constituencies. The committee structure does not include a budget advisory group. The Board of Trustees receives quarterly updates on projected variances for the current year, reviews and approves the budget for the following year, reviews the annual audit, and explores other issues, such as the discount rate and borrowing. Financial materials prepared by staff for the Trustees tend to be highly tabular with limited narrative explanation. The preliminary state of the strategic planning framework has not yet permitted the articulation of linkages and the presentation of financial tradeoffs and investment needed for success. This situation has thus far delayed the emergence within the College community of a clear understanding of how the strategic initiatives envisioned by the leadership will ultimately affect College's financial position and development goals.

Budget monitoring and reporting is not fully developed, due largely to the highly centralized control exercised by the business office and limitations of the administrative software system. Managers cannot view budget status or transaction details on-line, but instead must rely on monthly hard-copy reports. As a result, many units have developed and maintain a variety of side or shadow systems as primary monitoring tools. These must be reconciled with College's financial system each month, a duplicative and time-consuming process. On a positive note, however, the controller has articulated a detailed set of business processes to allow for cross-training, coverage and reference for staff and to regularize key transactions and workflow.

Institutional Effectiveness – Financial Resources Standard

Bennington exhibited considerable leadership, discipline, and diligence over the past decade to reverse negative financial trends and to re-establish the level of budget flexibility and net assets to allow it to begin to shift from managing from year to year to considering new opportunities and considering multiple priorities and competing initiatives. The focus on fundraising and enrollment growth has served the College well. With this greater stability, the ongoing challenge is how to regularize financial planning processes, including engaging various constituencies, enhanced monitoring and financial reporting, and shifting from an annual budgeting mindset to a multi-year financial planning perspective with multiple scenarios on the major assumptions underlying Bennington's financial position. As the strategic planning process develops from its current broad framework to an actionable plan, linkages between the financial, fundraising, and strategic plans must become more pronounced and strengthened.

Standard X. Public Disclosure

For the external audience, the quality, variety, and accessibility of information about Bennington are all excellent, due in large measure to recent efforts to raise the visibility of the College before its many stakeholders. Visually, the College's publications and web site are very attractive, complete, and effective, a tribute to the careful and focused attention to detail on the part of a skilled cadre of public relations professionals. In 2008, the College implemented a redesign of its website, resulting in the establishment of an open source content management system that

allows individual departments to create and update their on-line information. Although the system is not fully used by all academic and administrative departments, the capacity for outreach to potential students, parents, alumni/ae, and donors has grown accordingly.

The College leadership readily acknowledges that the use of the intranet for administrative purposes is not yet robust or fully developed. One area that needs particular attention is the use of the network to provide timely and accurate information to academic and administrative offices on financial and administrative matters. The College continues to depend on hard-copy reports, which is both costly in terms of production and inefficient in terms of end-user input. As the College becomes increasingly focused on learning outcomes, a fully developed intranet and a user-friendly and user-driven system for assessing student progress will be indispensable. All of this is well understood, and the recent increase in resources being dedicated to the College's information needs bodes well for the resolution of these issues in the near future.

Institutional Effectiveness – Public Disclosure Standard

The College has taken seriously the imperative to assess its publications and web presence on an ongoing basis. Most recently, the Office of Communications surveyed local and regional media in summer, 2009, on the effectiveness of its publications and website, and the results of that survey were immediately and intentionally incorporated into the planning and preparation of publications for the subsequent academic year. The printed materials of the College reflect the institution's historic dedication to good design in graphic presentation, and the ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of those materials by staff have resulted in a very high quality product. Evidence suggests that the recent upswing in applications is attributable to the feedback of potential students concerning the presentation of the College in print as well as on the internet.

Standard XI. Integrity

Bennington College has a strong tradition of emphasizing the ethical dimensions of a student's education and striving for a culture of respect for the individual and for diversity of opinions. This tradition is conveyed to students, faculty, and staff through publications, the College's website, and campus events, and is crystallized in the powerful statement that is read at each Commencement.

In the past decade, the College has taken steps to improve clarity and communication between the Board, members of the Senior Staff, faculty, staff, and students. The President, the Provost and Dean, and other senior officers of the College hold open hours each week to promote a culture of open communication. Several initiatives have focused specifically on creating more communication with faculty: policies regarding faculty leaves and sabbaticals, faculty review, grievances, and academic freedom have all been revised and/or clarified and are clearly described in the faculty handbook. The process whereby members of the faculty are reviewed for contract renewal is overseen by a faculty-elected committee in concert with the Provost. The policies and standards for this review are clearly laid out, and the process reflects both rigor and fairness.

The student and faculty culture at Bennington creates an environment in which academic honesty is a shared value. A clear explanation of academic honesty expectations and a procedure for handling suspected cases of plagiarism are included in the Student Handbook. Students report that academic dishonesty is a rare occurrence, unacceptable to most of their peers.

As noted under Standard VI, student diversity, historically a challenge for Bennington, continues to be a priority in the College's strategic planning, and recent trends are offer reason for cautious optimism. From 2006 to 2008, the percentage of racial minorities in the overall student body increased from 5% to 7.3%, and 9% of the incoming class of 2008 were students of color. Progress has also been made toward gender diversity, with the percentage of men in the incoming class rising to 35% in 2008. A Diversity Committee has developed further plans for minority grants, outreach, and targeted student recruitment strategies. Student services offices exhibit careful adherence to the confidentiality of student information and strict adherence to FERPA guidelines.

Steps have been taken to increase faculty and staff diversity through recruitment, search, sabbatical, and leave policies and practices. Given Bennington's location, it is impressive to note that 14% of the faculty are from under-represented groups, although recent progress in this area has been limited to the part-time rank.

Institutional Effectiveness – Integrity Standard

Bennington has undertaken a number of measures to improve the processes by which the leadership of the College communicates with the faculty. The College has also seen success from its efforts to diversify the campus community. As Bennington moves forward, the team encourages the College to further promote clarity and communication to involve the campus community in open discussions of its future directions.

Institutional Effectiveness Summary

At the level of individual outcomes, that is, in terms of evaluating student success during the course of study, Bennington merits very high marks indeed. The Plan Process is ideally suited to the purpose of continuous quality assessment and to finely calibrating each student's program of study to optimize the likelihood of success. The newly implemented "Expectations for a Bennington Education" framework shows promise of establishing greater consistency across the range of student outcomes in this regard. Moreover, the engagement of faculty members as a team in accompanying each student in her progress toward the degree ensures that the Plan Process itself is constantly under scrutiny and refinement.

At the course level, within the discipline groups, and at the collective institutional level, continuous assessment has always occurred, but without an overarching framework that historically has allowed the institution to capture and document that assessment. With the new emphasis within the Administration on assessment and outcomes evaluation and the creation of offices charged specifically with planning and assessment, that framework is already emerging. As a consequence, the College today is capable to a far greater degree than was recently the case

of evaluating its policies and procedures, with regard not only to the academic program, but also to administrative operations as well.

A word of caution. For a college such as Bennington, there is potential danger in the wholesale adoption of standard industry norms and practices as a basis for its self assessment. Improved performance in each of the generally accepted metrics for success—upward tending retention and graduation rates, an ever-expanding applicant pool, improving financial ratios, falling levels of deferred maintenance, and so on—may be in the short run unrealistic for this College. Bennington will for the foreseeable future be faced with difficult choices and trade-offs, even as it solidifies its market position and moves toward greater financial stability. In assessing its evolving effectiveness as a business enterprise, the College should take care not to abandon its distinctive character as a seat of liberal learning and its historic dedication to serving the best interests of each student individually. To make critical strategic choices solely or even primarily for the purpose of attaining a more normative institutional profile could jeopardize the entire mission of the College and is strongly to be discouraged.

Summative List of Institutional Strengths and Concerns

Strengths:

1. Bennington has a strong sense of itself and its purposes that has not changed over the course of its history. This identity is strongly bound up in its unique curriculum, which is designed to develop within every student an extraordinarily high level of individualism and self-confidence and a conviction that it is the responsibility of every educated person to strive to improve the human condition.
2. Bennington enjoys the benefits of strong leadership, embodied in a supportive and engaged Board of Trustees and a visionary and energetic President.
3. Over the course of the last few years, Bennington has achieved a degree of fiscal stability that provides an advantageous position from which to launch new initiatives. That stability is the result of sound fiscal management in containing costs and focused efforts to meet its enrollment targets, improve student retention, and raise gifts for current operations and capital projects through the annual fund and major gift solicitations.
4. The Board and the Administration have recently created a framework for strategic planning as a basis for community-wide discussions about the future. At the same time, Bennington has moved forward with the initial steps in establishing comprehensive and systematic processes for the assessment of its programs and their effectiveness in achieving institutional goals.

5. The College enjoys an extraordinarily strong sense of community and pride in its small size, as well as a broadly shared commitment to a common purpose. In spite of its location and its origins as a women's college, Bennington is making modest but steady progress in achieving greater diversity within its student body and faculty and in establishing a broader social and ethnic profile.
6. Recent strategic staffing changes have made a demonstrable improvement in the ability of the College to achieve its long-term goals. These include the establishment of the Provost's Office seven years ago, which in the meantime has won the respect and trust of the faculty. Additional positive changes include the growth in the Admissions Office, enhancements in the fund-raising capacity, the newly created first-year advisors, and other strategically critical positions within the Administration.
7. The College is well served by a library and academic support services that are highly attuned to the specific needs of the students and faculty.

Concerns:

1. Although Bennington has succeeded in improving its fiscal basis for moving ahead, the College continues to labor under several distinct financial constraints, namely, the lack of a substantial endowment, a relatively high discount rate, a constrained borrowing capacity, and a reliance on the sustained generosity of a small number of major donors.
2. The Administration has not yet had the opportunity fully and transparently to engage all elements of the College community in a coordinated way in the strategic planning and outcome assessment processes.
3. Much standard information concerning the fiscal and operational health of the College is not readily available to faculty and staff, either for normal administrative purposes or for strategic modeling.
4. Although recent trends suggest a return to fiscal robustness, concern remains that the financial course ahead and the means for navigating it are still unclear. Master plans for facilities, for example, do not contain concrete and achievable action plans for addressing problems with the physical plant. The fiscal implications of growing the size of the College are not yet fully tested. Decisions about necessary trade-offs need to be better informed about their impact on the budget and balance sheet.