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COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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April 14, 2010

Dr. Elizabeth Coleman
President
Bennington College
One College Drive
Bennington, VT 05201

Dear President Coleman:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on March 4, 2010, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Bennington College:

that Bennington College be continued in accreditation;

that the College submit a report for consideration in Fall 2011 that gives emphasis to the institution's progress in:

- 1) ensuring financial stability, with particular attention to managing debt, managing the tuition discount rate and reducing the gap between net tuition revenue and operating expenses;
- 2) reducing deferred maintenance and completing renovations to the campus;
- 3) implementing a comprehensive approach to the assessment of institutional effectiveness, including the use of data to inform planning and decision-making;
- 4) implementing the Strategic Planning Framework;

that the College submit a fifth-year interim report for consideration in Fall 2014;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the College give emphasis to its success in continuing to address the items specified for attention in the Fall 2011 report;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2019.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

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Bennington College is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be substantially in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

We commend Bennington College for the clarity of its mission and purposes, which provide direction to its programs and services. We take favorable note of the substantial progress the College has made in the last decade to strengthen its financial position and improve the enrollment and retention of students and of strategic staffing changes, including the establishment of a Provost's Office, the creation of two first-year advising positions, and growth in the admissions and development staff. We concur with the visiting team that this places the College in an "advantageous position from which to launch new initiatives." We are pleased to learn of the College's effective use of NSSE data to improve the student life program on campus and increase support for student services and of the institution's investment of more than \$40 million in construction and renovation projects. With the support of a highly qualified, dedicated faculty and staff, bright and engaged students, a committed Board of Trustees, and a visionary and energetic President, Bennington is well positioned to respond to future challenges and achieve the strategic goals it has established.

The items the institution is asked to report on in Fall 2011 are related to our standards on *Financial Resources*, *Physical and Technological Resources*, *The Academic Program* and *Planning and Evaluation*.

Despite the progress of the last ten years, financial resources remain a concern for Bennington College. Increased revenue and enrollment and prudent management of expenses, including salaries, have allowed the College to achieve greater financial stability, but we note that the institution is heavily tuition-dependent and experiences an annual gap of approximately \$7-8 million between net tuition revenue and operating expenses. The discount rate continues to rise above 40%, even though the College has had a goal to reduce it over the past five years. In addition, the College has recently increased its debt (\$28 million in new debt and \$7 million in refinancing) to make significant capital improvements. We are pleased to learn that the College was able to negotiate favorable interest rates on this debt and has received a gift of \$2 million a year for the next ten years that it will use to repay the debt. We look forward to learning, through the Fall 2011 report, of Bennington College's continued success in strengthening its financial position, with particular attention to the management of debt and the tuition discount rate and to the success in closing the gap between net tuition revenue and operating expenses. We remind you of our standard on *Financial Resources*:

The institution preserves and enhances available financial resources sufficient to support its academic and other activities. It manages its financial resources and allocates them in a way that reflects its mission and purposes. It demonstrates the ability to respond to financial emergencies and unforeseen circumstances (9.1).

The institution's multi-year financial planning is realistic and reflects the capacity of the institution to depend on identified sources of revenue and ensure the advancement of educational quality and services for students. The governing board reviews and approves the institution's financial plans (9.3).

The institution and its governing board regularly and systematically review the effectiveness of the institution's financial aid policy and practices in advancing the institution's mission and helping to ensure that the institution enrolls and supports the student body it seeks to serve (9.5).

The Commission is pleased to learn of Bennington College's substantial investment in its physical campus, including improvements to teaching and performance spaces, a comprehensive renovation of the Dean Carriage Barn, and improvements to the admissions building. We understand that construction has begun on a \$20 million Center for the Advancement of Public Action. As noted in the team report, however, deferred maintenance remains quite high at over \$40 million. Of this, projects totaling \$15-20 million have been identified as "high priority" for the next five years, and the College has secured \$7.5 million to support this work. The Fall 2011 report will provide an opportunity for Bennington College to update the Commission on its success in addressing deferred maintenance and completing planned renovations to its campus. Relevant here is our standard on *Physical and Technological Resources*:

The institution undertakes physical resource planning linked to academic and student services, support functions, and financial planning. It determines the adequacy of existing physical and technological resources and identifies and plans the specified resolution of deferred maintenance needs. Space planning occurs on a regular basis as part of physical resource evaluation and planning, and is consistent with the mission and purposes of the institution (8.4).

The Commission concurs with the visiting team that, although Bennington College has begun to address the assessment of programs and student learning in a comprehensive way, "there is significant room for more effective assessment at all levels." We are pleased to learn that the self-study process, including completion of the Student Achievement and Success data forms, was helpful in enabling the College to compile information about its assessment efforts and how assessment data are made public and used for improvement. We understand that the College has recently appointed an Associate Provost for Planning, Research and Assessment to oversee development and implementation of a comprehensive approach to assessment. We look forward to learning, in Fall 2011, of the College's success in this regard, consistent with our standard on *The Academic Program*:

The institution implements and supports a systematic and broad-based approach to the assessment of student learning focused on educational improvement through understanding what and how students are learning through their academic program and, as appropriate, through experiences outside the classroom. This approach is based on a clear statement or statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The approach provides useful information to help the institution understand what and how students are learning, improve the experiences provided for students, and assure that the level of student achievement is appropriate for the degree awarded. Institutional support is provided for these activities (4.44).

The institution's approach to understanding student learning focuses on the course, program, and institutional level. Data and other evidence generated through this approach are considered at the appropriate level of focus, with the results being a demonstrable factor in improving the learning opportunities and results for students (4.45).

As noted in the report of the visiting team, long-range planning at Bennington College has historically been a "relatively informal process." We understand that the College is developing a model of broader participation in planning and has prepared a Strategic Planning Framework as a first step in this process. The Fall 2011 report will provide an opportunity for the College to

update the Commission on the implementation of the Strategic Planning Framework, in keeping with our standard on *Planning and Evaluation*:

Planning and evaluation are systematic, comprehensive, broad-based, integrated, and appropriate to the institution. They involve the participation of individuals and groups responsible for the achievement of institutional purposes. Results of planning and evaluation are regularly communicated to appropriate institutional constituencies. The institution allocates sufficient resources for its planning and evaluation efforts (2.1).

The institution undertakes short- and long-term planning, including realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints. The institution systematically collects and uses data necessary to support its planning efforts and to enhance institutional effectiveness. It plans for and responds to financial and other contingencies, establishes feasible priorities, and develops a realistic course of action to achieve identified objectives. Institutional decision-making, particularly the allocation of resources, is consistent with planning priorities (2.2).

Commission policy requires a fifth-year interim report of all institutions on a decennial evaluation cycle. Its purpose is to provide the Commission an opportunity to appraise the institution's current status in keeping with the policy on Periodic Review. In addition to the information included in all fifth-year reports the College is asked, in Fall 2014, to provide evidence that additional progress has been made on the areas specified for attention in the Fall 2011 report. The Commission realizes that these matters do not lend themselves to rapid resolution and will require the institution's continued attention over time; hence we request additional information in the interim report.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2019 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years.

You will note that the Commission has specified no length or term of accreditation. Accreditation is a continuing relationship that is reconsidered when necessary. Thus, while the Commission has indicated the timing of the next comprehensive evaluation, the schedule should not be unduly emphasized because it is subject to change.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the self-study prepared by Bennington College and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Dr. Elissa Tenny, Provost and Dean of the College, and Dr. Andrew Shennan, team representative, during its deliberations.

You are encouraged to share this letter with all of the institution's constituencies. It is Commission policy to inform the chairperson of the institution's governing board of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Mrs. Deborah Wadsworth. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with Commission policy.

The Commission hopes that the evaluation process has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation with the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education in New England.

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Barbara Brittingham,
Director of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Elsa M. Nuñez

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Enclosure

cc: Mrs. Deborah Wadsworth
Visiting Team