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Bennington College

There are small colleges, then there are *very small* colleges. Bennington College is a very small college in a very small town in Vermont.

Founded in 1932 as the sister women's college to then all-male Williams, today only 15 minutes away by car, Bennington went co-ed in 1969. Today approximately one-third of Bennington's 750 undergraduates are men. Bennington was the first college in the US to [include the visual and performing arts as an equal partner](#) with the humanities, social sciences, mathematics and natural sciences in a liberal arts setting.

Bennington accepted 57 percent of the students who applied to join the freshman class that arrived in the fall of 2017. While admissions are test optional, approximately half of all applicants submit scores. Among those who submitted scores when applying to join the Class of 2021, the average SAT was approximately 1310, and the average ACT Composite was a 29. The middle 50 percent for the SAT was quite broad, ranging from 1210 to 1390. Nearly a fifth of the class that arrived the following year were first-generation college students; over 30 percent were men or women of color.

Students who consider Bennington also consider schools such as Bard, Hampshire, Reed and Sarah Lawrence, art and design schools and colleges with strong dance programs. Among larger schools NYU was the most considered option.

Bennington loses between 15 and 20 percent of a freshman class each year, a higher percentage than more selective colleges, but also in line with Bard (85 percent), Hampshire (82 percent) and Sarah Lawrence (85 percent). Attrition continues after the freshman year, too. The four-year graduation rate for the students who entered in 2012 was only 56 percent, although 69 percent did complete their degree within six years.

Costs

Bennington is one of the most expensive private colleges in the US. Tuition and fees alone total more than \$53,000. [These are slated to surpass \\$55,000 for the next academic year.](#) The room and board charges exceed \$16,000. The estimated total cost of attendance, including charges for books and transportation, among others, can easily surpass \$75,000 next year.

Bennington offers need and merit-based aid to reduce costs, enough in the past that the average student loan debt for 2017 graduates was slightly less than \$28,000. This is slightly more than the maximum (\$27,000) that college students may borrow over four years through the Federal Direct Student Loan program, but less than the amount that may be borrowed for five (\$31,000). Thirty-five percent of the students who graduated in 2017 had no debt at all.

The average need-based scholarship for freshmen who entered in 2017 was just under \$45,000 according to data the college supplied to *US News*. But the average merit-based award was less than \$18,000. The college met the full need for 39 percent of its student; on average it met close to three quarters of need for students it deemed to have need.



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All students who wish to apply for financial aid must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the CSS/Profile as well as the college's own application for funds.

Curriculum

Bennington is one of the less selective colleges to have an open curriculum. There are no required courses—though some will have pre-requisites—and students take charge of [designing a plan of study from their sophomore year going forward](#). The college does not use the term 'major' preferring that students choose courses from 'concentrations' for their plan. Every plan is individualized, though a three or four-member faculty committee must approved it and make sure that the student is making progress. Students may also change their plans, with the faculty committee's approval. They may also request other faculty to be on their committee.

While prospective students do not need to be committed to a concentration if they want to attend a school like Bennington, they should visit first and speak with faculty who might become their advisors. Success at Bennington, and similar schools like Hampshire or Sarah Lawrence, depends on how well one manages relationships as well as academics. While the students may be quite brilliant and resourceful, the college's faculty and administration manage the resources on campus as well as programs such as the offerings of the [Center for the Advancement of Public Action](#).

Bennington offers [42 areas of study, 16 in the visual and performing arts](#). However, the college advertises than approximately half of all courses are "pop-up" new offerings. This makes it more difficult to design a plan of study, though the college faculty may be creating the pop up courses to help as many students as possible stick to their plan at a school where no two plans of study will be alike.

Nearly 90 percent of all classes at Bennington have fewer than 20 students. You are not likely to have a class with more than 40. Bennington students gave their faculty a rating of 3.91 (out of a possible 5) on [RateMyProfessors.com](#), lower than students at Bard (3.97), Hampshire (3.94) and Sarah Lawrence (4.09).

Community

If the term 'New England village' appeared in an encyclopedia or travel guide, Bennington, Vermont [could be the featured community](#) and Bennington College might be the [featured small college campus](#). The college renovated its student center, and uses that building as its temporary dining hall. [The Commons](#), the signature building for the campus as well as the dining hall, re-opens in February, 2019.

Depending on where you're from, you might find Bennington's campus and community quaint or isolated. However, given the small student body, the academic latitude given to the students, and the college's location, prospective students should be independent minded but also socially open. Bennington does not bond around intercollegiate sports or major campus-wide events. But this college offers more than enough opportunity for students to lead their own clubs, organizations and programming. Given the number of arts related majors, it appears that the students are also quite willing to exhibit or perform for each other.

With the exception of alcohol-related disciplinary referrals, Bennington is a relatively crime-free campus, according to the college's [2018 Clery Report](#).



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Comforts

Bennington undergraduates live on campus in [houses of varied architectural styles](#) built from 1932 through 2001 that have no more than 45 residents. The college mixes students of all years in a house, with each led by student House Chair. Each house has its own weekly Sunday Coffee Hour. Upper class students also have the option of living in the Paran Creek Apartments, built from a renovated historic mill about a 15-minute walk from campus.

Connections

Bennington students do four seven-week Field Work terms between the fall and spring semesters working in paid or unpaid internships or study abroad—in addition to having the summer available to pursue similar opportunities. Thanks to the Field Work program, Bennington graduates have a better chance to test their intellect and social skills in potential work settings than their peers at most other liberal arts colleges. The college leverages a small alumni network and faculty connections to help students find opportunities though they are not always likely to be near a student's hometown. It helps if a student comes from Boston or New York, the metro areas where the college has the latest number alumni connections.

Because of the Field Work term and self-designed academics, 94 percent of Bennington graduates will go to work after graduation, higher than the 70 to 80 percent who graduate from other liberal arts colleges.

Conclusions

Bennington empowers its students more than most colleges large or small, but also hands them more responsibility to set their academic direction. It provides a nice campus to encourage independently minded students to become more social. This can be a godsend for some very bright students. But it appears to be overwhelming for others, given the retention and graduation rates.

Report Card: Bennington College

Four-Year/Six-Year Graduation Rates: C/B

Freshman Retention: B

Costs: B

Curriculum: A

Community: B+

Comforts: A

Connections: B+ (Boston and New York)/C+ (Elsewhere)