

Laura Walker

Oral Remarks for Education Committees

January 14

Thank you to Senate Committee chair Brian Campion and Vice Chair Cheryl Hooker; to House Chair Kate Webb and Vice-Chair Larry Cupoli; and all the members of these committees for having me here today.

I am immensely grateful for your leadership, advocacy and financial support on behalf of Vermont colleges and the students our institutions for colleges in Vermont . The assistance you've provided us throughout the year has been critical.

I am a recent transplant to Vermont and I am so proud to be a Vermonter You an the Governor have taken COVID seriously and protected the residents of Vermont.

I want to share a recent note we received from a student of ours because I think it articulates just how essential our cooperation and collaboration during this pandemic has been to them. She said:

I'm following the health and safety guideline because I want to stay in school. I don't have another place to go and that's the case for so many of us students who are international and/or FLoW (First-Generation, Low-Income and Working Class). Being in school is so much more for us than just being in school, it's security - it's about having a safe place and having a room and having food. It's a privilege to be here and to be in person and that's not something I or my friends want risk in any way.

As many of you know, Bennington College is a national liberal arts college located in the southwest corner of the state.

We have a smalldiverse population of students.

- International students make up roughly 17 percent of our student body.
- 21 percent of our undergraduates are the first in their families to attend a four-year college.

- 17 percent are domestic students of color.
- Undergraduate enrollment is around 700 annually, and there are reasons to be hopeful about next year's numbers.

One of the things that makes Bennington distinct among its peers is its commitment to an experiential, student-directed education that provides hands-on preparation for post-college work.

Ours was the first liberal arts institution in the nation to integrate classroom study with annual field experience, and this vital practice still thrives eighty years later, yielding exceptional results for our students.

- 96 percent of Bennington graduates are employed or pursuing continuing education within one year of graduation, and these careers involve meaningful work in their desired fields. Many of them stay in Vermont.
- 80 percent of Bennington graduates report that they feel engaged at work, or more than double the national average of 39 percent.

We are a creative, nimble, and innovative institution—all of which has served us well over the past year as we adapted to the challenges of this pandemic.

And people all around the world are taking notice

- Domestic applications increased more than 30 percent this year among undergraduates, and applications for our top-ranked MFA in Writing is at record highs.

So let me tell you how we've adapted.

The robust strategy we crafted and implemented last summer has enabled Bennington College to stay nearly COVID-free, to protect the health of our neighbors in Southern Vermont, and to continue to provide a rigorous education to our students. All term 4 student cases on arrival No staff until thanksgiving--and after that,

These are the key components of that strategy:

Restrictions on Travel

Student arrival to campus began the third week in August and was staggered to allow for COVID-19 testing and physical distancing during move-in. Roughly two thirds of total campus housing capacity was occupied in the fall, with the remaining students studying remotely. WE followed vermont guidelines plus. Any student who left campus to visit a high caseload area outside the state was not permitted to return that term. We expect to follow similar protocols, informed by state guidelines, for Spring semester.

Comprehensive Testing Upon Arrival

Every Bennington student, faculty, and staff member on campus was tested for COVID-19 upon arrival in the Fall. Students who reside outside of Vermont in places with high caseloads, as identified by the State of Vermont, were tested within 48 hours of arrival and again after the seventh day of their quarantine. Similarly, all other students were tested seven days after their arrival to campus. All students returning to campus for Spring semester will arrive February 13-14 and follow a similar protocol to the ones that were successfully implemented in the Fall.

Ongoing Prevention and Containment

All students, faculty, and staff are required to self-screen daily to confirm that their temperature does not exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit and that they are free of other symptoms associated with COVID-19. Anyone who develops a fever above 100 degrees and/or becomes symptomatic is tested and required to self-isolate while awaiting test results (we reserved 5% of campus housing for quarantine use). We provide transparent reporting on our website on the status of new cases.

Reimagined Campus Spaces

Every physical space on campus has been reimagined in accordance with state distancing guidelines. The on-campus faculty and staff population has been calibrated to comply with social distancing and capacity requirements; it is designed to be flexible and adaptive as needs change.

A Promise to One Another

Every student, faculty, and staff member using campus is required to sign a Commitment of Shared Responsibility (CSR). The CSR requires adherence to the State of Vermont's Safe and Healthy Return to Campus: Mandatory Guidance for College and University Campus Learning, as well as Bennington College's additional requirements for mask-wearing, physical distancing,

health screening, travel restrictions, and more. Anyone who refuses to sign the CSR is not permitted on campus.

Designed to Be Flexible

Perhaps the most crucial element of this strategy is weekly testing. BROAD Everybody on campus gets tested every week. . Our reporting and testing protocols enable us to monitor the health of our community closely and to respond quickly to contain the occasional positive test. And because our instructors have designed adaptable hybrid courses that can accommodate both in-person and remote learning, we can toggle up or down on the number of people living on campus with relative ease.

We are proud of just how well our community health has fared under these trying circumstances--and with no compromises to the rigor of their education.

But make no mistake, the disruption caused by this pandemic has come at great financial cost to the College. We estimate that the full impact of the pandemic in terms of lost revenue and additional expenses is over \$8 million. This includes \$1.3 million in room and board refunds to students last spring when the College was forced to send most students home (over 80 percent returned home).

In the current year, our revenue from students is projected to be down almost \$4 million due to a reduction in enrollment and 20 percent of the students studying remotely and, therefore, not incurring room or board fees. On top of the lost revenues, the College has incurred additional costs for testing, PPE, and campus modifications necessary to safely operate.

In the face of these losses, we took serious measures to reduce costs and secure government funding. Those measures included: freezing hiring and wages; suspending the College's retirement contributions for its employees; reducing discretionary expenses; reducing capital expenditures; and temporarily furloughing dining and some housekeeping staff.

The College received funding from the SBA Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) in the Spring along with a one-year deferral of debt payments to the USDA under its COVID relief program. We are incredibly grateful to the State of Vermont for recently making two sources of funding available: \$1.237 million from the Act 154 Independent Colleges Grant program and \$413,000

from the VT Department of Health for reimbursement of its testing costs through the end of 2020. Without that assistance, we would be in a more dire financial situation today and we thank these committees for your advocacy.

Under the latest federal COVID relief bill, which was signed into law December 27, 2020, the College expects to receive \$860,000, half of which must be used for students.

Bennington College is in a unique position today. We foresee an increase in student applications in coming years, a renewed enthusiasm for our experiential approach to learning, and the fruits of years of investment in a more diverse and representative population of students and faculty. We are the beneficiaries of stellar leadership by our elected officials under this pandemic and we offer a relatively safe refuge from COVID-19 in Vermont's bucolic hills. We have all the ingredients of an institution that can thrive for another eighty years--and empower our broader community to thrive too.

But the economics of this pandemic have hobbled us in the near term and we are going to need your help. Higher education is one of the top economic drivers for Vermont. As a result of your staunch advocacy, and state and federal assistance during the pandemic, I believe that we can survive, but also thrive as an employer to Vermonters, as an educator to our ever-growing number of in-state students, and as a cultural and intellectual contributor in a state that celebrates the arts..

I am so grateful for your time today and your ongoing help . I look forward to answering your questions.