

# The Bennington College Plan Process

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## INTRODUCTION OF THE PLAN PROCESS

Central to Bennington's founding vision was the belief that a dynamic, relevant education could best be achieved when students themselves define its direction. Further, the College envisioned that students, as a result of such purposeful self-reliance, would take with them when they graduated not only what they'd learned but also the way in which they'd learned it. What began as a conviction has been continuously verified over time as the College has grown, resulting in an increasingly intensified intellectual and artistic trajectory for its students.

The Plan process, strategically the framework and essentially the soul of a Bennington education, can be seen as a kind of theoretical map drawn by every student with the aim of reaching an identified curricular destination. This destination often changes, sometimes slightly, sometimes significantly, as students perceive more enriching routes of scholarly and artistic discovery. When such redirections occur, the map is re-drawn, the Plan revised.

With their Plans as aids and reference, Bennington students progressively formulate the questions that drive their areas of study, with the aim of bringing them to fruition in sophisticated work. The process assumes that meaningful learning works best when rooted in a student's ever-expanding curiosity, rather than being imposed by following entrenched institutional paths. Internal sources of order replace external templates as students, in consultation with faculty, design the content, structure, and sequence of their curricula, taking full advantage of the College's varied resources.

In devising and implementing a Plan, students are asked to write and rewrite a series of prospective and reflective essays that form the basis of their ongoing discussions with faculty advisors and Plan committees. These focused narratives not only require them to detail their academic goals and strategies, but also to describe their commitment to and deepening immersion in their studies and the degree of progress toward their aims.

When students take responsibility for their Plan and also are invited to be open to fresh influences, two potential problems can be avoided: first, that they might not be sufficiently grounded in the understanding provided through the intellectual focus of disciplines; second, that they might become too discipline-bound and thereby fail to ask the kinds of questions that would lead them to individual explorations. The Plan process seeks to find the point between a student's sense of educational adventure and the need for a trajectory that is coherent and cumulative. The specifics of that trajectory will, of course, be unique for each student.

The oversight and assessment of your work at Bennington is multi-faceted and broad. It includes individual faculty members, your advisor, your Plan committee, and faculty from the disciplines that make up your declared areas of study.

Your Plan committee provides broad oversight of your work and educational goals, while the discipline groups, or other groups of faculty working across traditional disciplinary boundaries (CAPA, Environmental Studies, etc.) will provide more focused oversight and assessment.

## **THE PLAN PROCESS TERM BY TERM**

### **First Term**

The Plan process begins in discussions with your faculty advisor and first-year advisor. They'll work with you to lay a solid foundation for successfully pursuing your education.

Your initial, formal Plan-related task is the writing of a first-term essay. This three- to five-page document centers on your progress in coursework, possibilities for the Field Work Term (FWT), directions for your second term of work, and options for future studies. Examples of questions that might be addressed include:

- How would you characterize the range of your course work?
- Does that range include exploring the unfamiliar? If so, what happened? If not, how do you plan to insure that encountering the unfamiliar does happen?
- What have you discovered about your learning process?
- How might your FWT relate to your studies?
- What broad areas of study are you interested in pursuing? If you are still very much in exploratory mode, why does more focus seem premature at this point?
- What do you propose to study during the spring term and how does it relate to your interests?
- How do your second-term course selections broaden your range of study?

Upon approval by your faculty advisor, you'll submit your essay to the Dean's Office for further review.

Regular conversations with your faculty advisor should also address the "Expectations of a Bennington Education" (see attached) and the ways in which these expectations can be met. These flexible expectations will serve as a blueprint for your Plan and as guideposts for Plan meetings.

Plans are under way to include an online portfolio as part of the ongoing Plan process. A pilot program will be developed (see portfolio section at the end of this document). This online portfolio—which will include a selection of work from courses, projects, and performances that reflects the development and accomplishments of your Plan—will be reviewed by your Plan committee. Details of portfolio creation noted below are contingent upon the successful implementation of an online portfolio system.

Conversations with your first-year advisor will focus on your transition to Bennington College and will introduce you to the resources available to you as a Bennington student. These discussions will include an overview of Field Work Term, course registration, the Plan, and your electronic portfolio.

### **Second Term**

You will continue to meet regularly with your faculty advisor and first-year advisor to discuss your experiences. This will include an assessment of your first Field Work Term, your written reflection that will constitute, in effect, a second-term essay, tied to the Plan you have begun formulating.

Discussions with your faculty advisor will focus on your academic experiences and the courses

you have in mind for the next two years. These ongoing discussions lay the groundwork for the development of your Plan proposal in the third term. In addition, you will work with your faculty advisor and appropriate faculty to identify work that should be included in your portfolio.

Concurrently, your first-year advisor will work with you to shape the portfolio of academic and creative work from your first year.

### **Third Term**

#### **The Plan Proposal**

In your third term you'll put together an educational Plan for the next five terms. While it's up to you to explain, pursue, and defend the goals of your Plan, its progress unfolds under the close guidance of the faculty. You should think of your Plan as a collaboration—an ongoing conversation with your teachers, faculty advisor, and Plan committee.

Ideas for your Plan will naturally arise from continuing and newly emerging academic and creative interests, from knowledge gained from courses, and from the experience of your Field Work Term in the first year. You should work with your faculty advisor to identify your strengths and press yourself to explore unfamiliar subjects and untried curricular opportunities.

A broad course of study will empower you with the experience and knowledge necessary to move towards advanced work; you are therefore expected to study a wide range of subjects. When you write your Plan proposal in the third term and articulate the particular areas of study that support your educational goals, you are expected to define a range of courses that engage the history, theory, and practice of those areas.

In addition, it's your responsibility to seek out faculty members and others who might point you to further beneficial Field Work Term experiences. Field Work Terms are an integral part of the Plan and the ways in which yours are relevant to your life in and outside the College should be discussed both in the Plan proposal, and as part of continuing conversation with your faculty advisor.

As you prepare to write your Plan, you should address the following questions:

- What's the central idea or inquiry your Plan addresses, and how might that idea shape and direct your progress?
- How will you use resources (faculty, courses, facilities) available at—or through—Bennington to bring your Plan to fruition?
- Does your Plan transcend a simple list of courses?
- Can you articulate a compelling argument for your Plan? How does it express your beliefs, interests, and ambitions? Why this Plan? Why now? Why Bennington?
- In what ways does your Plan build on your abilities and work habits, and how does it challenge you?
- Does your Plan address the history and context of your proposed area of study?
- How do your plans for Field Work Term further support your Plan proposal?
- How do you see your Plan connecting to a broader community?

#### **Title or Question, Primary and Supporting Areas of Study**

You will give your Plan a working title, the purpose of which is to identify in a preliminary way its unifying theme or the question driving your inquiry. (You will choose a final title for your Plan in the sixth term when you meet with your committee to discuss your progress and advanced work.) You will also identify the primary areas of study—for example, philosophy, biology,

composition, directing—that will be central to the intellectual foundation for your work. In addition, you will identify supporting areas of study. These topics need not be directly related to your advanced work or specifically interrelated with primary areas of study, but a case should be made for “supporting.”

You’re encouraged to wait to title your Plan until after you’ve written your Plan essay and you and your faculty advisor have thoroughly discussed its educational goals. After that, you’ll have both the text and the context you need to define your Plan in a one-sentence summary: the working title of your Plan.

The Plan document you submit to the Dean’s Office will contain not only your Plan essay, but also a form on which you’ll state the working title or question, the primary areas of study, supporting areas of study, and a brief but explicit statement of how you will achieve a trajectory of depth and coherence. (This statement may be drawn from your essay.)

Your Plan committee consists of your faculty advisor and two faculty members selected by the Dean’s Office, ideally from areas of study you have designated. At the Plan meeting you will present your Plan proposal, which, along with your course evaluations and portfolio (when implemented), will be reviewed by your committee. Your committee’s task is to discuss with you the feasibility of your proposal and make suggestions to help you meet your outlined goals. Together, you will confirm the discipline(s) that will provide focused oversight and assessment of your work. Immediately following the meeting, your Plan committee will approve, conditionally approve, or defer your Plan. Students whose plans are not approved will be placed on academic warning or probation the following term.

#### **Fourth Term**

If your Plan was approved during your third term, the main task of your fourth (and fifth) terms, working closely with your faculty advisor and other appropriate faculty members, is to proceed toward the realization of its aims and to develop your portfolio. Your FWT reflection essays should, by this point in your Bennington career, increasingly connect to your overall Plan.

At this stage, you should be taking courses that prepare you for and engage you in advanced work, which will vary depending on your area(s) of study and will have been discussed during your Plan meeting. The five fundamental areas of the “Expectations of a Bennington Education” document serve as the basic guide to success at an advanced level:

- Formulating an inquiry
- Identifying, analyzing, and using resources
- Creating and revising work
- Presenting and explaining work
- Connecting work to broader contexts

As previously stated, any significant changes in your academic focus will likely initiate a new Plan meeting, in which you’ll explain the reasons for your reconsidered direction and propose new goals that reflect it.

If your Plan proposal was conditionally approved or deferred in the third term, the fourth term is primarily a time—working closely, as always, with your faculty advisor and Plan committee—to confront and resolve the issues that arose in your first Plan meeting. Your requirement now is to craft a coherent Plan that addresses these unmet issues, for review at a new Plan meeting before the end of the term.

If your revised Plan is not passed by the end of the fourth term, you will need approval from your Plan committee and the dean's office to continue at the College.

### **Fifth Term**

At the start of the fifth term, you'll ask for individual Plan process meetings with each member of your Plan committee, seeking his or her guidance as you prepare for the upcoming Plan progress and advanced work meeting in the sixth term, and discuss with your faculty advisor the results of these meetings. If it seems necessary, you or any member of your Plan committee can request a fifth-term Plan meeting.

Once again, should your focus of study have changed significantly during the fourth or fifth terms, you must write a revised Plan proposal and request an additional Plan meeting, in which you will articulate the reasons for this shift, propose goals that reflect it, and present your updated portfolio for review.

### **Sixth Term**

#### **Plan Progress and Advanced Work**

You will submit your Plan progress and advanced work essay, along with your updated portfolio, in the middle of the term. The Dean's office will schedule a meeting with your Plan committee. Whenever possible, the committee will be composed of the same faculty members who approved your Plan proposal in the third term.

In this latest essay, you'll confirm the title of your Plan and the primary and supporting areas of study, as well as evaluate your overall progress. You'll reflect on your successes, acknowledge the challenges you've encountered, and detail any curricular adjustments. This essay must also outline your program of study for the next two terms and demonstrate how your educational choices, including FWT, have been integrated into a solidly constructed Plan. The work you've been gathering in your portfolio will offer evidence of your academic and creative achievements to date.

You'll also demonstrate your successful performance of advanced work, or, at the very least, your anticipation of that success. Advanced work is the realization of work in one or more areas of study that moves well beyond the introductory level and demonstrates a broadly formed understanding of your stated areas of study and their connection to your educational goals.

Generally, each student's work will be assessed in relation to how successfully she has realized the Expectations of a Bennington Education (see attached). Beyond these expectations, each discipline may have additional methods of assessment and/or opportunities for engagement within that particular community of inquiry. This may include a review process, performances, thesis work, lecture series, colloquia, and more. The Plan committee, in conjunction with faculty from the area(s) of study, will assess individual progress.

If you're working across disciplines, you will clarify with your advisor and Plan committee how discipline group oversight intersects with your stated goals for advanced work. If your work falls outside of established disciplines at the College, you'll work with your Plan committee to identify the appropriate faculty to provide oversight.

The Plan committee will assess your Plan progress and provide guidance for studying at an advanced level in your final year. Should you have changed the primary emphasis of your Plan, or if your portfolio (when implemented) does not demonstrate sufficient advancement, the

committee may recommend a further progress meeting or a revised essay.

### **Seventh Term**

#### **Realization of Advanced Work and Further Portfolio Development**

Working with your faculty advisor and other faculty members who are overseeing your advanced work (as determined in the sixth term Plan meeting), you'll be refining your skills, making clear by your competence in the classroom and/or studio that you are capable of mastering increasingly sophisticated subject matter. At the same time, you will continue to explore the breadth of educational opportunities at the College, venturing into new areas of study as time permits.

Although it is quite unusual, a second progress meeting may be scheduled during this term if you have made far-reaching modifications of your Plan or are not working at an acceptably advanced level.

### **Eighth Term**

You will write a senior reflection essay and submit it to your faculty advisor for review and then to the Dean's office for final approval. In this essay, you'll look back on your last year as well as on your Bennington experience in full. Here, you should also reflect on your intellectual and creative growth throughout the Plan process and your advanced work as evidenced by your portfolio.

The senior reflection essay serves as the preface to your portfolio (when implemented), which, upon approval, may be shared with the larger Bennington College community through a variety of venues, including live presentation, publication, and presence online. You'll determine which of these venues is appropriate, in consultation with your faculty advisor, Plan committee, and the Dean's office.

Your final FWT essay should also provide a cumulative reflection on the past four years and how the experiences influenced the progress of your education.

### **PORTFOLIO**

Pending a successful pilot program and implementation of a College-wide portfolio system, you will create an online portfolio, comprised of representative samples of your academic and creative work, including class papers, images, videos, and research. The development of your portfolio provides the evidence members of your Plan committee will need to monitor all aspects of your education, and to gauge how effectively you are pursuing your Plan.

As stated previously, you will confer with your faculty advisor and faculty members you have worked with to identify the work that merits inclusion in your portfolio. In selecting this material, you'll demonstrate your understanding of the essential expectations of your education, showing that you have (1) formulated an inquiry, (2) identified, analyzed, and used resources, (3) created and revised work, (4) presented and explained work, and (5) connected work to broader contexts.