

**BENNINGTON COLLEGE**

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PRISON EDUCATION INITIATIVE

# **Student Handbook**

**SPRING 2023**

## Welcome to Bennington College!

Bennington College is a liberal arts college in Southern Vermont that has, since its founding in 1932, provided an education in the humanities that addresses the questions and changing realities of the contemporary world. In 2016, Bennington's Prison Education Initiative (PEI) began offering Bennington College credit-bearing courses at Great Meadow Correctional Facility in Comstock, NY. Bennington College now offers an Associate of Arts degree for PEI students who complete the program requirements as outlined below.

### Program Structure

The Prison Education Initiative (PEI) at Bennington College brings the College's renowned faculty and undergraduate degree program into Great Meadow Correctional Facility in Comstock, New York. The mission of PEI is to provide a quality liberal arts college education to incarcerated students, enabling them to earn an Associate of Arts degree to better their chances at further educational opportunities and employment after their release.

The Prison Education Initiative (PEI) provides classroom-based courses taught by Bennington College faculty at Great Meadow Correctional Facility. Following the Bennington seminar model, these classes consist entirely of lecture, instruction, in-class discussion, and regular assessment of student progress. Over the course of their studies, PEI students will be expected to demonstrate collegiate-level skills in the English language that include the ability to convey sophisticated ideas in both oral and written work, as well as reading and comprehension of sophisticated texts. Students are required to demonstrate basic math skills and also to pass courses in the social sciences that demonstrate scientific and quantitative reasoning and information literacy.

PEI students are provided free tuition for their Bennington College education, and are given all books and materials needed for courses free of charge. Bennington College participates in the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative, and all PEI students eligible for Pell grants will be requested to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as part of their participation in the program.

To increase the opportunity for student success, PEI students will in their first term be enrolled in no more than one or two classes. They will also have access to study hall, which provides an opportunity for quiet study time, access to the PEI library, and discussion with classmates on assignments. In subsequent terms, PEI students will choose to be considered full-time students or part-time students. **Full-time students** must be enrolled in a minimum of six credits per term, are allowed two study hall blocks per week, and cannot hold another job at Great Meadow. **Part-time students** must be enrolled in a minimum of four credits per term, are allowed one study hall block per week, and may hold another job at Great Meadow. All exemptions to this

rule must be authorized by the director of the program. This placement will not impact any necessary release-oriented programmatic needs assignments.

PEI runs year-round: the fall term begins in July and ends in December; the spring term begins in January and ends in June. Classes meet weekly for a 6, 10, or 16-week period, and each course is staggered throughout the full six-month term (e.g. one course may begin in July and end in October; another course may begin in September and end in December). Over a three to five year time frame, each student will complete 60 semester credit hours as required for an associate's degree. Though students will be required to complete at least one-fourth of their credits through Bennington College to earn a Bennington associate's degree, Bennington accepts transfers credits for PEI students from other regionally accredited institutions of higher education, using the same criteria and standards established for Bennington's on-campus students.

In the event that a student transfers to another facility before earning a Bennington College Associate of Arts degree, PEI will communicate with the college-in-prison program (if one exists) at that facility and will help transfer credits.

### **Admissions**

Upon acceptance into the PEI program, students may be required to take a college preparatory course before joining credit-bearing courses. Based on the initial assessment of writing and comprehension abilities demonstrated during both the review of application materials and the application interview, this requirement may be waived for some students; these students will begin taking credit-bearing courses immediately.

### **Enrolling in Classes**

#### ***Registration***

Near the end of every term, PEI students will receive a list of the upcoming semester's course offerings. In consultation with PEI faculty, students will submit course request forms indicating which classes and how many they would like to take; faculty will review these requests and will determine appropriate courses, keeping in mind requests, credit requirements, and space availability.

#### ***Withdrawals***

The first three weeks of the term is considered a probation period. During this time, the student may drop the course without any note on his record. If a student withdraws from a course beyond this three-week period, either by request or at the discretion of the teacher, he will receive a "W" (for "withdrawn") for the course on his transcript. Students are encouraged to meet with a member of the PEI faculty before withdrawing from a course unless this is not

possible for circumstances outside the student's control; should the student decide to move forward with the course withdrawal after this conversation, he must notify the teacher immediately. **Students who drop or withdraw from more than two courses cannot be guaranteed a place in future classes.** Please note that receiving more than one "W" over the course of one year may result in academic probation or dismissal from the program.

If a student does not enroll in classes for **two consecutive terms for any reason**, he will be removed from the program and must write to PEI's administration stating the reasons for his absence and why he would like to be readmitted to the program. PEI staff review these applications for readmission based on prior academic records, reason for original exit, and any demonstrated independent study the student has conducted in the interim.

### **Academic Support**

Bennington College has permission from DOCCS to communicate with students via secure messages through JPay regarding their academic program. For use of JPay, students must abide by the following guidelines:

- All correspondence must be related to the specific student's college program
- College programs can only send one pre-paid stamp with each secure message
- Students must respond by using the pre-paid stamp provided by the college program
- Group secure messages are not permitted and must not contain messages for other students
- If a student is removed from the program or transferred, all communication must immediately cease

PEI will contact every student during the term with a pre-paid stamp to allow for students to respond with questions for faculty or staff members. Bennington must abide by Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) guidelines, and cannot disclose personal information such as academic status, student ID number, registration, grades, enrollment status, and transcripts over the secure messaging system.

When in-person instruction is possible, a member of the PEI faculty will hold office hours on occasion throughout the term, allowing students access to meet individually to ask questions and discuss their academic progress. Please note that students are not permitted to contact any of their teachers outside of class time, either directly or through another person. Should a student need to communicate with the PEI program through the mail, he can write to:

Prison Education Initiative  
Bennington College  
One College Drive  
Bennington, VT 05201

## **Evaluation**

In addition to feedback during the term, student work at Bennington is evaluated through written reports by faculty members submitted to the Dean's Office at the end of each term. Along with narrative evaluations, students will receive grades (A, B, C, D, F). The Final Evaluation appraises the student's work for the term and is part of the student's permanent transcript. The Final Evaluation includes a judgment of Pass (comparable to A+–C-), Marginal Pass (comparable to a D+–D-), and Fail. No credits are given for classes not passed.

Faculty may also document an academic concern with an Academic Progress Concern Form by the middle of the term. Academic Progress Concern Forms are part of a student's internal record, but do not appear as part of the student's transcript. Students who choose to withdraw from the course after receiving a Concern Form may be placed in the next College Preparatory course offered by Bennington College at Great Meadow at the discretion of the instructor and in conversation with the student.

As stipulated by federal guidelines, students must pass 67% of the credits they attempt in order to stay enrolled in the Prison Education Initiative (please note that withdrawing from a course counts toward credits attempted but not earned, thus negatively affecting this percentage). Students must also maintain a cumulative GPA of 2.0 at all times. Students who are dismissed based on poor academic performance will have the opportunity to appeal the dismissal in a one-page letter addressed to the assistant director of PEI. PEI's executive committee (made up of the director, associate director, and two faculty members) will evaluate each appeal on an individual basis and will send a formal written response to the student.

## **Expectations of Students**

### ***Attendance***

Classes for which students are enrolled will be included on their program cards, as will be a twice-weekly study hall. Being enrolled in PEI means being available for college-related callouts. Class attendance is mandatory. This also means staying in class for the entire session. Each student is responsible for whatever he misses while out of the room. Students who miss a class must fill out the absence form sent to Mr. Thompson, the Education Supervisor, giving the reason for this absence.

Should a student be taken out of class or is unable to attend class due to circumstances outside his control (court dates, medical reasons, etc.), he may be given the opportunity to make up the missed work at the discretion of the teacher. Should he not be able to make up the missed work, he will receive an Incomplete or Fail for the course and will not receive course credit.

Per Great Meadow policies, students who are found guilty of a tier 2 or 3 infraction during the term will be removed from the program for the remainder of the semester. Once the semester is

over, a review of the disciplinary infraction will be reviewed by the Education Supervisor and the Deputy Superintendent of Programs. In conversation with PEI staff, enrollment back into the program will be determined at that time.

### ***Classroom Etiquette***

PEI has a zero-tolerance policy for any students engaging in behavior that is disruptive to the processes or operations of the class, interferes with the instructor's ability to teach, or interferes with other students' ability to participate in the class. Disruptive students will be dismissed from the class and receive no credit for their work in the class.

This policy also applies to study hall: any student who is disrupting study hall or using the time for activities not pertinent to course assignments will be dismissed from the class or program.

### ***Transfers***

Once enrolled, students must agree to a transfer hold until the completion of courses in which they are enrolled each semester (except when a hold cannot not be honored for security or reduction-of-security reasons).

### ***Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty***

Plagiarism and all kinds of academic and artistic dishonesty are contrary to the educational philosophy and aims of Bennington College and are absolutely prohibited. Plagiarism is submitting the work of others as one's own, whether intentionally or not, and includes failure to acknowledge sources. Proper acknowledgment of sources is the basis of academic honesty. Such sources include words, ideas, data, and images from books, articles, and so on. Sources of images must be noted in the same way that textual material is cited, according to discipline standards. Academic dishonesty also includes the submission of the same work for different classes without substantial revision and prior permission from the faculty. Academic dishonesty may also include projects or assignments done collaboratively but not approved in advance by faculty as collaborative work.

If plagiarism or other academic dishonesty is discovered, consequences will be determined by the instructor and a PEI committee; these consequences may include failure in the course or being dismissed from the program.

### **Infrastructure**

#### ***Course Books***

Every student will receive all the texts required for each course. At the end of each term, students have the option to keep their books or to return them to the classroom, where they may borrow them at any point in the future while participating in PEI. Students will be required to return some hardcover textbooks at the conclusion of a course. When borrowing a book from the PEI classroom library, students **must** sign out the book in the provided ledger.