

Skidmore College 2011: A Strategic Plan for Excellence

Statement of Scope

The authors offer the present document as a vision and ten-year strategic plan for Skidmore insofar as it can be defined by its academic mission. Our goal is to foster a culture of academic excellence across the student body, faculty, support staff, administrators and professionals. The document includes in its scope the principles, commitments, programs, and structures that bear clearly and most immediately on our academic mission and tries also to indicate areas whose contributions to our educational purposes are important, even if more indirect. Given the constraints under which we have worked, however, we have proposed strategies only for those elements most central to the formal academic mission of the College. The principles presented here can shape the exploration of other issues of significance to the educational mission of the College and the culture of excellence promoted in this plan, including:

- An ambitious plan for improving the compensation and benefits for support staff
- The need for further opportunities for intellectual and skill development of academic/professional/support staff as this contributes to the academic mission of the College.
- The enrichment of students' residential, leadership, and co-curricular lives
- Athletics
- Special Programs -- their needs and their contributions to the College
- CITS and technology resources
- The reconfiguring of facilities, or the creation of new ones, that will enhance educational opportunities
- Administrative structures and staffing levels
- College business policies

These and other concerns may be included in the final Strategic Plan for Skidmore; however, not every institutional concern need be (nor likely should be) addressed explicitly in the final plan.

The Vision

Skidmore College has achieved national recognition as a liberal arts college committed to educational excellence and curricular innovation. Thanks to a faculty impassioned by scholarship and teaching, to a curriculum that liberates as well as illuminates, to students who embrace enthusiastically the challenges of discovery and mastery, to a rich co-curricular program co-extensive with the formal education of the classroom, and to a staff that comprehends and supports our complex educational enterprise, Skidmore stands poised to embark upon its next challenge: in the next decade Skidmore will strive to take its place among the top tier of national liberal arts colleges, and as preeminent in emphasizing interdisciplinary work and study.

Excellence in the Liberal Arts Tradition

Following the conviction that a liberal arts education is unparalleled in cultivating agile, inquisitive, creative, and informed minds, as it prepares students to assume positions of leadership, shape productive careers and lead fulfilling and meaningful lives, Skidmore's overarching goal is the creation of, and ongoing commitment to, an environment in which

individuals develop these skills and frames of mind to take control over their own learning. Achieving this goal requires that learners experience the broad disciplinary and interdisciplinary character of knowledge – the questions, methods, concepts and theories that are part of inquiry in the various disciplines. The term ‘liberal arts’ denotes an education that frees individuals from the grip of received opinion, unchallenged assumptions, and prejudices through the development of critical and self-critical faculties, and motivates students to become informed, discerning, caring, and creative individuals for whom ideas really matter. It embraces individual and collaborative methods and processes of learning and knowing within a disciplinary and interdisciplinary context. In short, the liberal education necessarily and fundamentally transforms the students’ relation to themselves and modulates the ways they engage the world.

Such an education not only cultivates the best in mind and spirit but attends with equal vigor to the lives that all of us lead beyond the academy. A culture of inquiry and of life-long learning, and an education that regularly tests ideas, explores their relationships to actual phenomena, and fuses theory with praxis, constitutes the best preparation for a fulfilling personal and career life. It prepares them to comprehend local and global concerns, respect diverse human cultures, explore alternatives, solve problems, make wise choices—and to care about making a difference. There is no more prudent investment than in the community of scholars and learners that is the liberal arts institution.

Skidmore’s Academic Culture: A Community of Scholars and Learners

Skidmore’s ambition to elevate itself to stand among the premier liberal arts colleges is an ambitious but achievable one, requiring a three-part strategy to foster a community acculturated to scholarship and learning:

- First, the College must invest in the development and numbers of the faculty serving the role of teacher-scholar.
- Second, the College must enhance the quality as well as the diversity of the students’ commitment to their academic experience as individual and collaborative learners.
- Third, it must clarify and enhance its commitment to the curriculum both in its rich disciplinary structure and in its distinctively interdisciplinary character.

The College recognizes that these three areas represent intrinsically related objectives, for the academic culture of the College constitutes an organic intellectual body in which each of the academic foci is mindful of the others and contributes to each other’s well-being. Indeed, it is these organic and synergistic components of Skidmore College that inform its essential nature as a *Community of Scholars and Learners*.

The Teacher-Scholar

It is fair to say that every faculty member at Skidmore College has been drawn to academic pursuits as the result of a passionate commitment to a life-long scholarly engagement in his or her chosen field of study. Their decisions to pursue the life of an academic in a liberal arts setting reflect both a devotion to research and scholarship (broadly defined) *and* an equal commitment to imparting their enthusiasm to students by serving as scholarly role models and mentors. Thus faculty are eager to work in partnership with students, to help them develop the critical, analytical, and creative skills required for successful learning. The faculty as a whole has an unparalleled role to play as intellectual role models, stewards of the curriculum, and mentors of students. As is stated clearly in the Mission Statement of Skidmore College: “*Underpinning the entire enterprise [of the College] are faculty members’ scholarly and creative*

interests, which inform their teaching and contribute, in the largest sense, to the advancement of learning.” Scholarly engagement is necessary for maintaining a flexible and focused mind, is the catalyst whereby one flourishes in one’s discipline-centered career, discovers new interdisciplinary horizons of understanding, and becomes and remains an inspired teacher.

Achieving the goals we propose requires a major institutional commitment to support faculty as they pursue active research programs, engage effectively with students both in the classroom and outside as academic advisors and mentors, and explore interdisciplinary opportunities with their colleagues. To inspire and sustain the animating force at the heart of a life of learning requires time as well, time for faculty to engage profoundly with their objects of study and to connect effectively with their students. To this end a re-balancing of the faculty workload is imperative. Achieving this elevation of the teacher-scholar model to the level of the top-tier liberal arts institutions will require a reduction in class enrollments and in the number of courses that each faculty member teaches, a harder look at the burgeoning number of excellent programs to which we commit ourselves, and the hiring of a number of new faculty. Moreover, our ability to attract and retain the best faculty hinges upon the institution’s commitment to these principles. Without these steps, the faculty’s scholarly ambitions, their aspirations for pedagogical innovation, and their exuberance for teaching and guiding students will have been diminished, inhibiting our ability to attain the goals to which we aspire.

We must have a clear sense, moreover, of the sort of person we hope to make a part of the faculty. There must be a commitment of the academic community to seek out individuals who are devoted to their disciplines and the scholarly process, who take joy in teaching and in collaborating with students, who are eager to expand their intellectual and pedagogical horizons beyond their own specialties, who delight in shared academic endeavors with colleagues within the department and across the disciplines, and who want to expand interdisciplinary approaches to questions and problems. These are the faculty who truly live the ideals of a liberal arts environment.

The quality of the Skidmore faculty has evolved rapidly and dramatically in the last 25 years. Responding to its sense of rising professional standards, in 1992 the faculty made the teacher-scholar—the highest and most demanding model of academic excellence—the standard by which to measure itself in hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions. The successful implementation of this model represents one of the central distinctions between the top liberal arts colleges and those that fall short of this standard. As a result of this decision, Skidmore has built a faculty many of whose members have achieved national and international standing, hold offices in national and international professional organizations, and have garnered prestigious awards and grants. If given the time and opportunity to develop their potential, the faculty will conduct the research, produce the works and pedagogies, and graduate the students that will raise markedly Skidmore’s standing among other top liberal arts colleges. The proposed increase in the number of faculty will accelerate this rise in standing, provide additional faculty to strengthen our existing disciplines and programs, and help secure our leadership in interdisciplinary education.

The Student-Scholar

Our goal is to enhance a culture in which faculty and students share the same level of excitement and energy for a rigorous course of study. As students shoulder increased responsibility for shaping their education, they will learn to handle complexity and the co-existence of differences and contradictions in a world that is internationally sophisticated, culturally diverse, and technically and scientifically advanced. While the achievement of excellence in teaching, learning, scholarship, and academic standards and expectations is facilitated primarily by the faculty, our reaching these goals also requires a student culture of honorable, active, and intelligent engagement in the intellectual and co-curricular life of the

institution. The vestiges of a culture of comfort and of getting by must be supplanted by students' dedication to the rewarding work of active learning, scholarship, and creative engagement.

In liberal arts colleges of the highest order, the faculty's devotion to teaching and learning must be mirrored by a student body equally committed to the academic mission and culture of the institution. Among the issues and initiatives we need to re-examine are:

- Students embracing the passion for and commitment to the scholarly and creative activities exemplified by the faculty.
- Our degree of commitment to the recommendations made over the years by several CEPP subcommittees on academic standards and expectations.
- Taking creative steps to encourage and train ourselves to fulfill the College's long-standing commitment to expository writing and mathematical and quantitative reasoning across the curriculum.
- Involving student peer evaluation and criticism in the educational process.
- Assuring students have access to and training in the uses of technology where appropriate, *and* that technology functions to enhance, rather than substitute for, excellence in the classroom experience.
- Opportunities for collaborative research between faculty and students and for students to engage with faculty in professional academic experiences.
- Our levels of commitment to advanced student endeavors such as capstone experiences and honors projects, Honors Forum courses and events, and the cultivation of graduate fellowship opportunities.
- Efforts to create a more seamless integration between conceptual and applied learning through, for example, case studies and contemporary problem solving, learning communities and service learning, laboratory and field work, and internships.
- The means to infuse the students' out-of-classroom life with educational challenges and opportunities, thus forging a stronger "interdisciplinary" partnership between the curricular and co-curricular domains of activity
- The promotion of intellectual integrity as a broad and essential outlook that informs all of our educational efforts and relationships
- The success with which we demonstrate for students the value of the liberal arts and life-long learning for their personal, professional, and leadership lives after graduation

As we commit ourselves to integrating these habits of mind, resources, and pedagogies into the classroom, supported with the financial and real resources to allow them to be effectuated, we will surely find that the aspiration to excellence among the students will follow. Our expectation must be that students are introduced to the creative and scholarly mind-frame, by our providing them with the curricular and pedagogical commitments that will allow them to embrace that process as their own. Our goal is for students to understand the imperative of independence in the academic process that can only occur if the academic environment is created from which that independence can emerge. We all have experienced students who reach far beyond their normal level of productivity when self-motivated and impassioned by what they are doing. We believe that the culture of the institution should strive to make the student-scholar the norm, a goal reinforced by the administration, the faculty, and the students themselves.

The Meeting of the Minds: Skidmore's Liberal Arts Curriculum

The time has come, we believe, to move beyond the ostensible dualities that sometimes surround our discussions of "mind and hand," of conceptual and applied learning, of the traditional liberal arts disciplines and the pre-professional programs. The distinctions and

integrations of Skidmore's founding efforts tell a noble history. The worth of such principles, however, is evidenced not so much in their original intent but in the vitality of their evolution over nearly a century of Skidmore successes. In our current model of higher education, theoretical and applied learning are conjoint as praxis and concept move along the same educational pathway. Our traditional liberal arts and professional programs do not merely co-exist; rather, they share a common vision, complement one another's methodologies and paradigms, and thrive on their partnership in educating life-long learners. In their interrogation of underlying assumptions, attention to critical thinking skills, and encouragement of students toward a broad and responsible understanding of human histories and cultures, all of the disciplines at Skidmore belong among the liberal and liberating arts.

Skidmore's fruitful integration of disciplines that, in many other institutions, occupy quite separate academic divisions, suggests why we were able to move earlier and more successfully than most colleges and universities toward a formal program of interdisciplinary education. While we have often debated, over the past thirty years, the proper balance between discipline-centered and interdisciplinary studies, we have generally understood that a healthy disciplinary infrastructure was the solid base out of which interdisciplinary studies grow, and we have therefore experienced interdisciplinarity as the flowering of healthy disciplinary growth, as an enrichment and strengthening of disciplinary and collaborative vigor, not as a competing force. This commitment is evidenced clearly in, for example, the genesis of interdepartmental and interdisciplinary programs, the extensive inclusion of interdisciplinary perspectives and scholarship within the individual academic disciplines, in college-wide participation in programs such as Liberal Studies and International Affairs, and in the recent creation of the Tang Museum. There are other initiatives which should be given careful consideration and encouragement, and CEPP should be encouraged to develop a framework for such deliberations.

Especially important for Skidmore's long-term plans for excellence is that it include, we submit, an even stronger commitment to interdisciplinarity within and across the disciplines. Our goal in the next decade is for the faculty to clarify its commitment to discipline-based and interdisciplinary programs. We all agree that robust interdisciplinary endeavors are an essential part of Skidmore's identity, and that the lives we live cannot be parsed easily into disciplinary categories. Clearly both faculty and student interest in integrative learning is increasing rapidly, and the professional scholarship of most disciplines reflects this as well.

The resources and time-commitments that support interdisciplinary education are certainly not inexpensive. Even an ambitious and successful fund-raising campaign will not give us abundant resources, and each established or new multidisciplinary major and minor has its serious costs. We need both to be realistic about these costs and not to spread ourselves too thin with low-overhead, under-funded courses and programs. So we need to make some harder and more progressive choices over time. We need to explore, for example, how interdisciplinary resources can become part and parcel of discipline-based requirements rather than be viewed as desirable add-ons to courses required in the major.

We need at the same time to develop a faculty culture, and a more fluid calculation of workloads, that makes the co-teaching of interdisciplinary courses a regular and common phenomenon, not an occasional commitment that is often purchased by "stealing" time from another teaching commitment. Faculty who have focused their disciplinary expertise on the same objects of study in the same classroom have found it to be an invigorating teaching experience. Seeing two or more faculty bringing their different angles of vision and fields of knowledge to bear upon a common topic, and experiencing the interconnections between student learning and faculty learning is invigorating to students.

Our overarching effort should thus be to secure and support a liberal arts curriculum that engages the best energies of teacher-scholars and student-scholars, is creative in its scope and integrative connections, and intellectually responsive to the world that our students will enter

upon graduation. The curriculum should develop and require a faculty culture in which discipline-based research and teaching are of the highest caliber, in which faculty commitments to interdisciplinary education are strong and creative, and which encourages faculty regularly to share teaching and research insights, and inspires truly interdisciplinary education. In equal measure the curriculum of our future should be directed to student-scholars who want to invest their best energies in an exciting and demanding course of study, develop the foundational skills and perspectives needed for life-long-learning, and work in creative partnership with faculty in interdisciplinary and disciplinary endeavors.

Goals and Their Strategies

Skidmore's vision of taking its place among the premier liberal arts colleges is an ambitious but achievable one; it requires a tripartite strategy: first, investing in the development of the faculty as teacher-scholars; second, strengthening the curriculum both in its existing disciplinary structure as well as specially supporting the distinctively interdisciplinary vision of the curriculum; and third, enhancing the quality of the students' academic experience as individual and collaborative learners. The initiatives we propose for implementing this strategy are listed in the following section along with the rationale as to how they would contribute to the achievement of these goals. As mentioned in the "Statement of Scope," there are, in addition, initiatives bearing on our institution and its academic culture which we have not explored.

Clearly not all of these initiatives can be undertaken. Mindful that one must not simply admire the many worthy and interesting initiatives, but must approach initiatives strategically, we have selected a group of *six initiatives* that are logically and strategically coherent, are feasible for Skidmore, and, most importantly, are those initiatives that seem to have the highest probability of successfully serving as the vehicles for achieving the goals of Skidmore taking its place among the top tier national, liberal arts school, and securing Skidmore's place as a leader in interdisciplinary education. To these six we give the highest priority. Following these are other worthy initiatives that are less indispensable to the strategic plan. They have been given a secondary priority.

Highest Priority Initiatives and Rationales

◆ Hire Faculty Needed to Restore and Maintain the Integrity of Disciplines and Programs

Rationale: The integrity of the disciplines and programs are the foundation for excellence in the curriculum and must be the highest priority. Strong disciplines and programs are the basis upon which to attain membership in the top tier of national, liberal arts colleges. **In addition, this initiative would serve to:**

- Increase opportunities for student-faculty contact
- Provide additional members for community service
- Increase the expertise base for teaching and collaboration
- Enable further efforts to diversify the faculty
- Provide additional interdisciplinary possibilities
- Provide additional opportunities for 'capstone' experiences for students

◆ Hire Enough Faculty (approximately 27) to Reduce Teaching Load from 18 to 15 Credits

Rationale: This initiative would serve several purposes -- faculty development, curriculum, and the improvement of the students' overall educational experience. This would serve both to establish Skidmore as a leading liberal arts school, and secure Skidmore's preeminence as an interdisciplinary institution. Specifically, this initiative would:

- Reduce the student/teacher ratio from 11/1 to 9.5/1 (28 of 50 top schools have ratios of 8/1-10/1)
- Increase opportunities for student-faculty contact
- Provide time for community service
- Increase the expertise base for teaching and collaboration
- Provide time for increased scholarly productivity
- Increase the diverse composition of the faculty
- Provide time for intensified teaching across all courses
- Provide time for designing new courses
- Strengthen interdisciplinary capabilities of disciplinary faculty through hiring
- Provide additional opportunities for 'capstone' experiences for students
- Help us remain within range of best cohort schools that are likewise lowering teaching loads

◆ Increased Financial Aid for Students

Rationale: The quality and character of the student body is indispensable to achieving the highest levels of excellence in the academic culture, and financial aid must be used to compose a student body that rises to the occasion of becoming active, responsible student scholars and citizens. This elevation of the academic tone of the academy -- an ever-ongoing process -- is of benefit to the students, the faculty and the standing of the institution as a whole.

- 20 million in endowment funds would yield 100 additional scholarship units (1 unit =10,000).
These scholarships should be used to:
 - *Increase the social socio-economic, racial and ethnic diversity of the student body
 - *Institute 'magnet' scholarships such as Filene and Porter scholarships, to attract high-achieving students
 - * Offer financial assistance to retain students who achieve academic distinction
 - *Promote/Reward the seriousness and joy of purpose that is the living context of our academic missions

◆ Achieve a Level of Compensation Indexed to the Middle Third of our Comparative Schools

Rationale: Along with teaching load, competitive levels of compensation are crucial for attracting and retaining the caliber of faculty that Skidmore's academic mission needs and deserves.

◆ Limit Class Size

Rationale: The strength of the liberal arts college experience is the intimacy of the learning environment and the intensified contact between teachers and students. Many classes that emphasize in-class interaction between students and faculty experience a degradation of the quality of that experience when the enrollments are as high as many classes presently have.

- More intensive learning experience.
- Closer contact between teacher and students, and students amongst themselves.
- Enables attention to writing in the curriculum where larger classes don't.
- More feasible to apply meaningfully academic standards and expectations.

◆ Center for Interdisciplinary Studies

Rationale: Although there are a number of different interdisciplinary programs, currently the College has no body dedicated to the planning, development and oversight of interdepartmental and interdisciplinary programs and initiatives. If Skidmore is to engage in interdisciplinary work in a proactive and deliberate manner, a Center should be established that would coordinate and cultivate interdisciplinary work among faculty and students. Life-long learners must be integrative, synthetic thinkers, and the Center would provide institutional and curricular support to that end. It would:

- Assist in the development of interdisciplinary initiatives.
- Improve the coordination of existing interdisciplinary curricular and co-curricular activities
- Provide resources for faculty and students working on interdisciplinary projects
- Promote the development of interdisciplinary courses.
- Maintain and provide information about faculty expertise
- Assist in the integration of disciplinary activities into the larger College community
- Promote dialogue and activities across disciplines.
- Promote the integration of curricular and extra-curricular activities (internships, community service, etc.)

Second Priority Initiatives and Rationales

◆ Diversity

Rationale: Just as one of Skidmore's great historical strengths has been the variety of its programs, so the many ways in which diversity can be understood and promoted are essential to the richest learning environment. Specifically,

- Skidmore must aspire to building a talented and diverse faculty – racial, socio-economic, gender, and national differences must be prized as a strength to the learning community.
- Skidmore must attentively compose the student body, giving thought to the socio-economic, racial, ethnic and regional considerations, as well as student talents and interests, so as to insure the richest learning environment.
- Studying abroad is a unique opportunity in an individual's life and it powerfully contributes to one's appreciation of the diversity of values, customs, and one's own identity. Students should be strongly encouraged to make use of this opportunity.

◆ Increase Sabbatical Support

Rationale: Sabbaticals are the most precious of research opportunities that make possible the pursuit and completion of projects that would be impossible without an extended period of time free of other academic obligations. There are several different ways to increase sabbatical support.

- A) A full year at 80% of full salary would make a full-year sabbatical possible for many for whom it is impossible.
- B) Accelerating sabbaticals -- to every sixth or fifth year -- would increase the productivity of faculty, by shortening the now relatively long period of time between sabbaticals
- C) A half-year sabbatical every three years, and a full year sabbatical every sixth year would enable faculty to integrate more effectively the opportunities presented by sabbaticals in to an ongoing program of research, creative projects, and pedagogical innovation, thereby giving rise to greater productivity of faculty.

◆ Increased Library Funds

Rationale: The library is the primary resource for independent, self-directed learning, and it must be equipped to provide for the daily, 'on-demand' needs of teacher and student scholars. Network and interlibrary services are a boon to its patrons, but to serve its community well, the library must increase its material holdings and subscriptions to electronic databases.

◆ Increase Travel Funds

Rationale: The levels of funding for attending professional conferences having decreased in the last 15 years and the costs have increased; it is penny wise and pound foolish not to support faculty in their regional, national, and international engagements. Attendance at such meetings is important not only for the development of the faculty, but is an important opportunity to raise Skidmore's public profile. The equivalent of support for attending two conferences a year is a reasonable goal.

◆ Establish Visiting Fellowships

Rationale: A group of short term (1-3 years) Fellowships would supplement the faculty and maintain curricular and administrative flexibility. Specifically, these would

- Enhance individual programs
- Enable 'targeting' of general education and LS programs
- Establish Links between programs
- Promote faculty diversity
- Provide a 'testing ground' for program development

◆ Increase Departmental Discretionary Funds

Rationale: The Departments would be better able to take advantage of unexpected opportunities and be responsive to faculty and students needs.

◆ Establish a Hosting Fund to Bring Professional Academic Conferences/events to Campus

Rationale: Hosting conferences not only is beneficial to the development of the Skidmore faculty that do so, and not only brings individuals to Skidmore and focuses attention on the College, but students who assist their professors in organizing, hosting, and attending a professional academic meeting have a valuable learning experience hard to replicate in any other way.

◆ Merit Awards

Rationale: Merit increases in salary, as well as merit course reduction or leave time would cultivate the healthy professional ambitions of the faculty (and staff) to creativity and productivity, and would underscore the institutions commitment to excellence.

◆ Center for Teaching Excellence

Rationale: A center for teaching excellence would serve to promote excellence in pedagogy, curricular innovation, and coordination across the disciplines. It would be a physical facility with state-of-the-art classrooms, offices for involved faculty, and additional resources. The main purposes of the Center would be:

- to coordinate faculty interests in developing more discipline-based and interdisciplinary courses, programs, and pedagogies.
- to provide the space, time, and support for these efforts: the aid of faculty fellows and a supportive and knowledgeable staff to help with research and design and to coordinate faculty/student discussion.
- to provide time and place to explore more technology-enhanced teaching and research.
- to provide time and place to explore further intersections between teaching and scholarship (thus promoting the teacher-scholar model)
- to offer a place from which to coordinate assessment of learning outcomes
- to become the place to figure out Skidmore versions of distance learning
- to create a place for a paper and digital library of innovative instructional materials.
- staff and place to coordinate faculty conversations with other colleges' as they too explore new teaching and research.
- a place and staff to work with faculty on grants to support teaching and scholarship.

◆ Center for Science and Technology

Rationale: The many scientific and technological disciplines are becoming increasingly complex and integrated with themselves as well as with non-scientific disciplines. A Center for Science and Technology would help students and faculty in their appropriation of science and technology, promote the research and teaching in scientific and technological fields, and promote their integration into the curriculum and life of the College.

Respectfully Submitted by 'The Writing Group'
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