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17 fired professors gain \$1.8 million settlement

Bennington College also issues apology in deal won by Albany lawyer

BY LISA RATHKE
Associated Press

MONTPELIER, VT. -- Seventeen former professors won a \$1.89 million settlement and an apology from Bennington College on Friday for their dismissal six years ago.

The settlement ends a longstanding legal battle that erupted after the college president fired a third of the faculty and abolished tenure in a sweeping reorganization of the school in 1994.

On Friday, the tiny liberal arts college released a statement expressing regret "for the profound disruption of the faculty members' professional careers and personal lives caused by the termination of their employment."

The college also acknowledged the faculty members' "loyalty, dedication, contributions and commitments to their students and the College" and said the firings were not related to teacher performance.

Bennington College President Elizabeth Coleman has long contended that financial troubles and declining enrollment drove her to fire 27 faculty members in June 1994. More than half had tenure and nine had taught at the school for more than 20 years.

In the lawsuit, the teachers charged their contracts were breached and they were defamed. Some also claimed they were targeted as troublemakers for disagreeing with Coleman.

They challenged the financial crisis, citing the replacement of many of the teachers, some by people Coleman had hired over the telephone before the firings were announced, according to Peter Danziger, an Albany attorney who represented the teachers.

"The college's secret decision making and its disregard of tenure rights shattered the principles upon which Bennington College was founded," said Danziger. "Unfortunately, the settlement monies and statement of regret cannot restore the college's reputation nor the careers of some of the college's professors."

Long known as one of the most expensive schools in the country as well as one of the most innovative, with students studying as apprentices under faculty who are often prominent in art, drama, dance and literature, the college has been mired in turmoil since the reorganization.

In 1995, the American Association of University Professors, a national organization that supports tenure and academic freedom for college professors, concluded that, "Academic freedom is insecure and academic tenure is nonexistent today at Bennington College. Both seem to have flourished in the past but not to have survived the abrupt, excessive, inhumane and profoundly procedural flawed actions that culminated in the events of June 1994," the AAUP said.

The AAUP held a protest last year on campus to try to restore academic freedom and the faculty's participation in decisions about the school.