

# **Institutional Assessment Plan 2011 – 2016<sup>i</sup>**

## **Introduction**

The Assessment Plan for Skidmore College 2010-2016 has been designed to determine how well we are meeting our goals as outlined in the *Strategic Plan*; the document *Strategic Renewal: Reframing our Priorities at the Midpoint of the Strategic Plan*; and the College's Goals for Student Learning and Development (included below).

Assessment provides evidence of the knowledge, skills, and values that our students have achieved, and of the transformation that their Skidmore education brings about. When we have evidence that our students are not achieving all that we hope, we are committed to making evidence-based changes to curricula, pedagogies, academic requirements, facilities, and co-curricular programs that will improve their learning.

Our assessment plan has been designed to meet the standards for accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. It is also in accord with the College's commitment to the New Leadership Accountability Alliance for Learning and Accountability.

## **The Relation of Academic Assessment to Governance, Administration, Strategic Planning and Budgeting**

### *The Roles of Administration, Governance, and Faculty*

The President oversees all institutional assessments and ensures that appropriate processes are in place to set goals, assess outcomes, and make improvements on the basis of evidence in every division of the College.

The Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA) is responsible for guiding academic assessment activities and will be the responsible spokesperson for assessment at Skidmore College. The VPAA monitors assessment plans and annual assessment reports to ensure that assessments are taking place regularly and systematically and that the College, through its departments, interdisciplinary programs, and College-wide structures, is responding to the findings of its assessments. The VPAA provides appropriate budget support for academic assessment efforts. The VPAA may delegate specific responsibilities for various assessment activities to appropriate administrators.

Each Vice President is responsible for reporting the results of their units' assessments to the President and for providing appropriate resources for their implementation and effective use of their results.

The Committee on Educational Policies and Planning (CEPP) is responsible for reviewing, revising, and approving the five-year Academic Assessment Plan for Skidmore College.

The VPAA has appointed the Assessment Steering Committee (ASC), to monitor academic assessment planning at the College level and to make recommendations to the VPAA regarding annual institutional and program-level assessment plans, processes, and reports. The ASC also conveys assessment results to CEPP bi-annually for consideration and follow-up.

The Faculty Assessment Coordinator serves as Chair of the ASC and, working closely with CEPP and the VPAA, coordinates academic assessment activities across the college.

The Director of Institutional Research sits on the Assessment Steering Committee and consults regularly with CEPP.

The Assessment Facilitator works closely with the Faculty Assessment Coordinator and the staff of Institutional Research on all aspects of assessment: faculty development, communications, planning and execution, reports, and follow-up.

Department chairs and program directors have responsibility for guiding their academic programs' assessment planning, guiding the implementation of assessment activities, and, in their departments' annual assessment reports, reporting both results and how those results are being or will be used, as well as any follow-up on the effectiveness of changes made

The faculty is responsible for developing assessment plans within their academic programs and for participating in and following up on academic assessments. As part of this work, faculty develop student learning goals for their courses—stated on their syllabi—that coordinate with departmental and College-wide goals for student learning and development.

The Curriculum Committee is responsible for reviewing and approving syllabi for new courses and new or substantially revised academic program plans to assure that student learning objectives are clearly specified in both syllabi and department- and program-level documents.

Areas within Academic Affairs, such as the Library, the Writing Center, the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, and Special Programs, are responsible for assessing the effectiveness of their efforts to support the student learning and development.

Offices in other areas of the college that support student learning, such as Information Technology and Athletics, are responsible for assessing the effectiveness of those aspects of their programs that support student learning and development. Student Affairs collaborates with faculty in support of student learning and is responsible for assessing all activities within Student Affairs that support the academic mission of the College and student learning and development.

Alumni Affairs collaborates on assessment projects that engage alumni and provide useful information about learning outcomes.

### *Strategic Planning and Budgeting*

Our strategic planning and budgeting processes use the results of our assessment activities to maintain, improve, and strengthen Skidmore College and its ability to educate our students. Planning and budgeting effectively requires the systematic gathering, analysis, and use of a variety of information about our efforts, all in support of our academic mission. Budgets provide appropriate resources for assessment activities.

## **Academic Assessment of the Overall Learning of Skidmore Students (General Education)**

### *The Goals for Student Learning and Development*

During the academic year 2008/09 the ASC developed a list of characteristics that we hope all of our students will achieve by the time they graduate: the Goals for Student Learning and Development (GSLD). This list of goals was endorsed unanimously by the Skidmore faculty in December 2010. The GSLD reflect the transformative vision of Skidmore within the *Strategic Plan*.

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.<sup>ii</sup>

### Knowledge

- Acquire knowledge of human cultures and the physical world through study in the arts, humanities, languages, mathematics, natural sciences, and social sciences
- Understand social and cultural diversity in national and global contexts
- Demonstrate advanced learning and synthesis in both general and specialized studies

### Intellectual Skills and Practice

- Think critically, creatively, and independently
- Gather, analyze, integrate, and apply varied forms of information; understand and use evidence
- Communicate effectively
- Interact effectively and collaboratively with individuals and across social identities
- Engage in and take responsibility for learning; strive for excellence

### Personal and Social Values

- Examine one's own values and their use as ethical criteria in thought and action
- Interrogate one's own values in relation to those of others, across social and cultural differences

- Develop practical competencies for managing a personal, professional, and community life
- Apply learning to find solutions for social, civic, and scientific problems

### Transformation

- Integrate and apply knowledge and creative thought from multiple disciplines in new contexts
- Embrace intellectual integrity, humility, and courage
- Foster habits of mind and body that enable a person to live deliberately and well
- Develop an enduring passion for learning

Our plan for assessing the Goals for Student Learning and Development (GSLD) is two-fold: we are mapping existing and ongoing assessments onto the Goals; and we are creating new assessments that address Goals that are not yet being assessed. We will continue to update our plan for assessing the GSLD as new programmatic assessments emerge in College-wide contexts (for example, in the First-Year Experience, in CEPP's consideration of changes to the Culture-Centered Inquiry requirement, and in our research on high-impact practices at Skidmore).

The overall assessment of the GSLD over the next five years has begun in 2010-11 with the goal "Communicate effectively," and with the goals associated with intercultural learning and understanding. As part of our ongoing direct assessments of student writing, all departments are developing and implementing plans for the teaching and assessment of writing. In addition, we are planning further assessments at the college level of visual and oral communication.

As we understand effective communication, it includes awareness of audience and context, and thus relates directly to the remaining goals of focus: "Understand social and cultural diversity in national and global contexts," "Interact effectively and collaboratively with individuals and across social identities," and "Interrogate one's own values in relation to those of others, across social and cultural differences."

### **Academic Assessment within Academic Departments/Programs**

All academic departments and interdisciplinary programs leading to a degree assess student learning within their programs regularly and systematically. Each academic program leading to a degree has an assessment plan that:

- Specifies the learning goals and outcomes that all students within the program are to achieve
- Specifies the methods that faculty will use including direct assessments of student work
- Plans a systematic approach to assessment that may be spread over a timeline of up to five years
- Explains how and when the assessment results will be reviewed and by whom
- Follows up on previous assessments and any changes made, to ensure that results are put to practical use.

Each academic department or interdisciplinary program's assessment plan may be modified as experience is gained with it and is to be included within the department or program annual report to the Assessment Coordinator and VPAA.

Each department/program is expected to conduct an annual project within the cycle of the assessment of student learning. The assessment can be small and should be useful to the department. In its annual assessment report, the department/program demonstrates how the assessment results will be (or have been) used to improve student learning. Each department and program ensures that all courses within the program have goals that are clearly related to the overall goals of that program. Program goals should, in turn, relate to the College-wide Goals for Student Learning and Development.

### **Co-Curricular and Other Academic Support of Student Learning at Skidmore**

Learning occurs not only within our classrooms, but also across the campus in a variety of experiences available to our students. Non-academic programs responsible for supporting student learning at Skidmore have assessment plans that:

- Specify the goals of the program;
- Indicate how the goals will be assessed and who will be involved in that assessment;
- Indicate how the results will be or have been discussed and for what purposes, with follow-up on any changes made.

Each program that supports student learning and development conducts ongoing, systematic assessments and submits its plan and the results of its assessments to the appropriate vice president for review, approval, and support.

### **Creating a Culture of Assessment**

Our strategic planning and academic planning efforts take into account the results of our assessment efforts, as demonstrated in our Periodic Review Report, 2011. We are continuing to foster and grow a culture of assessment at the College, with particular emphasis on consistently using evidence gained by assessments to improve student learning.

Faculty participating in the assessment of overall learning at Skidmore are paid an appropriate stipend. Such compensation is part of the academic budget for the College, included in a line designated for assessment purposes. In addition, as we cultivate broader engagement in assessment efforts, faculty and staff who participate in assessment activities are recognized publicly for their efforts and contributions. Assessment efforts may count toward tenure and promotion decisions, but the results of academic assessments are not used to evaluate faculty. Outstanding efforts, not solely of individuals, but also of departments and support units, are commended in Faculty Meetings, Board Meetings, and other appropriate opportunities. Our public relations efforts note such efforts and help our various audiences realize that Skidmore is a leader among our peers in meaningfully assessing our students' learning.

## Methodologies to Assess the Overall Learning of Skidmore Students

*Departments and programs* use a variety of assessment methods to measure student learning, including some direct assessment. All departments have plans for assessing student writing in the major, and most assess capstone-level work. Most supplement that information with indirect means, such as focus groups, interviews, surveys, and alumni surveys. Some larger departments will participate in the alumni Learning Census with focused questions for their department. *College-wide* assessments include a number of national surveys (NSSE, CIRP, CHAS, and others); locally developed surveys and mechanisms for gathering evidence; and direct assessments of student learning and development, both embedded in course work and created to assess specific competencies.

### *Consideration of outcomes*

It is the task of the ASC, in consultation with CEPP, to ensure that appropriate constituencies are made aware of the evidence of outcomes that is gathered in assessment processes so that they can make use of that evidence to improve student learning and development. This includes College-wide, departmental, programmatic, and co-curricular assessment results. The ASC also ensures that those results are communicated publicly as appropriate, and do indeed result in changes to improve student learning and development. Assessments cannot be worthwhile if their results are not put to use; the ASC, CEPP, and the academic leadership share responsibility for ensuring that the results lead to effective changes.

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<sup>i</sup> Please note that the structure and make-up of the Assessment Steering Committee are under discussion as of May, 2011, and are slated to change over the coming months.

<sup>ii</sup> These documents were fundamental sources for the Goals:

- i. Skidmore College Mission Statement
- ii. Intersections of Paradigms, 2008 [including key phrases from the *Strategic Plan*, 2005]
- iii. Skidmore College Core Abilities, 1997-8
- iv. Skidmore College Academic Vision Statement, 2003-04
- v. Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) Essential Learning Outcomes
- vi. Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Colleges: Liberal Arts Outcomes
- vii. Council for the Advancement of Standards: Learning and Development Outcomes