

SKIDMORE

C O L L E G E

Urgency and Focus

The Strategic Action Agenda: 2009-2010

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise – with the occasion. As our case is new, so must we think and act anew.¹

- Abraham Lincoln

1. ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

It is often tempting for a given generation to regard its predecessors as having resided in some “quiet past” notably different from their own “stormy present.” When Lincoln penned these words nearly two years into the Civil War, some persons who had lived through the American Revolution still survived. Other contemporaries had fought pitched battles over the proposed expansion of slavery into Missouri and “bleeding Kansas” just a few years before. Any of those individuals might legitimately have urged that previous times were anything but quiet. Even so, Lincoln’s call for new thinking in response to a changed social and political context rang true. At this year’s opening faculty meeting, Vice President for Academic Affairs Susan Kress reminded us that, historically, Skidmore has not been a stranger to adversity. Although it should hearten us to remember that Skidmore College has weathered even more tumultuous storms in the past than we face at present, we now confront conditions that place at risk the core of our mission: our continuing pursuit of new levels of excellence, as measured, most importantly, by what our students learn.

In recent years Skidmore has built upon crucial choices made over decades in our own decidedly “unquiet” past: moving the College to the new campus, closing the nursing program, admitting men, attracting an increasingly professional and accomplished faculty, adopting the Liberal Studies curriculum, completing the groundbreaking “Journey” Campaign, and building the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, to name just a few. We also have benefited from measures taken by the Saratoga Springs community that reversed the significant economic deterioration of the 1970s and laid the foundation for the vibrant city we know today. Collectively, these and many other actions by those who came before us have allowed the College, in recent years, to seek and attain new levels of accomplishment and national prominence.

We have developed the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery as an interdisciplinary space that engages educators and artists from our campus and beyond in the project of creating knowledge in new ways through object exhibition. (And in the process, we have positioned the College as an innovative leader within the museum world.) We have re-imagined the entry of new students into our community with the new First-Year Experience Curriculum and its emphasis on mentoring. (And in the process, we have re-thought New-Student Orientation to forge more robust bonds between matriculating students and the College.) We have re-positioned the College in the admissions world with the affirmation that “Creative Thought Matters,” reflecting a strength at the heart of our academic enterprise that has resonated with those prospective students best suited to take advantage of the opportunities we offer. Through this and many other efforts, we have significantly broadened and deepened admissions pools, expanded our geographical reach, and made our admissions process less one in which applicants choose us and more a process in which we now select the strongest candidates. We have more fully valued the importance of diversity within our student population, expanded our funding for need-based financial aid, extended financial aid to students studying abroad, and have begun a complex, community-wide conversation about the meaning of a more

¹Abraham Lincoln, “Annual Message to Congress,” 1 December 1862 (one month before he signed the “Emancipation Proclamation”).

multi-cultural Skidmore. We are exploring how to achieve learning outcomes associated with the concept of *intercultural literacy*.

We have expanded opportunities for internships, volunteerism, and service learning, and we have become more intentional about interrogating the meaning of “responsible citizenship” in its many dimensions (including environmental responsibility and sustainability). We have increased the number of students doing independent research. We have added to the size and diversity of our faculty, and we are developing new ways to support our professors’ development across the trajectory of their careers. We are establishing structures for more deliberate and effective assessment of student learning outcomes. We have begun to raise the profile of the sciences and have articulated the educational value of *scientific literacy* for all Skidmore graduates. We have made great progress in extending into the traditional academic year the artistic and intellectual resources brought to campus by Special Programs each summer. We have enhanced our living and learning spaces through the Northwoods Apartments, the renovation of Murray-Aikins Dining Hall and several residence halls, the addition of new athletic fields, and (later this year) the Arthur Zankel Music Center. The “Creative Thought Bold Promise” Campaign is nearing its goal of \$200 million. And we have challenged the traditional assumption that Skidmore must always be under-staffed and under-funded.

These achievements have elevated the College to a level of competitiveness at which more of our admitted candidates are choosing between Skidmore and Harvard (or Yale, Michigan, or NYU) or Skidmore and Amherst (or Williams, Hamilton, Vassar, Oberlin, Pomona, or Grinnell). But as we face a time of increasingly constrained resources, our preferred candidates will likely have even greater opportunities to select the schools of their choice. Now more than ever before, we must know who we are as an institution and what we are about. We must be even more *effective* and *efficient* in deciding *strategically* where we allocate our resources and where we do not – emphasizing those choices that make the greatest difference in the lives of our students.

The present document represents the fifth annual “Action Agenda” of major initiatives we will undertake in the months ahead to advance our *Strategic Plan*. We are fortunate that the *Plan*² continues to serve as an effective guide to institutional decision-making. It has provided us a common vocabulary with which to articulate and interrogate our aspirations. But new times do require new thinking. Accordingly, we will create opportunities this year through a series of “Town Hall Meetings” (see §6, below) to inquire collectively into how best to shape our strategic choices – within the larger context of the *Plan* – in successive “Action Agendas” over the coming years.

For some time, the external context of higher education – especially as it relates to expensive liberal arts colleges such as Skidmore – has been changing for the worse. The recession altered the rate but not the direction of that progression. Even as the economy improves, we most likely will face both ongoing financial challenges and a more competitive admissions environment. It is the combination of these conditions that ultimately could undermine our ability to pursue the goals of excellence that have defined our College at its best. If this prognosis proves overly pessimistic, we can readily adjust to a more favorable environment. But while we cannot be ruled by our fears, neither can we afford the luxury of untrammelled optimism. Therefore, we need to act as though the current environmental conditions will define our external reality for the foreseeable future and do all we can to position Skidmore favorably within that context. Our effectiveness in doing so will depend upon the extent to which we collectively

- reaffirm and embrace our fundamental values;
- take a broad institutional view in comprehending the very real threats to our future we presently face;
- internalize a sense of urgency in confronting these threats effectively;
- understand our individual roles in moving forward; and above all
- come together as a community as we do so.

²*Engaged Liberal Learning: The Plan for Skidmore College 2005-2015.*

This framework may appear abstract, but it has concrete, practical implications for how we approach our work and add value to the College – above all, for our students. Together, we can reposition Skidmore within an altered educational landscape to meet the challenges ahead. This effort will require the participation of everyone across the entire scope of the Skidmore community. It begins with understanding not only who and what we are as an institution but also how the altered external context in which we now must function affects our outlook for the future.

We are first and foremost a mission-based institution. We exist neither to make a profit nor to advance a political agenda but to realize our educational values³ – to make them *real* above all for our students but also as norms that permeate our entire community. We see these values as both intrinsically and extrinsically good: they are valuable in and of themselves, and they equip our students to live productive and fulfilling lives. We embrace academic freedom – in our teaching; in the intellectual, aesthetic, and personal growth of our students; in the scholarly and artistic work of both our faculty and students; and in College-wide discussions of issues that we choose to take up. We also embrace shared governance and the collaborative decision-making it entails for our most important institutional deliberations. This fundamental commitment to free discourse and shared governance means that, from time to time, we critically examine even our most fundamental values, especially the way we express them both in our language and through our actions.

Yet even though we operate within an overarching framework of shared governance, we are not a democracy, either in the classroom or in the administration of our affairs. By virtue of their positions, different persons within our organization (beginning with the Board of Trustees) fulfill different roles marked by distinct levels of authority and fiduciary responsibility across various decision-making contexts. This particular combination of values and structural elements can complicate our ability to make difficult decisions in a timely manner. It imposes upon us the need to be sophisticated in understanding how the various elements of our institution function together. In light of this requirement, the intelligence, cohesiveness, and mutual trust of our community represent our most important assets, and the strength of those assets is proportional to the breadth and depth of the personal investment of our community members in our common enterprise.

2. *ECONOMIC REALITIES UNDERLYING THE SKIDMORE BUDGET*

If a problem is an opportunity, then a crisis is a massive opportunity. ... A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.⁴

- Paul Romer

Although the word “crisis” is all too frequently overused, there are times when it is the appropriate term of choice. In 2008-09, Skidmore College – along with virtually every institution of higher education – encountered a daunting set of financial challenges that did indeed constitute a crisis. We experienced a jarring transition from a period of relative abundance to one of severely constrained resources. Despite signs of economic recovery, the ongoing recession continues to place considerable pressure on our budgets – both now and for the future. Many commentators have described the recent economic disruptions not as a short-term departure from the previous *status quo* but rather as a “reset” of both national and international economies, with effects that are likely to persist indefinitely. It is not yet possible to say whether this assessment is true or what it might mean in full, but we do know that the effects – psychological, social, and economic – of the Depression in the early 20th Century were both significant and long lasting. In a recent review of several books dealing with that era and its aftermath, Benjamin Schwarz offers the following comment regarding the middle class:

³For one articulation of these values, see the *Strategic Plan*, §B. “Skidmore’s Distinctive Identity – the Values of Engaged Liberal Learning,” pp. 5-11.

⁴This comment is commonly attributed to Stanford University economist Paul Romer; the quotation comes from an essay on the *Lawson Opinionizer* web site entitled “A Crisis is a Terrible Thing to Waste.”

The defining characteristic of the middle classes has always been their orientation toward the future. The Depression ... at best disrupted and at worst (and often) destroyed carefully wrought plans for so-called investments in the future: the substantial house in the stable neighborhood, the savings account, and, *most important, what was then and remains the cynosure of American middle- and professional-class family life – a college education, or a certain kind of college education, for the children.* Even today, that investment largely determines the opportunities parents seize or forgo, the towns they move to, the rhythm of a family's daily life.⁵

We already detected fall-out from the economic climate in last year's admissions cycle (see §3, below). As we attempt to anticipate future developments, we must place recent economic events in a context of trends that preceded them and that likely will persist even after the economy has recovered.

The severe budgetary challenges we experienced last year resulted from a perfect storm of economic forces that affected our families (of both current and prospective students), our donors, the College's investments, and our long-term ability to increase our comprehensive fee at the rates we have seen in the past. As a result, we were forced to revise the core assumptions underlying our budgetary projections in our long-range financial planning. To appreciate the magnitude of those changes, note that we have reduced our revenue forecast for next year (FY '11) by 8% – nearly \$12.6 million – from estimates originally made in May 2008⁶ (prior to the economic downturn). This overall reduction represents a sum of lowered projections in almost every source of revenue:

- Endowment income – down \$6.7 million (reflecting declining markets and gifts).
- Tuition income – down \$3.4 million (reflecting lowered rates of increase).
- Short-term interest income – down \$1.0 million (market changes and less invested funds).
- Annual Fund – down \$1.2 million (due to effects of the economy on our donors).

These are only the most significant projected reductions in revenue, but they indicate the scale of the problem.

In recent months, all of us have been heartened by signs of recovery in the financial markets, along with upturns in other economic indicators. Our endowment has begun to rebound – moving from a low of just under \$220 million last February to an estimated \$252 million at the end of August 2009 (the most recent data available at the time of writing). Nevertheless, even if our endowment continues to regain value, by December 2009 it still will not attain the level of December 2007 (just under \$300 million) nor, more importantly, will it be where we had projected it to be by FY '11 (over \$340 million) when we initially modeled that budget year.⁷ Furthermore, because we calculate the amount we withdraw each year from the endowment to support our operating budget on a three-year weighted average, we will continue to feel the effects of this downturn for at least two more years.

In the long run, however, the most significant factor limiting revenue growth will be our increasingly constrained ability to raise our comprehensive fee at rates comparable with those from which we have benefited in the recent past. Our comprehensive fee, which represents more than 80% of our income in any given year, is now (FY '10) nearly \$51,200, making us one of the twenty most expensive colleges and universities in the United States. Projecting typical past rates of increase over the coming years would quickly bring us to a comprehensive fee approaching \$60,000 – perhaps as soon as FY '13. More importantly, even a small constant rate of increase year-to-year results in

⁵“Life in (and After) Our Great Recession,” by Benjamin Schwarz, *Atlantic Monthly* (October 2009), pp. 91-98; emphasis mine.

⁶Those original projections – made in May 2008 for the fiscal year ending 31 May 2011 – looked forward three years. In the interim, we have developed a much clearer and more detailed picture of the FY '11 budget situation, factoring in most importantly the subsequent economic downturn.

⁷Although the stock market has improved significantly over the last several months, with the greatest percentage gains in market history for the quarter ended 30 June 2009 (e.g., S&P 500 up 15.9%), for the year markets still were down overall: for example, 26.2% for the S&P 500 and 29.5% for the MSCI World Index. Skidmore's investment performance for the year ended 30 June 2009 was down 17.3%, a relatively strong performance compared to similarly invested funds.

larger and larger dollar additions to our price. In short, responsible budget planning requires us to anticipate that we will be limited in our capacity to increase our comprehensive fee for the foreseeable future.

Juxtaposed against these very real constraints on revenue growth are equally compelling needs for continuing investment in four primary budgetary areas:

- compensation,
- financial aid,
- support for programs (first of all, academic programs but other programs as well), and
- capital support (including both the physical plant and technology).

One telling indicator of the economic environment in which we now are operating is the pronounced increase in demand for financial aid we experienced last year (FY '09) from families of both current and prospective students. In response, we added \$3.3 million to our financial aid funding (beyond the approved budget of FY '09). The current budget now totals nearly \$31 million, and there is every reason to believe that additional increases will be required in the future, adding further stress to the budget. Each of the above budget categories relates directly to Skidmore's Mission and so represents a necessary focus for strategic investment. In other words, it is highly unlikely that pressure to augment *any* of these areas will diminish. Moreover, any increase in compensation, financial aid, or program support in one year almost inevitably carries forward into subsequent ones.

Over the past year, many people across the College have done meaningful work to help us respond to our economic challenges, and we already have announced additional decisions that will further reduce costs in various areas.⁸ I am pleased to report that these initiatives *have* made a difference – for example, generating a small surplus last year that we were able to use to fund the one-time supplemental payment for most regular non-union employees earning \$40,000 or less. The budget deficit for FY '10, projected last winter at \$1.4 million, has now been eliminated. **Despite the progress we have made, however, we must acknowledge that, although we have been able to balance our current budget, it cannot be regarded as a sustainable budget.**

A *sustainable budget* is one that includes meaningful investments not only in *financial aid* but also in *compensation*,⁹ *programs*, and our *capital needs* (again, primarily the physical plant and technology). But we have been able to balance the FY '10 budget only by reducing – and, in some cases, eliminating – our investments in three of those four areas. A sustainable budget also gives us the flexibility to respond to unforeseen challenges and, more importantly, to take advantage of unexpected opportunities. Unfortunately, the FY '10 budget and future budgets, as we currently project them, are so tightly constrained that they provide little capacity to pursue new initiatives. Furthermore, the carry-forward from our previous actions has reduced *though not eliminated* the deficits we are projecting for FY '11 and beyond. Specifically, we still anticipate a shortfall of approximately \$4 million for FY '11, if we do not take additional steps. This estimated deficit is less than we had projected last spring. But, as outlined above, the underlying causes for it remain as before. So as we move forward, we must establish a new budgetary framework within which the above-indicated strategic investments once again become feasible. Doing so will require us to make even more difficult decisions than those we already have implemented. The importance of these choices is underscored by other large-scale trends that directly affect our ability to recruit and retain the students we need, not just to stay in operation but to continue seeking the excellence in performance to which we so consistently have aspired.

⁸See my memo to the Skidmore community of 9 September 2009.

⁹Especially in the context of future increases in the cost of living, as they occur, and the compensation decisions of comparable institutions.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION'S CHANGING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Shifting economic winds over the past year brought an end to a powerful, healthy wave that many higher education institutions rode successfully in recent years. While the work of college and university enrollment leaders and organizational executive teams is never easy, the recent student demographic spike, the abundance of online admission applications, and half a decade's surge in financial markets made for mostly smooth sailing – until last fall.¹⁰

- Kathleen Dawley and Jonathan P. Epstein

The future ain't what it used to be.

- Yogi Berra

2008-09 was a year in which concerns long-expressed by members of the press, governmental officials, parents, and others about the rising price of selective liberal arts colleges were reflected in the behavior of college-bound students and their families. For most colleges and universities, uncertainty defined the admissions cycle,¹¹ but patterns nevertheless emerged. Nationally, many families whose children were engaged in college searches reacted to economic pressures by realigning their expectations and revising their lists of prospective schools. A study using data from 1,030 households with college-bound students from all regions of the country found that 46% had changed their college-search plans either “somewhat” (34%) or “dramatically” (12%) because of financial considerations.¹² Not surprisingly, although some higher priced liberal arts colleges experienced increases in applications, others experienced declines. The number of applicants to Skidmore decreased approximately 14% from the year before, and we admitted a greater percentage of the applicant pool – which is to say that our “selectivity” decreased for the first time in a number of years. Some of this decrease in applications almost certainly can be attributed to the economy and concerns regarding our cost. Virtually all institutions of our kind are confronting challenges relating to their price, to which can be added an increasing tendency among the general public to question whether such schools ultimately are worth their cost.

Several important characteristics distinguish higher education from other sectors of the economy. For example, while purchasing a new home or driving additional miles usually represents a discretionary expense, for most families the need to educate a child who has come of age does not. Some families can defer this cost (e.g., if a son or daughter enrolls in the military) or can seek less expensive options (e.g., community colleges, other public institutions, and most other private colleges and universities – particularly those that have replaced loans by grants for “middle class” families such as Harvard, Princeton, and the like). Nevertheless, most college-bound eighteen-year-olds will need to enroll somewhere. The fact that so many community colleges and state universities are now operating over “capacity,” along with the extended times required to complete degrees at many such institutions, may continue to motivate families to consider smaller liberal arts colleges – where students can gain admission and still can expect to finish in four years (or less). Moreover, in the previous highly challenging year and despite the noted declines in numbers of applications, highly selective colleges still experienced applicant pools numbering five to ten times the spaces available in their next entering classes. And indeed, the *College and University* report quoted above concludes that, from a statistical perspective, last year's admissions cycle ended up looking more similar to other years than earlier indications would have suggested and that “the enrollment apocalypse simply never arrived.”¹³ That is to say, its authors argue, institutions by and large filled their classes,

¹⁰“The Missing Enrollment Meltdown,” by Kathleen Dawley and Jonathan P. Epstein, *College and University* 85:1 (Summer 2009), published by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, pp. 49-52, p. 49.

¹¹See “This Year, Colleges Recruited Students in a ‘Hall of Mirrors’,” Eric Hoover and Beckie Supiano, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (29 May 2009), p. 1 ff.

¹²“Report on the Impact of the Economy on College Enrollment,” January 2009. This project was undertaken by Longmire and Company, in collaboration with “over 20 public and private institutions throughout the United States,” which supplied 10,000 names of students likely to enroll in fall 2009. The data were collected in November and December 2008.

¹³Dawley and Epstein, p. 50.

institutional performance seemed to have been influenced as much by what institutions did as by external factors, and historical data largely retained their predictive power.¹⁴

We can hope that, over time, the above-indicated factors and others not presently evident may preserve the population of potential students interested in our kind of institution. But as noted above, we cannot plan on the basis of hope. In other words, regardless of our views on the prospect of an “enrollment apocalypse,” we must seriously address the likelihood that the escalating comprehensive fee of selective liberal arts colleges will come to represent a “walk-away price” for increasing numbers of families – i.e., the price at which they do not even consider allowing a son or daughter to apply.¹⁵ Despite their desires to provide for their children’s future, as prices continue to rise, more and more families will be forced to increase the importance of cost as one of the determinative factors in their decisions about higher education.¹⁶ Taken together, all liberal arts colleges and smaller liberal arts universities today educate considerably less than 5% of the students in U.S. colleges and universities. In fact, the 100 or so colleges that most resemble Skidmore serve less than 1% of that overall college population.¹⁷ The families represented in this highly selected – and highly self-selected – student population clearly believe that such schools offer a special educational value that makes them worth their cost. Unfortunately, all indications (demographic, societal, and, most especially, economic) point to the conclusion that the numbers of potential applicants for our kind of institution will continue to decline over the coming years. Whether future decreases, year-to-year, will be gradual (as was the previous pattern) or more abrupt (as witnessed this past year) remains to be determined.

As a group, this diminishing pool of potential students will require more financial aid. Individually, they will have more choices among institutions – especially those among the most highly qualified applicants who also need less or no financial aid. Either way, the likely result will be increased competition for the most qualified students. Schools that fail to compete effectively for these strongest applicants – again, both those who do and those who do not require aid – will face the dilemma of accepting lower enrollments (an option that, for most, will not be financially viable) or admitting less well-prepared students. **Therefore, the prudent course of action – the course of action we must follow – is to assume that, even as we and our peer colleges continue to augment our institutional financial aid budgets, we will be competing more intensely than in the past for a shrinking pool of qualified students.**

Assuming that competition for qualified students will intensify, it is likely that top-tier liberal arts colleges will retain sufficient standing in the overall admissions “market” to continue attracting sufficient numbers of well qualified students to meet both their financial and educational objectives. It is equally likely however, that a growing subgroup of colleges will face diminishing interest by potential students, resulting in an increasingly desperate search for candidates who have the requisite

¹⁴Dawley and Epstein, p. 51.

¹⁵Consider the following commentary from the Moody’s Investors Service most recent report on the economic environment for higher education. Despite its overall positive tone, the report states that although many of the short-term risks we highlighted in our October 2008 and January 2009 reports have eased to some degree, ... serious fundamental challenges remain. The full impact of these challenges may not be evident until 2010 or beyond. Management actions, including operating budget restructuring, staff reductions, and slowdowns in planned capital spending, have aided in addressing near-term challenges. However, *we believe signs of rising resistance to high tuition levels may appear more gradually, especially with fall 2010 enrollments.* [Emphasis mine.]

Outlook Update: Immediate Pressures on U.S. Higher Education Are Easing,” (September 2009), p. 1.

¹⁶In “Hysteria Over High Tuition Distracts from Real Solutions for Students,” Sandy Baum argues that people also tend to systematically overestimate the cost of college tuition, in general, and inappropriately think of that cost as a one-time expense, as opposed to a lifetime investment. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11 September 2009, p. A15.

¹⁷Even before the current economic downturn, Victor E. Ferrall Jr. pointed out – in an essay entitled “Can Liberal Arts Colleges Be Saved?” (*Inside Higher Education*, 11 February 2008) – that the 2004 Carnegie Classification “identified only 95 liberal arts colleges with no graduate school where 80 percent or more of all graduates are liberal arts and sciences, not career-based majors.” According to Ferrall, these schools served just “0.8% of the total higher education enrollment in the U.S.” The slightly larger Annapolis Group of approximately 110 selective and highly selective liberal arts colleges, of which Skidmore is a member, still includes only about 3% of U.S. colleges and universities.

ability and who are able to pay. Unless they can increase their competitive position, institutions in this second group eventually will be forced to lower their aspirations and accept less qualified students or, in extreme cases, they will be forced to close their doors altogether. **Where will Skidmore ultimately be positioned in this likely future? Will we retain – and, ideally, increase – our ability to compete successfully for the students we need to fulfill both our Mission and our aspirations for excellence? Or will we fail to do so?** To answer these fundamental questions, we need to consider further the nature of such competition.

4. TWO VECTORS OF COMPETITION

Colleges compete for students along two principal dimensions: on the basis of *perceived value*, and on the basis of *relative net price* (the comprehensive fee less financial aid). Certainly, these two sets of competitive forces interact. But for our purposes, we can consider them one at a time.

For institutions with the strongest financial resources and highest levels of prestige (the Ivy League universities, other elite private, public, and special-purpose universities, the U.S. military academies, and the most prestigious private and public liberal arts colleges), demand by prospective students still considerably exceeds capacity and is likely to do so in the future. Such leading colleges and universities compete with one another for the strongest students almost entirely on the basis of perceived value, some of which relates to mission and fit. Historically, such schools have relied exclusively (or primarily) on need-based aid to provide access to an economically and socially diverse student body. Of course, the highly mission-driven national military academies offer full scholarships to all admitted students (requiring, in return, a substantial service obligation), and even the elite NCAA Division-I universities give athletic scholarships, scholarships for students in marching bands, and the like – all forms of “merit aid” (see below). But the Ivy League schools, whose intercollegiate sports teams compete in NCAA Division I-AA, do not offer athletic scholarships, and they compete successfully for applicants who are offered full athletic scholarships at other schools.¹⁸ Likewise, the highly resourced and most prestigious liberal arts colleges have been able to make need-based aid available to increasing percentages of their student body, while not experiencing any significant pressure to offer merit aid. Recently, some of these first-tier institutions have made aggressive moves to discount their tuition for the majority of their students through enhanced need-based aid programs. Perhaps the future of financial aid – and families’ financing of higher education – at elite independent institutions is foreshadowed in the present policy of Princeton University, where 60% of the 2009 entering class (comprising 1,300 students) is receiving “need-based” financial aid on a sliding scale that extends to families with incomes up to \$200,000 and above.¹⁹

Schools that fall within a second tier of institutions less inherently attractive to students than those in the first group – including Skidmore – face a very different reality. Less expensive schools in this category – both public and private – can and do compete with higher cost private institutions on the basis of price.²⁰ Many such institutions last year realized an advantage from the pre-existing differential between their comprehensive fees and those of their higher-priced competitors and so experienced significant increases in their applicant pools, in some cases of 100% or more. But many selective, private liberal arts colleges that do not enjoy either the resources or the same perceived value of higher-prestige schools nevertheless carry comprehensive fees equal to or even exceeding

¹⁸The military academies clearly compete on the basis of mission, but so too do some religiously based schools and other special purpose schools (e.g., institutions specializing in engineering, business, etc.). Interestingly, the University of Texas recently announced that it is ending its participation in the National Merit Scholarship program, to devote more of its resources to need-based aid. Texas, however, did not also announce its intention to do away with athletic scholarships.

¹⁹See “Class of 2013 Includes Record Number of Financial Aid Recipients,” posted 21 September 2009: <http://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S25/35/66Q48/>. The article notes that most families qualifying at the level of \$200,000 (and above) have two or more children in college.

²⁰This is especially true for the relatively small number of high quality public liberal arts colleges. For similar comments, see “Why College Costs Rise, Even in a Recession,” by Ron Lieber, *The New York Times* (5 September 2009): http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/05/your-money/paying-for-college/05money.html?_r=1&scp=4&sq=ron%20liber&st=cse

their more prestigious counterparts. (Princeton's current comprehensive fee, for example, is \$47,020, \$4,180 less than Skidmore's.) These second-tier schools are more frequently interrogated about the value they provide for their cost, and they are likely to face even stiffer price-related competition for students both immediately and in the future.

In principle, institutions have more control over their price than over their perceived value relative to their peers and competitors. Every year each school sets its comprehensive fee; it does not determine the way the external world views it. Yet because of their emphasis on small classes and close faculty-student contact, liberal arts colleges in particular have found it difficult – if not *de facto* impossible – to alter the fundamental cost structures of their operations. Moreover, unlike Microsoft or Starbucks, the costs associated with the workforce at a small college or university tend not to be scalable. That is, colleges cannot simply lay off employees in proportion to reduced revenues while continuing to provide essentially the same services. To offer their core programs under conditions of economic scarcity (even for fewer students), schools typically need to retain most of their employees. For these and other reasons, colleges that have sought to gain a competitive edge on the basis of price have tended to rely not on cutting expenses but on discounting tuition – i.e., reducing their net revenue per-student – through financial aid.

Need-based financial aid enables schools to attract students whose economic circumstances otherwise would not permit them to attend, enhancing both the diversity and the academic strength of their student bodies. By contrast, *merit aid* discounts tuition and fees for students who are capable of paying all or, at least, a greater portion of a school's comprehensive fee²¹ but who otherwise might find a given institution less appealing. Schools have justified the use of merit aid by arguing that it too increases the strength and, in some instances, the diversity of their student populations. But the truth remains that merit aid primarily serves as an economic inducement for prospective students who have choices to select one school over others. Recently, increasing numbers of parents feel that their children have “earned” merit aid by virtue of strong performance in secondary school and resent colleges that eschew or limit merit aid, regardless of their reasons for doing so – thus providing yet another impetus for schools to offer such aid. For all these reasons, beginning in the mid-1980s, many colleges in this second tier have incorporated either some or a great deal of merit aid in their admissions strategies. This trend is most pronounced in the Midwest, but it has become established in other regions of the country as well. Over the coming years, as admissions pools for private colleges contract and larger numbers of prospective full-pay students feel they can “buy up” to attend more prestigious institutions, more second-tier schools likely will face pressure to increase the use of merit aid as a fundamental component in their recruitment efforts.

There are several reasons to hold that greater reliance on merit aid does not represent a viable long-term strategy, either for the institutions that adopt it or for the country as a whole. As more families attempt to play one school against another in hopes of making the best possible “deal” on their net cost, many colleges (again, especially, though not exclusively in the Midwest) already find themselves locked in destructive merit aid “arms races” with their main competitors. But as schools respond to such peer pressure by raising merit awards, and as offers among competitors approximate one another, it is arguable that each school ends up enrolling pretty much the same student body it would have enrolled without the aid, but at the cost of increased tuition discounting (i.e., again, less net tuition revenue per student).²² Over the long run, every institution will reach a point at which further tuition discounting is simply not sustainable.²³ In the end, however, the strongest argument

²¹As defined by the federal government's financial aid policy standards, which in some cases do not fully reflect a family's true financial situation.

²²I first heard this argument from Dr. Roger H. Hull, former president of Union College.

²³In fact, the escalating merit aid competition represents a textbook example of a situation in which “sensible individual choices can add up to a collective disaster.” The quotation comes from “Rational Irrationality,” by John Cassidy, *The New Yorker*, 5 October 2009, pp. 30-35, p. 43. Cassidy is discussing last year's collapse of the credit markets as an instance of the “Prisoner's Dilemma” – an analysis that easily applies to the merit aid game as well by illustrating how the rationally self-interested actions of competitors who are influenced by one another's behavior can produce a mutually destructive outcome.

against this practice is societal. Every dollar of merit aid given to students who could afford the cost of college without it represents one less dollar available to support access for students who otherwise cannot afford to attend a given college at all. From this perspective, the trend toward increasing merit aid represents a diversion from what should be one of the most critical priorities of both the higher education community and our nation as a whole: the provision of access to students from all economic strata to all levels of higher education.

We are fortunate that heretofore Skidmore has not had to rely upon large amounts of merit aid to enroll its entering class. Indeed, given our relatively modest endowment and our historical commitment to need-based financial aid, our notable success in attracting increasingly strong entering classes is a tribute to both the high quality of the educational experiences we offer and the growing appreciation of that value in the admissions “marketplace.” The quality of our academic offerings (reflecting first of all the quality and dedication of our faculty), the quality of our residential and co-curricular experiences (reflecting the quality of our Student Affairs and Athletics staffs, the beauty of our campus, and the attractions of the Saratoga Springs region), and the positive perception of the College beyond our borders all have continued to improve in recent years. These developments are reflected in the positive trajectory of our admissions profile over the last decade, in our continuing ability to compete for the strongest job applicants (especially in faculty positions), and increased financial support from our alumni, families, friends, and foundations. **In short, Skidmore has achieved the admissions gains of recent years by competing on the basis of increasingly generous need-based aid and stronger educational value.** We will continue to emphasize need-based aid. But our ability to add to that budget will depend upon significant growth in our resources – primarily, our endowment. To underscore the scale of this issue, we are projecting a need for future growth in financial aid of approximately \$3 million per year. We support our budget by withdrawing from our endowment annually an amount equal to 4-5% of its value.²⁴ This means that supporting a yearly growth in financial aid of \$3 million entirely from endowment would require us to realize an additional \$60 million growth in endowment per year.

Taken as a whole, the increasingly unfavorable admissions environment now presents us with a fundamental challenge. If we are to continue competing successfully to attract the students we seek – and, specifically, if we are to avoid relying upon increased merit aid – then we must continue to improve our ability to make the case effectively for the value of a Skidmore education to prospective students and their parents. We must motivate as many parents as possible to consider Skidmore as part of their family’s “strategic plan” for the education of their children. Encouragingly, the study of college-seeking students referenced above found that 76% of responding families indicated that they were “very likely” (33%) or at least “somewhat likely” (43%) to reconsider an institution “initially perceived as too expensive” provided the school “could demonstrate greater value.”²⁵ As costs in all sectors of higher education continue to rise, the perception of value added by a given institution – primarily to the students and alumni whom it serves directly but also to society overall – will likely loom ever larger in a family’s decision making. **If we are to enhance our competitive position in this environment, we must continue to improve our educational quality in an environment of constrained resources.** To do so, we must move counter to a central trend that has dominated higher education in general and liberal arts colleges in particular for decades.

5. THE CENTRAL DOGMA OF OUR OWN “QUIET PAST”

Traditionally, in the core areas of teaching and learning, the liberal arts college has been built on a model of close interaction between students and a highly professional faculty dedicated to teaching. The perceived value of this model is the primary reason students and families have been willing to accept our substantial comprehensive fees. Because of their fundamental structure, liberal arts

²⁴The full picture is actually a bit more complicated. As noted above (p. 3), we follow the practice used by most schools in calculating the endowment value using a three-year weighted average. But the overall point remains as stated.

²⁵“Report on the Impact of the Economy on College Enrollment,” p. 7.

colleges represent a paradigm case of the economic condition known as *Baumol's cost disease*: the economic condition afflicting industries that, for structural reasons, have not been able to realize substantial increases in productivity. For example, as James Surowiecki points out, it still takes five musicians to play a string quintet, and “the average college professor can’t grade papers or give lectures any faster today than he [or she] did in the early nineties.”²⁶ If we measure educational “productivity” in terms of the number of students taught (on average) by a professor, the liberal arts college model is fundamentally inefficient. True, there are opportunities within our curriculum for a limited number of (relatively) larger lecture-format courses. And we are working to ensure that we have fully explored those possibilities at Skidmore. But, again, the primary educational value we offer depends on relationships between students and professors that require close access and develop only over time. Thus we and other schools have worried that cutting costs in ways that might place the educational value that defines our distinctive sector of higher education at risk would nullify the primary reason students choose to attend colleges such as Skidmore.

For these reasons, it is not surprising that most liberal arts colleges have focused little on *efficiency* or “productivity” in the above sense, concentrating instead on educational *effectiveness*. They have measured their value most of all in terms of what students learn during their time in college. Over the years, and especially in recent decades, liberal arts colleges have introduced numerous innovations in pedagogy: discovery-based labs in science, creative uses for technology, expanded opportunities for study-abroad and summer research, and widespread employment of teaching methods (e.g., service-learning) that actively involve students in the learning process, to name just a few. We believe these methods are effective. We know from experience, for example, that our science graduates are able to compete effectively for positions in Ph.D. programs – and then perform at very high levels when they get there – because they have had far more hands-on research experience than their competitors from better-known but larger institutions. Yet we are still working to develop ways of measuring our effectiveness at achieving the broad range of educational objectives we have identified as the core of liberal education.

Furthermore, increases in effectiveness have come at an ever-increasing cost. For example, as schools have elevated their expectations for faculty members to improve their teaching and to be more “productive” in their research or creative work, they have faced escalating pressure (from their faculties) to lower the number of courses required to be taught each year. Institutions with the largest endowments have led the way in doing so. But today, as they compete to attract the strongest new faculty hires, virtually all high-quality liberal arts colleges experience pressure to reduce their teaching load (as Skidmore did some years ago, when we added pre-tenure sabbaticals and reconfigured the annual faculty teaching requirement from six to five courses). In other segments of the economy, the introduction of new technologies typically enhances productivity. Arguably, the greatly increased use of technology in liberal arts colleges has improved the *quality* of the educational experience – the *value* of college – for students. But it certainly has not lowered the cost – or increased the “productivity” – of the educational enterprise. Indeed, if anything, the use of new technology and the implementation of other pedagogical improvements more often have added to operating costs, and so have contributed to the escalation of comprehensive fees.

These historical trends have reinforced the fundamental belief – our central dogma – that improvements in the quality of education at liberal arts colleges necessarily entail increases in cost. Our new economic and social context, however, presents us with a clear choice: **Either we commit ourselves to the project of further improving not only our *educational effectiveness* but also our *efficiency* in the sense of finding creative ways to further enhance student learning without adding additional costs – and, where possible, reducing them – or we risk losing our ability to attract the students we need to achieve our highest educational goals.** I trust that our path is clear. As we have done in the past, we must rededicate ourselves to the project of making Skidmore an even better college tomorrow than it is today, while accepting the premise that, for the immediate future,

²⁶James Surowiecki, “What Ails Us,” *The New Yorker* (7 July 2007).

we will not have access to the increases in resources that have marked the past few years. We simply cannot assume that our continued efforts to improve our value must require increased cost.

In sum, even with constrained resources, we must position Skidmore in the changing admissions “market” to perform analogously to the most prestigious liberal arts colleges – in terms of the educational value we offer our students, the continuing value we offer our alumni, and our effectiveness in telling our distinctive story to the outside world. To do so we must continue to increase our educational *effectiveness* by improving our *efficiency* – i.e., controlling our costs and limiting future increases in our comprehensive fee. At the same time, we must continue improving our ability to promote the College to future generations of students, parents, and friends.

In this new environment, we first must defend the hard-won gains we have made by *protecting* the core of our educational endeavor – the curricular and co-curricular opportunities that contribute most significantly to student success. This means that we need to make difficult choices to withhold resources – time, energy, and money – from certain activities that contribute less directly to this core. Second, we must *preserve* some capacity to invest in those opportunities that offer the best prospects for improving the educational value we offer to our students. And, third, we must continue to *perform* well even in these difficult times, meaning that we cannot allow our core functions to deteriorate now, and we must continue to expect ever higher achievement – from our selves and our students – in the future.

6. DWELLING IN POSSIBILITY – THINKING AND ACTING ANEW

I dwell in Possibility –
 A fairer House than Prose –
 More numerous of Windows –
 Superior – for Doors –
 - Emily Dickinson

While it is essential for us to understand the economic realities of our situation and accept the need to make difficult choices relating to our budget, it is even more important that we remain focused on our future. Yes, this is a trying time for Skidmore, as it is for all institutions of higher education. It also is a time when those colleges and universities able to muster the will to re-envision and reposition themselves will emerge stronger than before. A crisis really is a terrible thing to waste. At Skidmore, we can, we must, and we will take advantage of it. Even though Emily Dickinson is speaking about poetry, her words apply very well to our situation: the possibilities that remain ahead of us are always “fairer.” We need to dwell among them and create ways to make them real.

The advances we have achieved in recent years have positioned us to achieve the ambitious objective stated in the bolded paragraph at the end of the previous section. Furthermore, the strengths on which the College traditionally has relied represent precisely the sources of advantage we require today:

- the capacity and the will to innovate – creative thought really has mattered across Skidmore’s history, and it matters now more than ever;
- a willingness to take calculated risks;
- the expertise and deep dedication of those who work here;
- a broad and deep commitment to collective action through shared governance;
- the academic strength and positive spirit of our current student body;
- the strong and enduring support of our alumni and parents;
- the strength of our community – the capacity to see times of adversity as opportunities to come together, as opposed to allowing ourselves to be driven apart; and

- the sense, developed in recent years, that Skidmore is an institution that is increasingly attractive to prospective students and their parents – one that decidedly is “on the move.”

For these and many other reasons, even as we feel the urgency of the work immediately before us, we can and *must* approach our future with confidence.

Last year’s “Strategic Action Agenda” spoke of increasing our community’s *strategic literacy*. Our conversations regarding the financial disruptions we encountered and the decisions we made to address them contributed to this effort, and we made significant progress. This year, through work at institutional, divisional, departmental, and individual levels, we need to extend this project to encompass *financial literacy* as well. More importantly, we must be relentless in seeking further efficiencies in our allocations of time, energy, and financial resources wherever we can find them. We need to be intentional in articulating and challenging other “dogmas” that have limited our horizons in the past. We need to see every decision that allocates time, energy, or funding as a strategic one, and place it within the larger context of our institutional objectives. Depending upon our positions at the College, each of us will have different ways of participating in these efforts. But each of us has an important role to play.

As we go forward, we also need to keep in mind that good intentions alone are not sufficient to achieve our objectives. We need to become ever more sophisticated, across our community, in thinking about our work in terms of *systems*. It has been said that every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results it generates.²⁷ If we are to increase both our efficiency and our effectiveness, we must be purposeful about changing how we do things. This means gaining clarity about our objectives, seeking the best possible information about the extent to which we presently meet those objectives, and using that information to make changes in process, procedure, and action that will bring us closer to our goals. This call – to consider thoughtfully the changes we want to make and then to develop practical methods of bringing them about – evokes Skidmore’s tradition of valuing both “*mind and hand*.” That heritage will serve us very well today, as will our tradition of celebrating creative thought, which must be central to all of our efforts. We need to apply our creative capacities to the planning, decision-making, and execution of our plans at three different levels: in our work as individuals, through the collective work of departments and divisions, and by thinking together about the future of the College across the extended Skidmore community as a whole.

A Challenge To Us As Individuals

Each of us knows more about what we do – our individual contributions and the difficulties we face in attaining the outcomes we seek – than anyone else. Accordingly, each of us is uniquely positioned to think creatively about what we might do differently. Institutional change begins at this level, and so I challenge each of us to bring the full repertoire of creative resources to bear on our own jobs.

The single most important measure of our collective success is what our students are learning – what they take away with them when they graduate in terms of knowledge, skills, and habits of mind. My assumption is that every faculty member, in every department, continually asks, “How can I improve both my courses and my teaching?” Many other members of our community also interact directly with our students as they pursue their educational goals beyond the curriculum – coaches, Residence Life staff members, and so on. I ask everyone who works directly with students to leverage the resources represented in our increasingly strong entering classes. How can you take advantage of the capacity of our students to assume greater responsibility for their own education? Accomplished teaching does not always (or even usually) entail solving students’ problems for them; it is much more efficacious to delegate that responsibility to the students themselves – hence the value of independent research and creative work. So we must get them to the point of independence even more quickly than at present. Let us also work to be more intentional about articulating for students

²⁷ And Einstein reportedly once remarked that “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

the learning outcomes we want them to achieve in our classes, giving them a vocabulary to talk about the broader educational goals of liberal education that animate our work and that should shape their lives. By these and other appropriate means, we can continue to increase both our effectiveness and efficiency in helping our students achieve the learning outcomes that we identify, institutionally, as most important. Pursuing these objectives primarily represents a strategic investment of time, energy, and creative thought, and only secondarily an investment of financial resources. Even so, we will continue to support our faculty in its ongoing efforts to raise the bar for student performance, and various action items below speak directly to this need.²⁸

Each of us at the College who does not work directly with students contributes to the structure that supports teaching and learning and so adds value to their educational experience. Whether we are involved in maintaining the College's grounds and facilities, managing its finances, recruiting new students, preparing and serving nutritious and appealing food, supporting our technology infrastructure, raising funds, telling the College's story, or running the many operations (e.g., the Library, the Tang) and programs that enrich our community throughout the year, we each need to see our individual contribution in the context of Skidmore's overarching mission. What are the most important strategic contributions of your position – what is the most important difference you can make on a day-to-day basis? What might you do differently – i.e., what new *systems* might you put in place in your own work – to minimize time spent on lesser priority items or increase your effectiveness in achieving your highest-priority objectives? What might others do to help you increase your own efficiency, and what might you do to help them increase theirs? Human Resources offers programs aimed at assisting all employees to be more efficient and effective in what they do. But we also need to ensure that those in administrative and management positions do all in their power to encourage and reward individual initiative among those who report to them. Skidmore truly must be a place where individual employees are encouraged to think creatively about their work and develop new ways to increase both our efficiency and effectiveness in advancing our strategic objectives.

A Challenge To Departments And Divisions

Crucial decisions regarding the deployment of resources are made in departments and divisions. We must ensure that the operations of each such decision are situated within the framework of our highest strategic needs. Department chairs, division directors, chairs of governance committees and task forces, managers, and other administrators have the responsibility to ensure that the resources in their areas – again: time, energy, and funds – are being used as well as possible. Academic departments, especially, need to look systematically at their curricula to ask if they are doing all that they can (in terms of design of majors, the scheduling of courses, the use of remaining contingent faculty, equitable distribution of advising loads, selective sponsorship of directed studies and internships, sponsoring of colloquia and outside speakers, and so on) to maximize what our students are learning. Again, part of this effort involves incorporating in curricula systematic ways to delegate increasing responsibility for students' learning to them as they progress through their time at the College. It also involves seeking new ways to collaborate across departments and even divisions to enhance our interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning. It involves embracing thoughtful, useful assessment as our most important tool for determining the extent to which learning goals are being accomplished and then using that information to make curricular improvements. Above all, as we deal with the economic challenges before us, we must sustain the excellence of our programs and the integrity of the overall educational experience (academic and co-curricular) for all our students.

This may be an appropriate moment to remind academic departments of something I said in my inaugural address, six years ago, regarding the phrase “Creative Thought Matters” (CTM): that it presents itself “as a unique apostrophe that underscores the power of hand and mind,” as a way of capturing the insight that thought needs to be “embodied” to become complete. At the time, it seemed to me that “understanding just how to enhance creativity across our curriculum and for each of our students may be our greatest challenge.” I asked, “Just what does it mean for us, and how well do we do it?” In the intervening years, it has become evident to me that in fact we do a great deal to

²⁸See especially strategic action item #8 below.

realize the potential of this commitment to the value of creativity with our students. But, again, are we doing all we can? Describing Skidmore as a place marked by a pervasive appreciation of the value of creativity has become central to our successful admissions efforts. CTM resonates powerfully with those potential students we most want to come here – and especially with those who end up placing us first among their choices of potential schools. I suggest that it is time to assign this idea an even more central place in our curricular thinking than we have in the past. We certainly will continue our efforts to increase our ownership of this “brand” externally.

We must deploy the resources of creative imagination beyond our academic departments as well. Specifically, we need to do so as we interrogate and work to improve our systems across the College – certainly not all of them at once but as a serious, continuing commitment to review and revise our ways of acting that is expressed in action. Managers need to solicit information from people within their divisions and from those outside their divisions with whom their divisions work: Where do we make the largest investments of time and energy? Where have we created processes that incorporate redundancies that take unnecessary time and energy? Where can we collaborate more effectively across divisions, departments, and offices to leverage our resources and advance our highest priorities? What can we do differently to improve both our efficiency and effectiveness? These are questions that need to be asked closest to where work is being done, and we need to be serious about using the results of our inquiries to make systematic improvements in what we do.

Last year, the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) recommended that we reduce the number of faculty positions in our governance system. I strongly encourage those in positions of leadership within the faculty to collaborate with Academic Affairs in embracing this recommendation to find creative ways to accomplish the necessary governance work with fewer people. Committee chairs need to help their members review agendas to ensure that they are spending their time addressing the strategically most significant issues within the purview of their groups.

A Challenge To the Extended Skidmore Community

To focus the creative resources of the extended Skidmore community on our most pressing strategic issues, we will undertake this year a series of Town Hall Meetings, both on campus and across the country – from Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C. to Los Angeles and San Francisco. This project has the subtitle “Your Voice; Our Future,” and it means what it says. The off-campus events will engage our alumni, parents, and friends in thinking together about the extraordinary scrutiny higher education is now facing in the print and digital media, and especially the sharp criticism of liberal arts colleges in regard to their expense, efficiency, value, and relevance. We will talk with them about our efforts to ensure access to the College for a student population that is broadly representative of our society. And we will listen to their perspectives on which aspects of the Skidmore education are most valuable and how we can best make the compelling case for the value and distinctiveness of a Skidmore education to potential students and benefactors. All of us need to understand that the expectation of continuing financial support of the College by our alumni, parents, and friends is central to our “business plan.” No college or university can survive without such support, and we need to find even more effective ways of engaging the broader Skidmore community in this work as well.

Within the immediate campus community and the Board of Trustees, our conversations will encompass the preceding questions while focusing more directly on our immediate strategic choices. As noted at the beginning of this document, our *Strategic Plan* retains its vitality, and its four ambitious goals have served us well over the preceding years as both guideposts and aspirations. It is an appropriate moment, however, to rededicate ourselves to our Mission and basic values, to see whether our expression of those values still rings true (and, if not, to determine how we can become even more articulate in saying what we are about), to take stock of our accomplishments thus far in implementing the *Plan*, and to focus – or refocus – our investments of time, energy, and financial resources over the coming years.

The on-campus Town Hall Meetings will provide an opportunity for community members to provide input regarding the College's strategic focus during the second half of the *Strategic Plan*, particularly in light of the current economic conditions that are significantly more constrained than when the *Plan* was first developed. Thus they are *not* intended to revise the goals or overall structure of the *Strategic Plan* itself but will focus particular attention on how we might shape the College's "Strategic Action Agendas" over the next five years. They will help the members of the President's Cabinet, the IPPC, and me understand, relatively speaking, which strategic investments of time, energy, and money our campus community believes will have the greatest likelihood of advancing the goals of the *Strategic Plan*, and so should be assigned the highest priority in successive "Strategic Action Agendas" over the coming years. Throughout the course of these discussions, I hope that every member of the community will consider the contribution that each of us makes to Skidmore's mission and to the educational experience of our students. We also trust that these conversations will further advance strategic and financial literacy throughout the campus.

Getting On With The Work – The 2009-10 Strategic Action Agenda

The action items listed in the remainder of this document address each aspect of the framework set out in this preface – whether they involve finding ways for faculty members to teach, pursue scholarship, or support our programs more effectively,²⁹ strengthen strategic initiatives identified in the *Plan*,³⁰ or are aimed at developing the additional financial resources needed to sustain it.³¹ Additional items relate to continued improvement of our governance system and leadership skills for key individuals throughout the College.³²

A number of action items relate to various dimensions of assessment and its relation to planning.³³ These crucial efforts serve a dual purpose: first and foremost, they enable us to improve our performance systematically and intentionally. Second, they enhance our ability to tell our story effectively to external constituencies – most importantly, to prospective students and their parents. Over the coming years, if we are to differentiate Skidmore from other highly selective liberal arts colleges, the ability to demonstrate as clearly and concretely as possible the "value" of a Skidmore education in all its many dimensions – the benefits our graduates realize both during their time with us and throughout their lives – will be essential.

Let me conclude by drawing special attention to our need to do all in our power to continue making the case for Skidmore to those outside our community. Some offices, such as Admissions,³⁴ Advancement,³⁵ and the President's Office³⁶ have special roles to play here. But each of us becomes an ambassador for Skidmore when we present a paper at a professional conference, when we participate in a community group (e.g., as a board member for a local non-profit organization), or when we interact with a visitor to campus. Whenever any of us is speaking to someone outside the College community, we *are* Skidmore to that person at that time, and our actions make a difference.

If we can invest the initiatives described above and below with the sense of urgency they deserve and pursue them with focus, we truly will position the College to be even more competitive – and more successful in achieving its goals – than is the Skidmore we know today. Together, as I said above, we all must continue to "dwell in possibility." I invite your active engagement in these efforts.

Philip A. Glotzbach
President

²⁹ Items 6, 7, 8, and 13.

³⁰ Items 3, 9, 14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, 32, 33, and 44.

³¹ Items 4, 5, 20, 29, 30, 35, 36, 37, 45, and 46.

³² Items 9 and 16.

³³ Items 2, 22, 30, and 38-41.

³⁴ See items 48 and 49.

³⁵ See items 50-54.

³⁶ See items 34, 47, and 53.

Engaged Liberal Learning The Plan for Skidmore College 2005-2015

Goal I – Student Engagement and Academic Achievement

We will challenge every Skidmore student to achieve academic excellence through full engagement with our rich and rigorous educational experience.

Priority Initiatives

- Enhance institutional structure to support academic excellence. [SAA 06-07]
- Increase student academic engagement in the first year.
- Increase support for research and creative activity throughout faculty careers.
- Strengthen system of shared governance and capacity for developing leadership throughout the College. [SAA 06-07]
- Enhance intellectual life for the faculty, students, and others who comprise the extended Skidmore community.
- Strengthen information resources across the College.
- Strengthen the natural sciences to increase the number of science majors and enhance the science literacy of all Skidmore students.
- Increase our effectiveness in helping our graduates plan and prepare for their post-Skidmore lives.
- Take better advantage of the resources and capacity for innovation in the Office of the Dean of Special Programs (ODSP) to support the relevant initiatives identified under this Goal (and others, as appropriate).

Goal II – Intercultural and Global Understanding

We will challenge every Skidmore student to develop the intercultural understanding and global awareness necessary to thrive in the complex and increasingly interconnected world of the 21st Century.

Priority Initiatives

- Increase global awareness across the community in order to sensitize all Skidmore students to a complex, diverse, and interdependent world.
- Renew the conversation about diversity both within the Skidmore faculty and broadly across the campus community; building upon the work of the Middle States review and other past efforts, establish clear educational objectives relating to this Goal and develop shared expertise in achieving them.
- Enhance the diversity of our student population while providing the resources necessary to support all of our students in meeting our educational objectives.
- Enhance the diversity of our faculty and other employee populations and enhance their skills that relate to achieving this Goal.

Goal III – Informed, Responsible Citizenship

We will prepare every Skidmore student to make the choices required of an informed, responsible citizen at home and in the world.

Priority Initiatives

- Foster pedagogical innovation relating to responsible citizenship; support campus initiatives that teach and exemplify this value.
- Enhance residential learning.
- Enhance the campus residential environment, with special attention to common spaces.
- Increase support for athletics, fitness, and wellness.
- Develop, broaden, and deepen the College's connections to the local community; enhance our ability to function as a socially and environmentally responsible corporate citizen.

Goal IV – Independence and Resources

We will preserve Skidmore's independence by developing the resources required to realize our aspirations.

Priority Initiatives

- Continue to develop institutional capacity for effective planning and proactive internal communication. [SAA 05-06]
- Develop and enhance our key financial resources and our capacity to manage them.
- Achieve and maintain competitive compensation for Skidmore faculty, staff, and administrators; enhance our ability to support their professional development.
- Develop and enhance our capacity to manage our physical resources.
- Develop and enhance those relationships essential to the Skidmore community.
- Develop and enhance the "equity" in the Skidmore name.
- Cultivate a broader positive awareness of Skidmore within local, regional, and national populations. [SAA 05-06]

Strategic Action Agenda Items 2009-10

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, the expected date of completion for each of the following projects is June 1, 2010.

Goal I – Student Engagement and Academic Achievement

We will challenge every Skidmore student to achieve academic excellence through full engagement with our rich and rigorous educational experience.

Projects/Action Steps

- ***Enhance institutional structure to support academic excellence.***

1. **Clarify the mission of the Office of Special Programs and its place in the College.**
 - Implement reorganization of Special Programs.
 - Continue next phase of teach-out of UWW program.
 - Implement next steps of Special Programs Study Group Report for all of ODSP (assess

- summer programs, construct budget, etc.).
- Complete implementation of Oracle in UWW and MALS.
- Enhance revenue-producing programs.
- Institute the Carr Residency.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Special Programs.

2. Enhance Skidmore's capacity for academic assessment.

- Institute learning goals and general education assessment.
- Prepare for Middle States Periodic Review, June 2011.
- Continue work on assessment of learning goals associated with culture-centered inquiry and responsible citizenship.
- Explore possibility of extending current assessment efforts to include alumni through annual survey.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Academic Affairs.

3. Establish initiatives to support the academic achievement, retention, and engagement of all students not currently supported by the opportunity program.

- Support cross-divisional working groups to create effective intervention strategies during the first and sophomore years.
- Continue efforts to support Black and Latino males, including program series.
- Enhance and support academic achievement for students in the sciences.
- Implement S³M Program.
- Review and enhance collaborative work that supports engagement and academic achievement of student athletes.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of the Faculty and Dean of Student Affairs.

4. Achieve fundraising objectives to support Goal I.

- Complete Funding for Arthur Zankel Music Center (\$2-4.5M): Raise new commitments for Zankel Endowment and launch "seat" campaign to support initial operating costs (\$100-300K); explore opportunities to fund instruments and equipment for the building.
- Enhance the resources available to support the Tang (\$2.5M): Raise \$1-2M in new commitments towards Mellon match; \$250K for Friends of Tang and \$150K for programs and exhibitions.
- Increase financial support for the sciences (\$1-2M): Raise both current and endowed funds; explore creation of science advisory board.
- Increase financial support for other academic programs (\$2-4M): Raise funds both for programs and endowment.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Advancement.

5. Increase financial support for Special Programs.

- Develop advancement prospects to support new and continuing programs in conjunction with articulated plan for Special Programs.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Special Programs.

➤ *Increase student academic engagement in the first year.*

6. Continue to monitor the First-Year Experience (FYE).

- Develop a sustainable system for staffing the Human Dilemmas cluster.
- Continue Teagle sophomore initiative.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of the Faculty.

7. Enhance the collaborative programming between the First-Year Experience and the Dean of Student Affairs.

- Pilot co-curriculum 4th Hour series.
- Pilot new Parent Orientation session.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs, Dean of First Year Experience.

➤ *Increase support for research and creative activity across the faculty career.*

8. Strengthen support for research and creative activity across the faculty career.

- Develop plan for coordinated support of faculty development. (VPAA)
- Implement first phase of recommendations from the Center Study Group. (VPAA)
- Assess new Faculty Learning Community; revise as appropriate. (DOF)
- Implement greater support for pedagogy. (DOF, VPAA)
- Plan for faculty retirements (bridge grant, second stage). (VPAA)
- Foster new faculty-Tang collaborations through Mellon grant. (Dayton Director)
- Assess faculty workload by reviewing course release structure, support for academic administrative work, independent studies, and service. (DOF)
- Review sabbatical support and planning for greater efficiency. (DOF)

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dean of the Faculty (as above – with Assistant DOF and Dayton Director of the Tang Teaching Museum as appropriate).

➤ *Strengthen system of shared governance and capacity for developing leadership throughout the College.*

9. Continue a community conversation about our goals for shared governance and the effectiveness of our current structures and procedures.

- Cultivate leadership skills and provide leadership development for institutional academic leaders, including department chairs, program directors, and other academic professionals. (VPAA Senior Staff)
- Complete various changes (including Part One, Article X; policies for increased faculty flexibility; etc.) to the *Faculty Handbook*. (VPAA)

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Academic Affairs/VPAA Senior Staff (as above).

➤ *Enhance intellectual life for the faculty, students, and others who comprise the extended Skidmore community.*

10. Continue program development in the following areas:

- Implement next steps for Arts Administration Program.
- Coordinate resources for Student/Faculty Summer Research.
- Continue to implement writing initiative.

- Continue efforts to support students seeking national, competitive scholarships (e.g., Goldwater, Truman, Rhodes).

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of the Faculty.

11. Develop a plan for the College calendar.

Identify administrative processes and technological programs that will allow the College to better manage the scheduling and planning of campus events, including consideration of space availability and demands on key College services (e.g., Facilities, Dining, IT-Media, etc.).

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Special Programs.

12. Develop program for Arthur Zankel Music Center.

Complete plan for Zankel academic program and coordinate operations.

- Complete hire of Technical Operations Director.
- Complete hire of House Manager.
- Plan for Zankel opening in October 2010 (with Advancement and others).
- Develop summer program for Zankel. (DSP)

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dean of Special Programs.

➤ *Continue to strengthen information resources across the College.*

13. Ensure through institutional planning that the College's technological infrastructure, resources, and services are appropriately aligned with institutional needs.

- Implement next steps of Internet2.
- Complete Library self-study and external review.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Academic Affairs, in collaboration with Vice President for Administration, Chief Technology Officer, and College Librarian as appropriate.

- Continue review of administrative student information system and determine desired strategic platform direction by October 2009 and have implementation plan in place by February 2010.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Finance and Administration, in collaboration with Vice President for Academic Affairs, IPPC, and IRC.

➤ *Strengthen the natural sciences to increase the number of science majors and enhance the science literacy of all Skidmore students.*

14. Pursue various initiatives to strengthen the natural sciences.

- Implement Science Vision and identify resources to support it.
- Enhance retention and academic support in the sciences with Student Academic Services.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of the Faculty.

➤ *Increase our effectiveness in helping our graduates plan and prepare for their post-Skidmore lives.*

15. Work with Academic Affairs, Alumni Affairs, and Career Services to review and enhance our programs and advising for students to bridge to careers and other educational opportunities.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs, with Academic Affairs and Alumni Affairs.

16. Launch a Sustainable Leadership Program.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs, with Academic Affairs and Alumni Affairs.

- *Take better advantage of the resources and capacity for innovation in the Office of the Dean of Special Programs (ODSP) to support the relevant initiatives identified under this Goal (and others, as appropriate).*

17. Explore potential program enhancements.

- Generate a proposal for a combined BA/MALS degree.
- Complete a Creative Campus Initiative grant.
- Continue to determine ways in which ODSP residencies can enhance academic year programs (e.g., the FYE and McCormack Residency collaboration).

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Special Programs.

Goal II – Intercultural and Global Understanding

We will challenge every Skidmore student to develop the intercultural understanding and global awareness necessary to thrive in the complex and increasingly interconnected world of the 21st Century.

Projects/Action Steps

- *Increase global awareness across the community in order to sensitize all Skidmore students to a complex, diverse, and interdependent world.*

18. Enhance cross-divisional work with the leadership of the Director of Intercultural Studies, the Director of Student Diversity Programs, and the Assistant Director of EEO and Workforce Diversity.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of the Faculty, Dean of Student Affairs, and Vice President for Finance and Administration.

- *Renew the conversation about diversity both within the Skidmore faculty and broadly across the campus community; building upon the work of the Middle States review and other past efforts, establish clear educational objectives relating to this Goal and develop shared expertise in achieving them.*

19. Under the leadership of the Office of Academic Affairs, develop clear educational objectives to enhance intercultural literacy.

- Develop student learning outcomes and curriculum for intercultural literacy.
- Review Intergroup Relations (IGR) program and follow up for additional training; coordinate diversity component of Dialogues Project.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of the Faculty.

- *Enhance the diversity of our student populations while providing the resources necessary to support all of our students in meeting our educational objectives.*

20. Increase the College's resources for need-based student aid (\$2-4M).

Seek both endowment gifts and expanded contributions through the Annual Fund.

Administrative responsibility: Vice President for Advancement.

21. Integrate more fully the Intergroup Relations training into all aspects of Student Affairs.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs.

22. Conduct a campus climate survey to better understand the experience of all students with regard to campus diversity.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs.

23. Explore collaborative programs between Religious and Spiritual Life, Office of Student Diversity Programs and Leadership Activities.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs.

- *Enhance the diversity of our faculty and other employee populations and enhance their skills that relate to achieving this Goal.*

24. Continue efforts to recruit, attract, and retain candidates for faculty and staff positions who enhance the diversity of the faculty and staff.

- Establish accountability and review processes for recruitment of faculty/staff of color in faculty/staff search plans.
- Support for affinity groups (e.g., Black Faculty and Staff Group) through the Committee on Intercultural and Global Understanding as a means for supporting and retaining faculty and staff of color.

Administrative Responsibility: President and Cabinet.

Goal III – Informed, Responsible Citizenship

We will prepare every Skidmore student to make the choices required of an informed, responsible citizen at home and in the world.

Projects/Action Steps

- *Foster pedagogical innovation relating to responsible citizenship; support campus initiatives that teach and exemplify this value.*

25. Support joint efforts of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs related to responsible citizenship.

- Implement and support work of Responsible Citizenship Task Force as possible.
- Foster development of links to broader community: e.g., Saratoga Hospital professional development and ESL support; Water Resources Initiatives.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of the Faculty and Dean of Student Affairs.

➤ *Enhance residential learning.*

26. Implement new residential life programming model.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs.

➤ *Increase support for athletics, fitness, and wellness.*

27. Explore LateNight programming in the Sports Center to engage students in healthy physical activities.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs.

28. Explore offering non-credit bearing health and wellness classes to students.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs.

29. Increase support for athletics, fitness, and wellness.

- Raise \$250K for FOSA and \$200K for capital projects.
- Develop and launch fundraising efforts for new equestrian, tennis, and crew facilities.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Advancement.

➤ *Develop, broaden, and deepen the College's connections to the local community; enhance our ability to function as a socially and environmentally responsible corporate citizen.*

30. Review alumni and college events practices to identify opportunities to integrate more environmentally friendly approaches.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Advancement.

Goal IV – Independence and Resources

We will preserve Skidmore's independence by developing the resources required to realize our aspirations.

Projects/Action Steps

➤ *Continue to develop institutional capacity for effective planning and proactive internal communication.*

31. Conduct planning and implement measures to ensure the College's immediate and long-term financial sustainability in light of recent economic disruptions.

- Continue to look for opportunities to collaborate across divisions, departments, and offices to leverage our resources and further enhance our interdisciplinary approach to learning.
- Communicate clearly at each stage of the budget process, providing information as necessary to enhance the community's collective strategic and financial

literacy.

- Complete planning to identify programs, services, and positions that will be consolidated or eliminated through a Reduction in Force to be implemented in early spring 2010.
- Be attentive to community morale and include community-building initiatives during difficult budgetary times.
- Conduct “Town Hall” meetings on and off campus, reviewing the *Strategic Plan* to assess progress and determine whether any objectives need to be deferred, reconceived, or added. Seek input on where the College should focus its strategic attention during the second half of the *Strategic Plan*.

Administrative Responsibility: President and Cabinet.

32. Align budget with academic priorities.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Academic Affairs and Vice President for Finance and Administration.

33. Continue to improve our institutional capacity to communicate financial information effectively throughout the Skidmore community.

- Continue work of prior years to improve communications and provide fall and spring updates to College constituencies.

Administrative Responsibility: President, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Vice President for Finance and Administration.

34. Participate in the New York Six Consortium, supported by the Mellon Foundation, to explore partnerships and collaborations with Colgate, Hamilton, Hobart and William Smith, St. Lawrence, and Union.

Areas of potential collaboration to be explored include information technology, acquisition of goods and services, sustainability, student engagement, faculty and staff development, and intercultural literacy.

Administrative Responsibility: President.

➤ ***Develop and enhance both our key financial resources and our capacity to manage them.***

35. Enhance financial aid to support excellence (including diversity) of entering class.

- Oversee smooth transition of new Director of Financial Aid.
- Increase visibility of financial aid information in communications with students.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid.

36. Complete the Comprehensive Campaign.

- Secure \$15-20M in new commitments and reach \$200M in campaign total.
- Initiate 75-100 new major solicitations totaling \$15-20M.
- Raise \$15-16M in cash.
- Raise \$5M in gifts to the endowment.
- Conduct 1,300 individual visits with prospects.
- Complete Planning for End of Campaign Celebration.

Administrative Responsibility: President and Vice President for Advancement.

37. Focus on participation and growth of middle-tier donors in Annual Fund.

- Raise \$6.0 Million.
- Increase participation by 15-20% and 2,000 donors.
- Expand volunteer core by 30% and revamp volunteer leadership of Annual Fund.
- Launch Williamson Challenge.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Advancement.

➤ ***Develop and enhance our capacity to manage our physical resources.*****38. Continue to address facilities planning for academic space.**

- Plan for classroom and office space. (DOF/VPFA)
- Coordinate Campus Plan with Academic Plan. (VPAA/VPFA)

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dean of the Faculty, Vice President for Finance and Administration (as above).

39. Further develop campus sustainability policies.

Continue to develop campus sustainability policies, plans, and initiatives, and communicate to the community the College's commitment to sustainability.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Finance and Administration and Vice President for Academic Affairs in collaboration with the President's Cabinet, the Institutional Policy and Planning Committee, and others as appropriate.

40. Continue work begun by the Case-Ladd Task Force.

- Establish Case Council. (DOSA, VPFA, VP Advancement)

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs, in collaboration with Dean of the Faculty, Dean of Special Programs, VP for Finance and Administration, VP for Advancement.

41. Further develop the Campus Plan.

Continue to develop the Campus Plan first-phase initiatives including defining initial programming plans, analyzing ranges of costs of these plans, and developing initial funding plans for these projects through the Comprehensive Campaign, Special Campaigns, possible debt financing, and the operating budget. Place this work in the context of a comprehensive planning process relating to major capital projects.

Administrative Responsibility: President and the Cabinet, the Institutional Policy and Planning Committee, and others as appropriate.

42. Continue to address deferred maintenance.

Implement next phase of work to address issues of deferred maintenance.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Finance and Administration.

43. Improve the College's stewardship of the Skidmore North Woods.

Continue to develop and implement the management plan for the Skidmore North Woods balancing the values of preservation and flexibility of use for the College's immediate and long-term needs. Ensure effective management for appropriate educational and recreational uses by the Skidmore community and local residents. Communicate the results of this work effectively within the Skidmore community

and beyond. Continue work of the North Woods Stewards and Friends of the North Woods in education, development of policies, communication, and enforcement of policies for the woods.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Finance and Administration in collaboration with the President's Cabinet, the Campus Environment Committee, and others as appropriate.

44. Complete the pre-design phase planning for the replacement of the Scribner Village Apartments.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs, VP for Finance and Administration, VP for Advancement.

45. Identify and cultivate donors for replacement of Scriber Village (\$3-5M).

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Advancement.

46. Decide on next steps for the improvement of the tennis and boathouse facilities.

- Create long-range plan for athletic facilities.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs, VP for Finance and Administration, VP for Advancement.

➤ ***Develop and enhance relationships essential to the Skidmore community.***

47. Create opportunities to nurture a strong sense of community both on campus and within the various extended Skidmore communities (e.g., community meetings, President's Hour presentations to parents, external presentations such as Presidential Advisory Dinners).

Administrative Responsibility: President.

48. Enhance strategic outreach to prospective students.

- Increase number of interviews (on-campus, off-site, Skype).
- Evaluate Porter Program; revise outreach to accepted Porter winners.
- Add daily tour of arts facilities.
- Open Admissions Office Saturday mornings throughout the summer; offer group information session and student-guided campus tour.
- Evaluate and expand London outreach.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid.

49. Enhance strategic outreach to college counselors.

- Offer Financial Aid planning program(s) to feeder schools: one for parents of students preparing to apply to college and one for parents of younger students.

Administrative Responsibility: Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid.

50. Create a stronger sense among alumni of being part of a lifelong community.

- Conduct seven "Town Hall" meetings around the country with affiliated web site.
- Launch new virtual social networking community (Fall 2009).
- Launch annual alumni survey in conjunction with Academic Affairs.
- Expand SkidBiz/Career efforts.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Advancement.

51. Create a more personalized experience for each alumna/us.

- Continue work of integrating existing college databases to better serve students once they graduate.
- Expand segmented approach to fundraising and develop events targeted at specific constituencies.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Advancement.

52. Broaden base of support and leadership within the alumni community.

- Revamp and reconceive volunteer structure.
- Expand volunteer base by 30%.
- Expand Homecoming and “Zero-Year” Reunion programs.
- Focus fundraising efforts on annual fund and participation with focus on ten youngest classes through expanded Times2 Challenge.

Administrative Responsibility: Vice President for Advancement.

➤ ***Develop and enhance the “equity” in the Skidmore name.***

53. Continue to strengthen “brand” and pride in the College.

- Launch “Town Hall” meetings in Fall 2009.
- Focus Fall *Scope* on “Value Proposition.”
- Identify opportunities for President to engage in national dialogue on these issues.

Administrative Responsibility: President and Vice President for Advancement.

➤ ***Cultivate a broader positive awareness of Skidmore within local, regional, and national populations.***

54. Lead effort, externally, to make the case affirming the value of the educational opportunities afforded by small, highly selective liberal arts colleges, in general, and most especially, by Skidmore College. (*Annapolis Group, op ed piece, work with AAC&U Presidents’ Trust*).

Administrative Responsibility: President.