

## **STRATEGIC PLAN**

December 8, 2023

### **Bennington: At the Vanguard in Liberal Arts Education**

Bennington College Strategic Plan

2024-2029

The world is changing, and fast—and America needs to prepare its future leaders to meet it.

As we look forward to Bennington College’s centenary in 2032, we are reminded of our origins. Bennington’s founders envisioned it as a radical departure from the traditional and a bold experiment in higher education.

Bennington’s small student-centered inquiry-based model and close, graduate-style advising revolutionized the liberal arts experience, which had been characterized by routine institutionalized interpretations of what students of each major should learn. By contrast, Bennington students mapped a territory for study and practice that went well beyond the bounds of traditional majors.

Today, in an exponentially more complex and interconnected world, Bennington is again at the vanguard, a standout amongst our peers for our focus on individuality, interdisciplinarity, creativity, and social justice. These ideals brought Bennington to life, and ensured our enduring relevance and necessity. Today, they remain the College’s North Star.

The Bennington Plan—and its trademark interdisciplinarity, rigorous creativity, and commitment to social justice—serves as a model for 21st century (and, for that matter, 22nd century) liberal arts education. With a radically different student body—more diverse, global and intersectional, Bennington is leading the way.

The lives of Bennington alumni prove the value of Bennington’s methodology. Alumni are celebrated musicians and dancers, notable dramatists, bestselling authors, successful entrepreneurs, groundbreaking scientists, and critical theorists. As such, Bennington’s founding principles endured throughout the nine decades of its history and continually support students who go on to have had an outsized influence on the world.

Despite competition, Bennington College endured and continued to innovate. The College launched the Center for the Advancement of Public Action (CAPA) as a bold experiment for preparing liberal arts students to become agents of social change, and to act meaningfully and

productively in the world. Through the collaborative work of students, faculty, and citizens, CAPA strengthens civil society on a local, national, and global level by serving as a convener, catalyst and creative space for social change. Areas of focus include human rights and social justice, climate change, and sustainable equitable food systems.

In addition, Bennington College set a goal to be a welcoming, global, antiracist community that represents the diversity of talent of the world, including the talent that has been historically underrepresented. Bennington College is building meaningful support for whole-person education, including mental health, wellbeing, and conflict resolution.

### **RESILIENCE AND RESOLVE:**

Of course, all this progress hasn't come without its share of challenges. In this moment, too, we are reminded of Bennington's founding: though the College was first conceived during a period of financial prosperity and geopolitical security, its doors were opened in a moment of crushing economic depression and intensifying insecurity.

Which is to say: resilience is in Bennington's DNA.

Today's world poses similarly existential challenges and exciting new directions: climate change, systemic racism and attacks on the LGBTQ+ community; scientific discoveries that will prolong human life and health at the same time as there is intractable partisanship and increasing economic inequity; emerging technology offers promise and uncertainty.

Bennington itself isn't immune to these challenges, either. Bennington stares down the realities of financial sustainability, affordability, and student debt, as well as the devaluation of the liberal arts. What's more, the features that set Bennington apart, and set up our students up for success—small classes, intense, graduate-style advising and large historically significant rural campus—make financial and affordability goals more difficult to attain.

Far from band-aid fixes, this financial strategy includes a long horizon, a broadened approach, and deep partnerships—all while staying true to Bennington's core values.

This strategic plan aims to show how Bennington College's persistent ideals, recent innovations, and new programs will enable this institution to further stand out among its competitors; to continue to attract exceptional faculty, students and staff; and to build its reputation as a thought leader. What's more, the collective actions described below will generate much-needed

capital, scholarships, and endowment funds to help ensure financial stability, long into the future.

Perhaps most importantly, as we close out Bennington's first century and look toward its second one, this strategic plan will show how this once-humble experiment in higher education can help direct today's students toward self-fulfillment and constructive social purposes—making the world more beautiful, sustainable, democratic, and just.

### **OUR APPROACH:**

Bennington will be at the frontlines by

1. Reinventing our core academic and curricular model by attracting, retaining, and supporting our extraordinary faculty—who serve as not just teachers, but advisors, innovators, and thought leaders; broadening the Bennington curriculum through partnerships that expand our knowledge-base, and being a magnet for the world's best thinkers, scientists, artists and makers to use Bennington as their own innovation lab
2. Doubling down on interdisciplinary innovation to empower students to think creatively and across disciplines, and to solve the most urgent social, political, and environmental problems of our time—from climate change to the intersection of arts and technology. New centers, areas, etc. Strengthening both the Field Work Term experience and early career services for recent graduates.
3. Providing clear and potent pathways to purposeful work lives; building a stronger bridge from students' Field Work Term experiences to work after Bennington; ensuring that internships are equitable, relevant to students' plans and to a fulfilling and purposeful life after Bennington.
4. Strengthening our global diverse community through scholarship support; attracting a growing pool of extraordinary students and supporting our vibrant community of learners through focus on students' first-year on campus and increased emphasis on wellbeing, faculty support, and antiracism.
5. Expanding the audience for Bennington educational experiences by developing new credit, certificate programs, meeting students in through hybrid and online experiences as well as potential ways to use the campus
6. Building a strong and sustainable financial model through a capital campaign and new revenue sources, increased alumni engagement and fundraising, and improved operational capacity.

### **OUR METRICS:**

By their very nature, Bennington's core values—among them, interdisciplinarity, community, creativity, and antiracism—are difficult to quantify. That said, the success of this Strategic Plan will be measured by the following metrics:

- Student achievement and academic reach, including retention and graduation rates, whether students are accepted to their graduate programs of choice, students' ability to find meaningful, purposeful work with impact after graduation
- Students' success at Bennington, including academic joy, feelings of support, community, and belonging, as gauged by climate surveys.
- Public perception of Bennington, including employer satisfaction with Bennington interns and graduates.
- Alumni economic mobility, including ability to pay off loans Pace of innovation, including new academic programs, new revenue streams, and new ways of reaching future Bennington students.
- Financial sustainability, including new revenue, endowment

Our strategic plan lays out our vision of liberal arts at Bennington over the next five years and provides a viable path in Bennington's second century. By supporting the core of Bennington's educational experience and collaborative opportunities, we will empower students in becoming the people they want to be, strengthen our institution, and make the "world more beautiful, sustainable, democratic, and just."

### **OUR PROCESS:**

The Strategic Planning Steering Committee was convened and charged in February 2022 by president Laura R. Walker. The committee was an 18 person cross-constituent team nominated, appointed, and charged by the president, comprising college leadership, staff, faculty, student, alumni, and a trustee representative, and chaired by Provost Maurice Hall. The original charge of the Steering Committee was to "unify and synthesize the strategic proceedings and conversations that have already begun and to develop a framework and priorities that will be the foundation of a strategic plan and financial model to be crafted with senior leadership and the board," and specifically deliver a strategic plan complete with (a) a unifying and shared vision for the College's future (b) a mission statement and (c) a set of shared values.

The mission statement development occurred over the spring and summer of 2022, engaging more than 230 community members in live feedback sessions, and an additional 150 respondents via electronic survey. The board unanimously approved the mission in September of 2022. During the summer and fall of 2022, the steering committee and work groups began

work to transform the “four building blocks” President Walker had identified into concrete goals and supporting objectives.

Over the winter and spring of 2023, the steering committee and four work groups continued efforts to refine the draft values, goals, supporting strategies and action plans, as well as design a community engagement process for the spring semester to work towards the finalization of a draft plan. The draft goals were also presented and discussed with the Faculty Executive Committee, Student Council, Staff Council, Cabinet, Senior Staff and Trustees.

On Thursday, March 9, “*Our Community, Our Vision: A Day Long Conversation About Our Collective Future*” was held. The event was a full day of participatory and collective imagining sessions based on the progress to date of the steering committee. More than 200 students, staff, and faculty members participated throughout the day. Attendees were engaged in critical conversations in response to the committee's draft values and draft goals, as well as considered together what shared strategies and priorities will accelerate our progress towards a thriving tomorrow.

Finally, a core group of steering committee members worked to synthesize the feedback received through spring of 2023 into a draft strategic plan that was reviewed by the president, cabinet members and senior staff over the summer of 2023. The draft plan was then shared with trustees at the September 29, 2023 board meeting, and trustee feedback integrated.

### **OUR MISSION:**

Bennington liberates and nurtures the individuality and rigorous creativity of its students, supporting them as they forge their own paths and work toward a world more beautiful, sustainable, democratic, and just.

### **OUR CORE VALUES:**

We, the members of the Bennington College community, aspire to live the following values through intentional practices of inquiry, empathy, and self-reflection. We enter into this community with thoughtfulness, integrity, generosity, honesty, and an openness to embrace the unknown:

#### **A Commitment to Progressive Education, Creativity, Independence, and Experimentation**

A Bennington education turns curiosity into knowledge, passion into practice, and a sense of urgency into action. We believe that a collaborative process of self-directed learning crosses disciplines, pushes boundaries, and leads to the most rigorous and innovative thinking. This

conscious elasticity empowers our community to expand our creativity, critical acumen, and poetic imaginations. We are free to inquire in any direction we choose and express ideas, including those that are contrary to popular thought. We value learning by doing as exemplified by our commitment to a vibrant residential community and supported by the lived experiences of our faculty-practitioners, staff colleagues, and students engaged in a mix of classroom, and field experiences.

### **A Commitment to Antiracism and Social Justice**

We envision a shared world constituted by equality across gender identity, race, ethnicity, class, neurodiversity, physical ability, sexuality, citizenship, and religion in pursuit of a truly inclusive society. We are dedicated to dismantling ideas, systems, and policies rooted in racism and oppression to advance those that promote equality and liberation for all people inclusive of our differences, intersecting identities and lived experiences. This commitment extends to how we carry out our shared work, examining and remaking our individual, implicit and invisible assumptions that can lead to inequity and injustice. We devote ourselves to constructive social purposes and to doing transformative work in the world.

### **A Commitment to Sustainability, Wellness, and Regeneration**

We take our responsibilities to each other and the planet seriously through our commitment to ecological, social, and economic sustainability and to regeneration in an era of depletion. We believe that human health and wellness cannot be improved separately from the health of larger systems in which we exist, including our institutions and our planetary ecosystem. We believe sustainability is advanced through engaging with our evolving world, active questioning, intentional practices, dialogue, and the pursuit of individual and collective wellbeing.

### **A Commitment to Democratic Community**

We believe education is simultaneously the practice of individual freedom and a form of democracy that is continually made and remade through the dynamic balance between individuality and community. That balance acknowledges our interconnectedness and shared responsibility. Both within the classroom and the institution as a whole, we practice our commitment to working together through shared governance that creates the conditions for equitable dialogue and participation that informs decision making. This calls for communicating with clarity and transparency, and recognizing that care for the present community is fundamental to the future success of Bennington.

### **GOALS:**

1. **Strengthen, energize and improve access to Bennington's distinctive approach to a progressive liberal arts education, particularly its focus on student driven education, interdisciplinary work, teacher-practitioners, and a unique model of student-faculty collaboration that prepares students to confidently engage the difficult questions that impact our world.**

- 1.1. **Reinvigorate the core academic and curricular model to improve the student academic experience. (The Model)**

#### **Year 1-5**

- 1.1.1. Reevaluate and revamp First-Year Forum as a cornerstone of the First Year Experience (First Year)
- 1.1.2. Make Field Work Term more accessible and equitable; strengthen connections between the Plan, alumni, and the world of work (FWT)
- 1.1.3. Live up to our promise of truly progressive education that prioritizes interdisciplinary approaches and places students at the center of their own education (Interdisciplinary + Plan)
- 1.1.4. Strengthen advising, making it more consistent and equitable in support of students and their success (Advising)
- 1.1.5. Advance diversity, equity, and inclusion with a focus on culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogy in support of student learning (DEI)
- 1.1.6. Explore, develop and execute a fifth year fellowship program, retaining recent graduates for mutually beneficial work engagement with the college across critical areas (5th Year)

- 1.2. **Support faculty and create space for innovative, forward looking educational opportunities (Faculty)**

#### **Year 1-2**

- 1.2.1.1. Audit faculty work and workload, and seek to create time and space for innovation; focus faculty effort in areas that are central to our mission.
- 1.2.1.2. Assess balance of full-time to part-time to visiting faculty; delineate roles for each, and establish a philosophy of faculty hiring that strengthens the academic program.

#### **Year 3-5**

- 1.2.1.3. Recognize faculty experience and expertise through competitive wages and promotion; connect advancement opportunities to activities that enhance student learning and success.
- 1.2.1.4. Offer competitive course releases for faculty-initiated new program development.
- 1.2.1.5. Plan for a “Bennington Day” – A celebration and reflection on Bennington’s strengths in interdisciplinary study, student-centered education, and experiential learning.

### **1.3. Expand the audience for a Bennington Education (Students)**

#### **Year 1-2**

- 1.3.1. Expand scholarship funds to strengthen access to a Bennington education.
- 1.3.2. Formalize, strengthen, and illustrate potential pathways for incoming transfer students across all disciplines at the College.
- 1.3.3. Complete market research, invest in, and launch key graduate programs that are low residency, hybrid, or online that would meaningfully extend our graduate offerings.
- 1.3.4. Build out a print and digital messaging platform for marketing Bennington to prospective students, monitor results, and rework for improved results.

#### **Year 3-5**

- 1.3.5. Build the pipeline for undergraduate students by expanding early college opportunities for advanced high school students.
- 1.3.6. Create more flexible pathways for undergraduate students, including considering a low-residency or online BA program.

### **1.4. Pursue Academic Partnerships to Bolster Key Curricular Innovations**

#### **Year 1-2**

- 1.4.1. Pursue complimentary partnerships with regional institutions to extend our offerings.
- 1.4.2. Explore complementary and bidirectional affiliation, articulation and/or guaranteed admissions agreements for accelerated graduate study pathways (3+2 or 4+1), as well as dual degree opportunities.



2. **Design and implement the Bennington College Innovation Hub: A system that supports ongoing development and implementation of ideas that have the potential to make the world more *beautiful, sustainable, democratic, and just.***

**Through the Innovation Hub:**

**Year 1-2**

- 2.1. Affirm creative expression as a vital human need and counter the effects of an era of depletion through collaborative, self-sustaining and regenerative innovations and partnerships
- 2.2. Create campus-wide programming that fosters a culture of collaboration, innovation, and open-ended exploration
- 2.3. Create a sustainable staffing structure that is tasked with actively seeking partnerships locally, regionally and even globally

**Year 3-5**

- 2.4. Bring the world “beyond Bennington” into this process, and strengthen Bennington’s reputation as a global hub for innovative cross-disciplinary thinking, through symposia, conferences, lecture series, and other event-based formats
- 2.5. Bring attention and energy to Bennington’s role as a global innovator in a rural context.

3. **Create a center devoted to media, emerging technologies, and interdisciplinary approaches that connects across borders and disciplines and addresses the most meaningful and urgent questions of our time.**

**Year 1-2**

- 3.1. Center historically marginalized narratives, including works made in the global South and its diasporas, and by BIPOC and LGBTQ+ storytellers in the global North.
- 3.2. Build robust support structures that help students tell the ambitious and important stories they want to tell, however they want to tell them.
- 3.3. Build curricular capacity to support storytelling that is diverse in both content and form and to offer critical analysis of the role of storytelling in shaping contemporary debates.

**Year 3-5**

- 3.4. Connect storytelling initiatives and opportunities across disciplines both within the College and with external partners.
  - 3.5. Build on Bennington's existing tradition of storytelling and reputation for fostering exceptional storytellers, while updating the stories about Bennington that are circulated into the wider world.
4. **Strengthen the student experience by investing in our campus infrastructure, student support services and co-curricular programming to help students build on their strengths, clarify their values and goals, and expand their personal, social and leadership capacities.**

#### **Year 1-5**

- 4.1. Identify, assess, and repair critical physical infrastructure needs of an aging campus, prioritizing those enhancements that improve the safety, access, and quality of the student experience
  - 4.2. Create an exceptional student life and residential culture that fosters a caring, healthy, and antiracist residential living community by investing in engagement programming, staff development, and facilities
  - 4.3. Recruit and retain staff of diverse identities and experiences that reflect the diversity of the student body.
5. **Integrate and increase inclusive resources, services, programming, and curricula that centers individual and collective wellbeing, and repairs and redresses legacies of harm.**

#### **Year 1-2**

- 5.1. Together with APC and faculty governance structures, determine a way to integrate wellbeing initiatives into credited curriculum opportunities and the plan process.
- 5.2. Increase and improve paid or credited opportunities for wellbeing work and learning for students, staff and faculty with access to training, mentoring, coaching and support.
- 5.3. Ensure all students have access to fee-free basic mental health support and wellbeing programming.
- 5.4. Improve support for house chairs and student leaders.
- 5.5. Establish a task force or committee that continues and uplifts the conversation and energy towards ongoing wellbeing for all.
- 5.6. Review existing communication structures, make thoughtful improvements, and build a culture of proactive communications across the community

- 5.7. Create a designated budget for the initiatives, and secure funding for such, which would begin implementation in 2023/2024 with an emphasis on deepening support for Staff leadership in key areas of Student Life, among others.
- 5.8. Build and elevate spaces and opportunities for physical wellness.

#### **Year 3-5**

- 5.9. Prioritize identifying and securing corporate, foundation and/or government funders interested in supporting these kinds of activities.
  - 5.10. Expand personnel dedicated to these initiatives comprised of students, former students, staff, alumni and faculty as well as community members with pertinent skills.
  - 5.11. Explore the possibilities of revenue generating, extension programs that expand the reach of Bennington, that model inclusivity and are available to both campus and the larger community.
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6. **Commit to challenging and dismantling interpersonal, institutional and structural racism as well as other forms of inequity by empowering all community members to make “frequent, consistent, equitable choices\*” across all areas of the College with the goal to make impactful change.**
    - 6.1. Challenge and dismantle Interpersonal and Individual racism and inequity.
      - 6.1.1. Design and deliver antiracism educational workshops to all campus constituents and stakeholders.
      - 6.1.2. Provide regular guidance and equip campus constituents with tools to navigate and disarm interpersonal racism, individually and collectively.
      - 6.1.3. Foster the creation of affinity groups and spaces on campus to celebrate and affirm diverse identities.
      - 6.1.4. Develop toolkits for faculty, staff, and students to engage in and navigate difficult dialogues centered on minoritized lived experiences.
    - 6.2. Challenge Institutional racism and inequity.
      - 6.2.1. Establish a DEI advisory structure to work with VP-DEI to address systemic racism and make recommendations for improvement.
      - 6.2.2. Create and institutionalize policies and protocols that give protection to all constituencies, particularly minoritized faculty, staff, and students.
      - 6.2.3. Establish and formalize a competitive internal grants program to provide reasonable funding to campus constituencies to design and implement antiracism practices and to be used for professional development

opportunities centered on DEI.

- 6.3. Challenge Structural racism and inequity.
  - 6.3.1. Formal assessment of campus climate and utilize data to create metrics/scorecards to measure success and concerns by department and unit.
  - 6.3.2. Establish accountability reporting mechanism that aligns with institutional budgets.
  - 6.3.3. Launch an antiracism audit for each area of the College that will result in departmental action plans.
  - 6.3.4. Examine course offerings and programs that provide societal and historical context relative to race and culture in the United States and globally.
  - 6.3.5. Examine classroom experiences to better incorporate culturally responsive teaching and pedagogical approaches.

**7. Improve the financial stability of the college by diversifying revenue sources to attract and retain talented students, faculty and staff, and to maintain and develop exceptional physical resources.**

**Year 1-5**

- 7.1. Define and then achieve appropriate targets for incremental retention rate improvement initiatives by cohort, with emphasis on first to second, and second to third year students, subsequently improving the college's graduation rate and increasing retained tuition revenue
- 7.2. Develop and launch mission aligned programs to attract new audiences to Bennington College
- 7.3. Recruit and attract top talent across students, faculty and staff by honing how we tell the Bennington Story effectively through our marketing and communications efforts
- 7.4. Developing mission aligned and mutually beneficial strategic partnerships that expand opportunities for our students and/or recent graduates, generate new revenue and/or create efficiencies for the college
- 7.5. Conduct a feasibility study and launch a campaign for scholarships, innovation and endowment

- 7.6. Make Bennington College an employer of choice within the region by strengthening the employee experience that inspires all to do their best work by:**
- 7.6.1. Increasing the diversity of perspectives in our work by recruiting and retaining diverse and intellectually talented staff to better reflect the diversity of the students we serve in order to support the promise of a progressive education.
  - 7.6.2. Building a competitive and comprehensive compensation and benefits program that supports staff and faculty recruitment and retention efforts.
  - 7.6.3. Reviewing and assessing current staffing levels relative to the changing enrollment needs of the college, and ensuring sufficient coverage to deliver our promise to students.
  - 7.6.4. Making strategic investments within health promotion, well-being and social programs, as well as establishing clear and reasonable goals, work descriptions and expectations.
  - 7.6.5. Creating a framework for consistent employee access to professional development opportunities to ensure that staff have the tools and knowledge to uphold standards of excellence in learning and innovation.
  - 7.6.6. Strengthening systems of bi-directional and cross-departmental communication, trust and knowledge sharing within and among staff by improving internal meeting systems, communication channels, and strengthening the support for and structure of the Staff Council.