

Strategic Renewal:
Reframing our Priorities at the Midpoint of the *Strategic Plan*
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Philip A. Glotzbach
President

The 2009-10 academic year marks the midpoint of *Engaged Liberal Learning: The Plan for Skidmore College 2005-2015*. A separate report, “*Engaged Liberal Learning: The First Five Years*,”¹ reviews our considerable *collective* successes in implementing the *Plan* to-date. The emphasis on “collective” cannot be overstated. It has taken the work of many hands across the entire Skidmore community

This document draws upon all these conversations. It also incorporates the thinking of the President's Cabinet, the Institutional Policy and Planning Committee (the IPPC), the Trustees, and others from campus and beyond. Its purpose is to reframe our approach to achieving our institutional goals during the *Strategic Plan's* final five years. It reaffirms the basic elements of our mission as a student-centered liberal arts college. It draws our attention to those characteristics that differentiate us from competitor institutions. And most importantly, it provides a heuristic framework to guide our strategic choices going forward –

In order to seize the opportunities before us we need to be very smart institutionally – to make the best strategic decisions regarding what we will do and what we will not do. Even as the economy continues to improve, we still confront many serious and ongoing challenges: growing public concern about the price and value of expensive liberal arts colleges, reduced numbers of high school graduates within the geographical regions (most notably, in the Northeast) from which we historically have drawn the largest proportion of new students, and increasing skepticism among the U.S. population at large about the value of liberal education itself. These factors portend an increasingly competitive context for admissions recruitment.¹⁰ Indeed, some have questioned the continuing economic viability of expensive liberal arts colleges in general, and especially those – such as Skidmore – that remain undercapitalized relative to their quality and ambitions.

To move forward, we must

Other familiar characteristics of a Skidmore education, which also are highly prized by students, parents, and alumni, do more to differentiate us from other small liberal arts colleges. These *differentiating attributes*

- ! **And last but not least, our setting in the vibrant small city of Saratoga Springs** with its distinctive cultural life as manifested in its numerous museums, arts organizations, performance venues, equestrian heritage, and many fine restaurants. More broadly, our location in upstate New York in proximity to the 6,000,000-acre Adirondack Park and the Capital Region, within a three-hour drive of Boston, Montreal, and New York City, offers students a host of opportunities.

Together, these eight differentiating attributes define an undergraduate experience that is quite specific to Skidmore. Over the coming years, we need to take account of and, where possible, strengthen these distinctive features. In addition, we must become even more accomplished in referencing this constellation of attributes as we make the case for Skidmore to prospective students and donors.¹³

Strategic Themes

The central objective of the mid-term review of the *Strategic Plan* has been to articulate a set of strategic themes that stand conceptually between the *Plan's* relatively more abstract Goals and the specific action items we will identify over the coming five years. The three themes discussed below emerged in the context of this year's discussions. They resonate with the core values and distinguishing attributes referenced above, as well as with the objectives of the *Plan* itself. At the same time, they offer a new perspective on the *Plan* and, as such, will help to focus our interpretation of the Goals and sharpen our selection of specific action items in the coming years.

Transition and Transformation

We have always regarded a liberal education as the best possible preparation for life. The increasing demands imposed upon our graduates by a world marked by an accelerating rate of change only serve to reinforce our commitment to this fundamental premise. We will continue to develop in our graduates the high level cognitive, social, and personal abilities that position them for the multiple careers they are likely to experience over their professional lives. This commitment, however, is fully compatible with the awareness that – especially in today's economy

continue efforts such as “The Liberal Arts At Work,” and we need to develop more systematic

I now challenge us to apply the concept of transformation even more broadly, to acknowledge that the undergraduate college experience represents just one moment – though certainly a crucial one – in the longer passage from late adolescence into early adulthood, a process that begins in high school and extends well beyond our students' time at Skidmore, typically into one's mid-30s.

than we do at present. Furthermore, I have directed the Office of Business and Finance to identify areas in which we will evaluate the efficiency of our business practices.

Let me identify one final strategic opportunity relating to the curriculum: I challenge academic administration and the faculty to collaborate in developing a new “space” within the College’s academic structures for curricular and pedagogical exploration – a “space” where faculty members can explore new and perhaps even “disruptive” ideas that can help us shape the Skidmore of the future. For example, that future clearly calls for higher levels of collaboration across institutions (e.g., within the New York Six Consortium), more integral uses of technology (e.g., Internet2), and new models of instruction in which a professor, a program, and perhaps even the College as a whole functions more as an academic “hub” from which we send students out into the world (either physically or electronically) to access resources and explore opportunities that Skidmore cannot provide on its own.

What Are We Prepared To Do?

Over the past eighteen months, virtually every college and university confronted difficulties similar to ours. Although we could not control the developments occurring in the external environment, we can take pride in the way our community rallied to respond to them. Now, as we look to the future, we must reaffirm both our sense of opportunity and our determination to meet the challenges remaining before us. We will continue to call upon the substantial resources within the Skidmore community. The professionalism and commitment of our faculty and staff, the vitality of our students, the strength and support of our extended Skidmore community, our historical willingness to embrace risk, and our record of accomplishment in the face of constrained resources all encourage us to retain full faith in our future. If we continue to unite creative thought with discipline and pursue our highest strategic priorities with vigor, we will emerge even more strongly positioned among the nation’s highly selective liberal arts colleges and better able to fulfill our mission.

APPENDIX A: Skidmore College Goals for Student Learning and Development

The goals that follow reflect the unique characteristics and synergies of our B.A. and B.S. programs, as well as certain emphases that are deeply engrained in Skidmore's history and culture: on creativity, on civic responsibility, and on interdisciplinary thinking. As in the past, we aim to graduate students who strive for excellence, think deeply and creatively, and communicate and act effectively. We continue to ask our students to link theoretical and practical learning, and now also to develop intercultural understanding and an appreciation of their roles as global citizens. These goals have much in common with those of all liberal arts colleges who share a common mission, though we take pride in having long approached them in our own distinctive way.

Our goals emerge in particular from our collective sense of a Skidmore education as a transformative experience. We want our students to acquire both knowledge and capacities that enable them to initiate and embrace change and apply their learning lifelong in new contexts. We believe that this learning takes place throughout our students' experience – both inside the classroom and out, on campus and off. Our goals articulate, then, in language that is as clear and lean as possible, our understanding of students' learning and development at Skidmore. They lay the groundwork for our continued inquiry into the evidence of that learning.¹⁸

I. Knowledge

- ! Acquire knowledge of human cultures and the physical world through study in the arts, humanities, languages, t0 8 (a) -2 (t) -11(h) 5 ie 6 (a) 2 t(ic) -14 (s) 2 (,) -3 () -3 (n) 5 (a) -2 (t)-11 tural scnces, ntlld soci s

Differentiating Attributes:

Students were asked to identify other differentiating attributes – i.e., attributes that were not on the draft list but should have been. Themes that emerged from this question included supportive community (including faculty interactions in general and several mentions of the importance of the First-Year Experience) and opportunities for personal growth and leadership development.

Students also were asked to comment on any of the proposed differentiators that did *not* resonate with their experiences. Although CTM and “Mind & Hand” ranked relatively high on importance and difference, some students expressed the opinion that the College’s “real” commitment to these concepts does not always match its “rhetoric.” Some students (notably, students involved in the groups whose missions are related to diversity) indicated a disconnect with respect to the “intercultural literacy” differentiator – both in general terms and, more particularly, with respect to the reference that nearly 60% of Skidmore students study abroad (many students go to English-speaking countries; studying abroad not the only way to get intercultural literacy, and some who study abroad don’t achieve it in any case).

Finally, students were asked to engage in a “free writing” exercise for the final five minutes and to describe “the most meaningful aspect of Skidmore for me has been....” Here, the responses could be grouped into four major categories: welcoming and supportive community; faculty-student relationships marked, most notably, by faculty members’ sense of caring and a commitment to their students’ development; the College’s commitment to interdisciplinarity; and personal growth and development.

Readers are encouraged to review the complete report of “The Student Voice: Student Perception of our Primary ‘Differentiating Attributes’ ” (Spring 2010) available on the Office of the President web site. The full report presents detailed information from the student focus groups, including the full set of student responses to the “free-writing” exercise.