Since its founding in 1932 on the 550-acre estate of the Jennings family, Bennington College has been known nationally as a liberal arts institution - emphasis on the arts.

The bucolic college in the Green Mountains of Vermont has prided itself as a place where faculty practice what they teach. Students learned to dance with Martha Graham and studied literature with novelist Bernard Malamud and poet Howard Nemerov. And they lived in small, homey houses, not dormitories.

The college's curriculum emphasized private tutorials and encouraged individual initiative. Among the school's illustrative alumni: actress Carol Channing (class of '42), composer Elizabeth Swados ('73) and writer Bret Easton Ellis ('86), author of "Less Than Zero" and "American Psycho."

But the groves of academe have withered a bit. Many universities are suffering from soaring tuition costs, declining applications, and a host of other problems ranging from labor disputes to disintegrating physical plants.

Bennington has not escaped the trend. Chronically underfunded, the college relies on tuition to pay its bills. And with a student population that fluctuates between 300 and 400 - except for the 1970s and early '80s, when the inclusion of men and the softening of admission standards pushed that number above 600 - Bennington has been at or near the top of the list of the nation's most expensive schools. It now ranks ninth, with a comprehensive fee of $24,850 - "behind Hampshire, Bard and Sarah Lawrence," the college handout pointedly notes.

In part to address its burgeoning expenses, and in part to reinvigorate its intellectual capital, Bennington shocked its students, faculty and alumni - not to mention the rest of academia - when it announced a sweeping curriculum redesign this summer. Hoping to reduce tuition by 10 percent over the next five years, the trustees and administration fired 25 of the school's 79 faculty members, abolished tenure and eliminated all academic divisions.

"Of course, this magnitude of change is painful, very difficult," says President Elizabeth Coleman, who recognized problems at the college shortly after assuming the presidency of Bennington in 1987. "But this institution needed to be renewed, rethought. Nothing less would have been adequate."

The ideas behind the redesign are outlined in a gray pamphlet called the "Symposium Report of the Bennington College Board of Trustees." In remarkably clear and candid prose, the report admits that "the intellectual and artistic restlessness on which a pioneering institution depends has diminished and been replaced by a growing attachment to the status quo."

Left unattended, the report notes, such lethargy would be lethal. "Even if Bennington were free of the financial pressures that plague higher education today - which it is decidedly not - the need to reanimate its aims, abandon old habits and build more
flexible structures would be a condition of a vibrant and valued future."

Mrs. Coleman and the trustees were troubled by the existence of academic divisions that seemed to divide rather than coalesce the various disciplines, and by the college's tradition of self-governance for students and faculty. They also were concerned about the impact of "political correctness" on academic inquiry and the effect tenure was having on the faculty's vitality.

"I came here committed to what Bennington was, which is an institution that is passionate about learning," recalls Mrs. Coleman. "Over time, it became clear that anything but a major change was not adequate."

A PLAN FOR CHANGE

The trustees wrote the plan for change in April, the primary authors being Chairman John Barr, former Chairman Susan Borden and Mrs. Coleman herself, according to college spokeswoman Andrea Diehl. In June, they made their report public. The called-for changes were implemented - paid for in part by a $485,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

In broadest terms, the restructuring:

* Eliminated all academic divisions and created a core faculty, made up of "teacher-practitioners." Mrs. Coleman had to decide who among the faculty would stay and who would go using criteria laid out by the board. Termination letters were sent out in June. But some of those fired still had several years left under their existing contracts.

* Discarded the decades-old system of five-year "presumptive tenure" contracts, under which more senior faculty could assume they would be assured of a faculty position, barring some drastic change of circumstances. Presumptive tenure was replaced with individually designed contracts for each faculty member.

* Dismantled the existing systems of self-governance, under which students and faculty largely ran their own affairs. The board's charge to either group was to devise new systems of governance, a process currently in the works on campus.

* Proposed that foreign languages be taught at a regional language-learning center that would serve the entire Bennington community as well as "combining resources, eliminating duplication and achieving substantial economies of scale," in Mrs. Coleman's words.

Predictably, the response to the redesign has been as dramatic as the changes that provoked it, creating schisms not only between former and current faculty members, but also between incoming students excited by the change and upper-class students who have lost friends and mentors on the faculty.

Rightly or wrongly, much of the anger is directed at Mrs. Coleman, an intense woman with close-cropped gray hair who waxes passionate on the subject of education and the need to restore reading to a central place in the life of the academy.

"Liz Coleman has ruined the place," declares Ziva Gruber, a designer from New York City whose daughter, Limore, graduated from Bennington in 1990. "She wanted power and she took it. The beautiful school I sent my daughter to no longer exists."

FACULTY UNDER FIRE

Ms. Gruber also is a close friend of several fired faculty members who, with others, have formed the Bennington Academic Freedom Committee and hired a lawyer.

The committee claims that "the college illegally terminated the contracts of those fired, that it suspended existing rights of due process and appeal, and that it had an obligation to deal in good faith - something it did not do," according to Peter Danziger of Albany, N.Y., the lead attorney for the committee.

At best, they hope to negotiate a settlement with the college. At worst, they say, they will sue. The American Association of University Professors is investigating whether Bennington should be included on its list of censured institutions for terminating faculty contracts and eliminating tenure.

"I'm extremely concerned about issues of dissent and faculty governance," says Neil Rappaport, a photography teacher who was fired and then rehired after he appealed the decision. "The faculty handbook has been suspended and there is no
grievance procedure in place, no franchise for the faculty. It's an extremely difficult situation."

But Phoebe Chao, a teacher of literature, drama, film and women's studies at Bennington for 21 years, believes that her termination had nothing to do with her performance and everything to do with Mrs. Coleman's desire to rid the campus of unfriendly faculty.

Ms. Chao was one of several faculty members who vocally supported Leroy Logan, a drama professor fired in 1990 after a male student accused him of sexual harassment. Mr. Logan denied the accusation and successfully challenged Bennington in a federal district court, winning a settlement exceeding $200,000. But Ms. Chao thinks she paid the ultimate price for her loyalty to Mr. Logan.

"There was no real reason to fire me except that I stand for dissent," says Ms. Chao, who now teaches at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass. "If she's making pragmatic economic decisions, why did she clean out the literature division, which graduated more students than any other division? It's hard to see this as hard-nosed decision-making. It looks more like political enemies and favorites."

For her part, Mrs. Coleman adamantly denies rewarding friends and punishing enemies. "I was asked by the board to implement their criteria for noncontinuation of employment," she says. "The process was clear and aboveboard. There's absolutely nothing personal in any of this."

MORE OPEN DISCUSSION

And in some quarters, the changes are heralded as long overdue. "Communication among the faculty is much wider than before," says Sally Sugarman, who has taught childhood studies at Bennington for 25 years. "There's more discussion across the whole spectrum. The mood on campus now is less territorial, less divisive; there's more sense of common ground. I see more sharing, more honesty, more respect for each other among the faculty who remain."

David Merkowitz of the American Council on Education views the events at Bennington from the vantage point of one who has watched restructuring take place at colleges and universities nationwide.

"It's not unusual for smaller, private institutions to have financial problems," Mr. Merkowitz says. "All over the country, institutions large and small are restructuring, eliminating or combining departments, adopting more collaborative arrangements." Nevertheless, he admits, the scope of the changes and Bennington's high profile have put it in the media spotlight.

The college's financial plight, says Mr. Merkowitz, has been a long time coming. "For years, Bennington shunned endowments. There was a sense that artists should live on the edge. But what they discovered was that with declining enrollments, and the emphasis on jobs and vocationalism in the 1990s, they had stretched the rubber band beyond the breaking point."

The promised tuition reduction, Mr. Merkowitz concludes, should enable Bennington "to reposition itself in the market," a notion that Mrs. Coleman and the trustees applaud.

"It's quite obvious that Bennington's financial crisis is an enrollment crisis," says Mrs. Coleman. "Ideally, we would have a minimum student body of 600."

As for the students, they are as divided about the redesign as the faculty. Freshman Emily Hey says she is "in love with this place. I've never worked harder or enjoyed it as much. It's true that some of the upperclassmen do seem bitter, but among my friends, the attitude is that we're doing well and the changes don't matter."

Senior Sarah Rutigliano is one of those upperclassmen. "Everybody is angry about the firings," says Miss Rutigliano, a literature major. "We were told the administration wanted to switch to teacher-practitioners, but I don't agree with that. My teachers loved literature, and they taught me to read in a way that taught me how to write."

At the same time, Miss Rutigliano is willing to hope for the best. "Because we're in a mode of change," she says, "there are fantastic opportunities. A lot of people from diverse parts of campus are working very hard to make good, positive things happen here."
In an attempt to reduce tuition and reinvigorate the education process, the trustees imposed sweeping changes.; Bennington’s "intellectual and artistic restlessness," a Board of Trustees report says, has given way to "a growing attachment to the status quo."; Neil Rappaport, A&C) NO CREDIT; B) By Vyto Starinskas/Special to The Washington Times

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