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Bennington makes recovery its own way

President is credited with setting the course

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BENNINGTON, Vt. — When Bennington College president Elizabeth Coleman got a call recently from a longtime supporter saying she was giving the college some extra money, Coleman was delighted, but not surprised. Katharine and Albert Merck, heirs of the Merck pharmaceutical company, had been regular contributors to Bennington for years, donating an average of \$200,000 annually to Katharine Merck's alma mater.

"Splendid," Coleman told Merck. "I'm terrific at spending money. Anytime you have that problem, let me know."

The next day, Coleman was in a meeting when a woman from the development office barged in. Her face was pale. After she apologized for interrupting, she explained breathlessly that the Mercks had indeed given the College some extra money — a \$5 million unrestricted donation, the largest in the small school's history.

The gift marks the culmination of a remarkable comeback by a college that has long been renowned as an innovative hub of art movements and progressive thought. It was in Bennington theaters that Martha Graham invented modern dance. It was in a Bennington studio that Helen Frankenthaler produced her first "stain painting," an abstract technique hailed as a breakthrough moment in the history of modern art.

Under Coleman's 15-year tenure, Bennington College has risen from near bankruptcy and survived a



ELIZABETH COLEMAN
Bennington president

tumultuous reorganization that sent shock waves through the halls of higher education. The college is back to operating in the black, with an endowment of \$10 million. Student enrollment has rebounded to more than 500 undergraduates this year, almost twice what it was five years ago. Three sleek new college dormitories, one of them named after the Mercks, have been featured on the cover of *Architectural Record*, marking the first new construction at Bennington College in 25 years.

The transformation began in June 1994 when the college took a radical step, viewed by Coleman as yet another example of Bennington College leading the way. Faced with declining enrollment and a growing deficit, the trustees and Coleman released a report known as "the symposium," "challenging several sacred

cow's of higher education with new ideas designed to bring the college's programs and resources more in line with its original philosophy and aims."

Bennington did away with tenure and eliminated traditional academic divisions to allow for more communication across disciplines. Twenty-seven professors, a third of the college faculty, were fired. Several of those dismissed had been teaching at the college for more than 20 years.

The backlash was immediate and widespread. The Modern Language Association condemned the College, and the American Association of University Professors declared, "Academic freedom is insecure, and academic tenure is nonexistent today at Bennington college." Nineteen of the fired faculty members filed a multimillion dollar lawsuit, accusing the trustees of overstating claims of "financial exigency." They said they were let go, not as a result of fiscal concerns, but because they openly opposed the politics of Coleman and the trustees.

The year following the symposium, enrollment dropped below 300 students, with an entering freshman class of less than 100. Students who studied under the fired faculty transferred to other schools and recent alumni withheld financial support.

In the years that followed, the college began a slow but steady comeback. In 1997, Bennington started a bachelor's and master's degree program in teacher education. One year later, Coleman and the trustees settled out of court with the former faculty members for \$1.89 million. As part of the symposium, tuition was frozen, and Bennington lost its dubious status as the nation's most expensive college for the first time in

BENNINGTON, Page B12

Bennington College makes a comeback after a stormy restructuring

► BENNINGTON

decades. Both enrollment and the size of the college endowment started to rise.

"When we did this, there were at least three questions," Coleman said. "One – can we design such an institution? The second is can the world know about it? The third question was, if they know, will they come? Those three questions have been answered – we were able to make the design, we were able to get the word out, and they have come."

Coleman credits the recovery to college trustees who stuck with their vision for Bennington, and to the ideas at the heart of the college's new direction.

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"Higher education is not famous for being a laboratory of ideas ready to entertain possibilities. In fact, it's well known as an institution that spends a great deal of energy perpetuating itself," Coleman said. "People think about Bennington as a place where new things happen, where there are possibilities that an institution might contemplate doing things differently."

As for Albert Merck, he credits Coleman with Bennington's turnaround. "What prompted the gift was how president Coleman has turned the college around and essentially revived its ideals," Merck said. "I think it's a successful model of what a true education can be."

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