

# 2019-2020 Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness Annual Report

Sponsored by  
IPPC Subcommittee on Institutional Effectiveness

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## Introduction

The Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness Annual Report is prepared by the Institutional Policy and Planning Committee (IPPC) Subcommittee on Institutional Effectiveness (SIE). The purpose of the annual report is to both highlight and document assessment related activities from across the college. Per the charge of the committee, our goal is to use the results from these assessments to guide institutional action both in regard to student learning and operational effectiveness. The report is organized beginning with college-wide projects and then by division. The SIE committee is unique in that the membership represents each division across the college. The 2019-2020 membership was as follows:

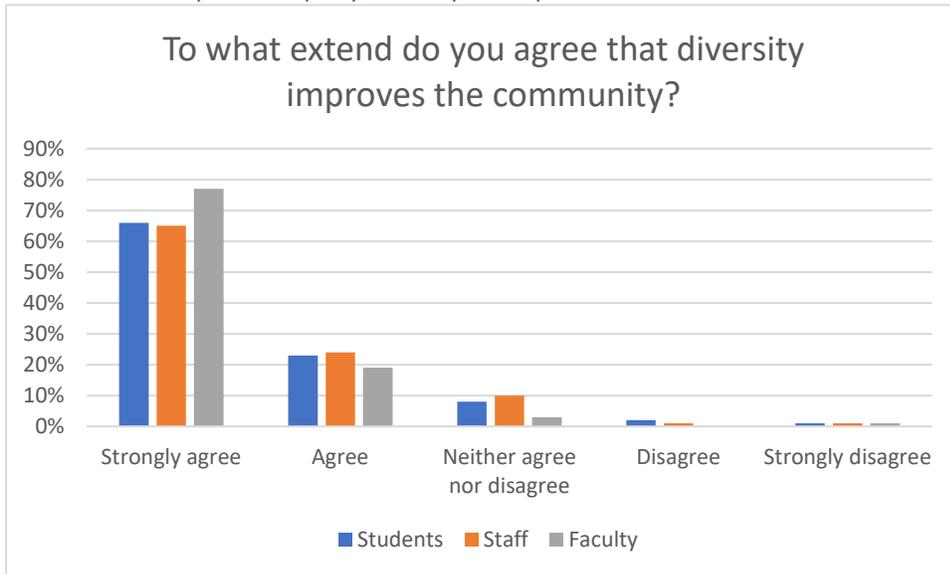
- Catherine DeLorenzo, Director of Admissions
- Riley Filister, Student, Class of 2021
- Jennifer Allen, Budget Director
- Luke Meyers, Director of Marketing and Engagement
- Ron Seyb, Associate Dean for Student Academic Affairs
- Michael Sposili, Executive Director, Alumni Affairs
- Joe Stankovich, Director, Institutional Research
- Jamin Totino, Associate Dean of Student Affairs & Dir of Student Academic Services
- Amy Tweedy, Institutional Effectiveness Specialist, **Co-Chair**
- Peter von Allmen, Faculty Director of Assessment, **Co-Chair**
- Joshua Woodfork, VP for Strategic Planning and Institutional Diversity

## College-Wide Assessments

### [Institutional Effectiveness/Assessment Plan](#)

The IPPC subcommittee on Institutional Effectiveness (SIE) revised the Institutional Assessment Plan during the 2019-2020 Academic year. A working group was established that included Jennifer Allen, Budget Director; Joe Stankovich, Director of Institutional Research; Jamin Totino, Associate Dean of Students and Director of Student Academic Services; Amy Tweedy, Institutional Effectiveness; Peter von Allmen, Faculty Director of Assessment. The goal was to revise the Institutional Assessment Plan, expanding the expectations of engagement from solely Academic Affairs to divisions across the college. The working group reviewed institutional assessment plans from like institutions where available, ultimately developing a plan that respected division autonomy and scope while providing a consistent framework. A list of departments that are expected to engage in annual assessment was created. The overall plan was approved by the IPPC subcommittee on Institutional Effectiveness. Due to the pandemic, the plan was held to be submitted to Cabinet and IPPC for feedback and approval in the 2020-2021 academic year with the goal of implementation in the 2021-2022 academic year.

## HEDS Diversity and Equity Survey Analysis



The Committee on Intercultural and Global Understanding (CIGU) partnered with the Office of Institutional Research to create a working group to analyze the data from the results of the HEDS Diversity and Equity Campus Climate Survey that was administered in

spring 2019. The CIGU HEDS Analysis Working Group committed to over 200 hours reviewing the data and developing the process and format to report back to the college community. The group presented the analysis to the President’s Cabinet and Institutional Planning and Policy Committee (IPPC) for feedback. The planned presentations to students, faculty and staff were cancelled due to the shift to remote learning as a result of the pandemic. Instead, the committee presented the results in the fall of 2020 and is working to develop an accompanying website to promote using the data to support institutional action.

### Surveying Alumni

The Subcommittee on Institutional Effectiveness (SIE) undertook a conversation during the 2019-2020 academic year regarding surveying alumni. The impetus was to identify where redundant efforts could be streamlined. The committee evaluated re-engaging the Alumni Learning Census. The Alumni Learning Census was intended, in part, to align with the College’s Goals for Student Learning and Development. The Alumni Learning Census was administered by the Office of Alumni Relations and College Events in collaboration with Academic Affairs between 2010-2016. As we further discussed this specific survey, we recognized this as an opportunity to communicate across the college to best utilize resources for surveying alumni.

As a result, a working group was created consisting of Peter von Allmen, Faculty Director of Assessment; Kim Crabbe, Director of Career Development Center, Mike Sposili, Assistant Vice President for Alumni Relations and College Events; Joe Stankovich, Director of Institutional Research; and Amy Tweedy, Institutional Effectiveness Specialist.

The committee engaged in benchmarking exercises by reaching out to counterparts at NY6 Alumni Offices. In addition, we made an inquiry through an institutional research listserv.

Finally, the committee read an article specific to assessing alumni.<sup>1</sup> We found our own concerns mirrored in the responses from our colleagues and in the literature. Ultimately, the committee recommends continuing the HEDS Alumni Survey on a 5-year schedule with a commitment to a collaborative analysis among the offices to utilize the data more effectively.

### Healthcare Working Group

The IPPC sub-committee on Budget and Finance created a working group to conduct assessment of the current college healthcare costs. Based on feedback from IPPC and Community Forums, the Working Group:

- Considered scenarios for modifying the cost sharing so that a greater burden will fall on higher earners;
- Ensured that employees making <\$50K/year would not see a % increase in their premium cost share;
- Worked through/debated a multitude of scenarios with a modeling tool that HR created over two meetings lasting several hours;
- Goal-Increase funding coming into the plan without adversely impacting employees with the least resources while addressing perceived inequities as well as salary growth.

### Next Steps

- HR to notify community about specialty drug prior authorization and quantity limit going forward
- Working group to develop process for gathering input

## Finance and Administration

### Financial Sustainability

President Glotzbach announced a new Future Financial Sustainability website to enhance understanding of the College's current and future financial situation. For some time before the global COVID-19 pandemic arrived, the community was engaged in discussions about maintaining the College's continuing financial sustainability in an ever-changing and challenging higher education landscape. Now, as we adapt to drastic changes in our operations due to the pandemic, we are facing a whole new set of challenges that have both short- and long-term implications for the College's budget.

A presentation has been developed that explains the many components of Skidmore's annual budget, presents future financial models that illustrate the extent of the College's budgetary challenges, and offers ideas to bring the projected deficits to a manageable level. Although a balanced "base" operating budget for fiscal year 2021 has been achieved and approved by the Institutional Policy and Planning Committee (IPPC), the President's Cabinet, and the Board of

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<sup>1</sup> Volkwein, J. F. (2010). Assessing alumni outcomes. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, S1, 125-129.

Trustees, it incorporates parameters that align it with previous budgets and will need to be adjusted as we enter the fall semester.

As the College works to make challenging decisions to ensure Skidmore remains fiscally strong, the community will need to be engaged in both understanding and assisting the College in many different ways. Toward this end, the [Future Financial Sustainability webpage](#) was developed to enhance understanding of the College's financial situation. This webpage will be updated on a regular basis to provide important information and updates to the Skidmore community. The webpage also includes a form through which members of the community can submit questions that will be answered and compiled in a future "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)" section.

### [Aligning Budget Process](#)

In FY20 the Budget Office created an online version of the [New Initiative form](#). This form was updated to require that each new request be tied to the Strategic Action Agenda. To better utilize Skidmore resources, departments must now demonstrate how each request will support Skidmore's Strategic Action Agenda. This level of detail has helped Cabinet prioritize funding and spending for new programs and services that best support our Strategic goals.

For FY22 similar wording will be added to the Capital Budget form.

## [Advancement](#)

The Advancement Office contracted with West Wind Consulting to gain advice and counsel on beneficial modifications to programs, policies, and practices and the best investments to facilitate growth of the College's Skidmore Fund. Given that the very successful *Creating Our Future* Campaign will conclude at the end of 2020, this is an opportune time to consider how we build, from a fundraising perspective, on the Campaign's successes including developing strategies to increase the level of operating support that the Fund provides to all aspects of the College going forward. The assessment began in Fall, 2019 with significant data collection and review and continued with staff interviews (both in Advancement and with key partners across campus), conversation with President Glotzbach and Marie Glotzbach, as well as discussion with the Board of Trustees and a sampling of class fundraising volunteers. The report was completed in spring 2020 and an executive summary was shared with the Board of Trustees in May. Recommendations are focused in several areas including branding and messaging, increasing visible leadership advocacy on many levels, raising sights and aspirations, increasing and enhancing stewardship, and providing additional tools to make data based decisions. Implementation of the assessment's recommendations are underway this fall.

## [Admissions and Student Aid](#)

### [Student Employment Review](#)

In the spring of 2019, students urged Skidmore administration to increase the minimum student wage rate to match the NYS minimum. President's Cabinet took up the matter and a

review of the basic student employment policies were presented to cabinet by financial aid and finance staff. This review included an overview of wages by division of the college, used benchmarking with other “NY6” colleges, as well as the financial impact of increasing the wage rate.

This information was presented at two public forums during the fall semester of 2019 and feedback from students and others was received. In addition to the wage rate issue, students requested some updates and changes to the [Student Employment Handbook](#). Some changes have been made and other requests and suggestions are forthcoming from SGA.

A working group to further review the wage rate issue, and also determine how to reduce the budget by \$250,000, as part of a campus-wide budget reduction measure, was created in December of 2019. This group included staff from financial aid, finance, student affairs, and the dean of faculty offices, in addition to two student representatives.

The group supported an increase to the 2020 NYS minimum wage rate of \$11.80/hour, and a suggestion for planned increases going forward. President’s Cabinet supported the plan, with the exception of capping student hours at the level of the financial aid award to achieve the \$250,000 budget savings. Due to concern over additional disruption to students, including alternative earnings options, during the pandemic, the option to cap earnings was recommended to be tabled until 2021-2022. IPPC reviewed the recommendations of the working group. IPPC agreed with increasing the student wage rate, but expressed concern about who would then do the work that would not be done if student employment hours were reduced. That was tabled for future discussion.

## Communications and Marketing

### COVID-19 and fall planning response and tracking

The Office of Communication and Marketing played a central and collaborative role in pivoting resources to respond to institutional needs during the beginning of the pandemic. Overall, the office engaged institutional partners across campus to support the shift to remote business and respond to changing marketing and communication needs.

### News Content

Throughout the summer and early fall, the top web news stories reflected the importance of keeping the College and regional communities up to date about the College’s plans and efforts to protect the health and safety of everyone in the community while returning to residential living and learning.

### Website Development & Programming

The unit supported numerous offices across campus, including the Office of the President, Student Affairs, Alumni Relations and College Events, Admissions, Advancement and many others, with the development and update of websites, web templates, custom programming, forms and online galleries to prepare students, faculty and staff for an unusual fall semester.

The unit also manages homepage takeovers for campus wide events such as Commencement and Convocation. Sample website projects include the [Fall Planning](#); [President's page](#); [COVID-19 Dashboard](#); [Daily Health Certification](#); [Racial Justice Initiative](#); [Admissions](#); [New Student Orientation](#); and [Election 2020](#) resources.

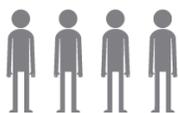
## Marketing and Engagement

Following the successful spring push for enrollment of the Class of 2024, the unit's partnership and collaboration with the Office of Admissions continued to expand throughout the summer with enhanced virtual programming, including live, interactive Virtual Open Houses, new print pieces for direct mail, more targeted digital marketing efforts and the addition of TikTok as a key social platform, and an Admissions website refresh.

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### ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

The summer months of 2020 brought heavy traffic to the Skidmore.edu website, with stories covering the gamut from COVID-19 updates and fall planning to a presidential welcome and heartwarming tales of students' return to campus. One notable shift over the last five months is a sharp increase in mobile and tablet traffic, which saw a 7 percentage point increase over the same period of time in 2019.



942,075

Total web sessions  
+8.4% compared to 2019



47% mobile traffic

Versus 53% desktop  
7 point increase in mobile from 2019



3:06

Average session duration  
-3% compared to 2019

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## Student Affairs

### Student Affairs Signature Programs

The Division of Student Affairs committed to a thematic assessment across departments for the 2019-2020 academic year. Each department selected a signature program within their department to assess for currency, effectiveness and relevance to divisional and institutional goals. Each department was responsible for developing expected learning outcomes, designing an assessment project including the methodology. In addition, each assessment included a plan for analysis and developing subsequent action steps. While some projects were disrupted by the pandemic, below is a brief description of the projects that were completed or are underway.

#### *Athletics*

The Department of Athletics, Fitness and Recreation's project focused on assessing the intramural program. The department took the opportunity to survey the students on sports that are currently offered through the intramural program. The assessment framed areas of inquiry such as a review of the current sports offered, opening opportunities to add different sports, balancing the program against limited space and resources, questioning the time and day intramurals are offered, ensuring effective communication with students. Ultimately, the

assessment outcome focuses on increasing student participation, particularly among females. The survey was sent to all students and the department received 78 responses. The survey uncovered that students do not understand the differences between the Intramural Program which is administered through Athletics, and Club Sports which is funded through SGA and administered by students. Students reported being more likely to engage in Intramural sports in the spring and were more likely to participate in a co-ed league. As a result of the assessment, six of the eight spring leagues will be offered as co-ed.

#### *Campus Life and Engagement*

Building on previous work that identified learning outcomes, the staff within Campus Life and Engagement continued a mapping exercise aligning programs and activities to department, division and institutional goals. Each office identified programs, assigned learning outcomes, and linked to institutional Goals for Student Learning and Development. Specific learning experiences were also identified and means of measurement decided. This exercise was completed by the Student Leadership, the Office of Religious Study, Student Diversity Programs and the Office of Community Service. This work will continue to serve as a foundation for the department.

#### *Career Development Center*

The Career Development Center (CDC) undertook a study of student engagement. The analysis utilized data from Handshake and annual First Destination reports between 2015 and the present. The following are five research questions that framed the analysis and what was learned:

Question: What are the demographics of clients who **are not** engaging with the Career Development Center during their lifecycle on-campus?

Answer: Demographics with lowest rates of engagement were: Male, White, Low to Mid-Low GPA, Low to No Financial Need, and majoring in Arts, Humanities, and Pre-Professional disciplines.

Question: Did early engagement impact the longitudinal relationship with the Career Development Center and post-graduate outcomes for the classes of May 2015 – May 2018?

Answer: Yes. For the total population of Classes 2015 – 2018, 90% of those who engaged with the Career Development Center during their First Year and sophomore year continued to engage during upperclassmen years. However, there was not a significant statistical difference in post-graduate status based on engagement (continuing education, employment, unemployed, or volunteering).

Question: Was there a different in post-graduate outcomes between those who received the Summer Experience Fund (SEF) awards and those who didn't?

Answer: There was not a significant statistical difference in post-graduate destinations was demonstrated between SEF recipients and the general population.

Question: What are the majors and financial need levels of the recipients of the Summer Experience Fund?

Answer:

*Recipients by Major:*

- Social Science - 38%
- Science - 27%
- Humanities - 10%
- Arts - 10%
- Business - 7%
- Pre-Professional - 4%
- Self-Determined - 3%

*Recipients by Financial Need:*

- High Need - 47%
- No Aid - 33%
- Mid-High Need - 14%
- Mid-Low - 6%
- Low Need - 1%

The results are being used to increase outreach to the Arts and Humanities faculty in order to increase services provided to these students and to continue to target early engagement in student's academic career.

*Health and Wellness*

The Department of Health and Wellness conducted an assessment of the Weeks of Welcome Program which aims to help students connect to Skidmore in a way that feels meaningful and fosters a sense of belonging. A survey was sent to current students, ultimately resulting in 574 responses. Areas of improvement that arose from the feedback included better advertising, providing programming for students who are abroad their first semester and connecting students to the broader Saratoga community.

*Student Academic Services*

Student Academic Services selected the International Friends and Family program to assess. Since 2007, the program focuses on matching international students with hosts based on academic and social interests. A survey was developed to gather feedback on the effectiveness of the program from both the host and student perspectives. The pandemic halted this work and it will resume in the fall of 2020.

*Residential Life*

The Office of Residential Life selected to assess student's level of engagement and satisfaction living in special interest housing. The Global Floor and Multicultural Floor were established in the fall of 2015. Peers Representing Intersectional Identities and Sexuality Meaningfully (PRISM) was implemented in the fall of 2019. The assessment included a combination of methodologies including a short survey supplemented by a focus group and individual interviews and finally a review of current and past events and programs. The project was put on hold due to the pandemic and will be completed during the 2020-2021 academic year.

## Student Affairs- Response to COVID

Beginning in March 2019, the Division of Student Affairs quickly pivoted normal operations as the College switched to remote learning. This included assessing student needs regarding housing, leading the College to implement emergency procedures, collaborating across divisions to establish clear communication with students, parents and families. In addition, the staff creatively shifted operations to continue to provide support to students in the areas of health and wellness, academic support services and engagement. The Student Government Association quickly identified funding as a vital need for our most vulnerable student population. As a result, they worked tirelessly towards that aim.

### *COVID-19 Student Emergency Spring Fund*

In a partnership between Student Government Association, Student Affairs, and Advancement, from March-June 2020, the Student Emergency Fund (SEF) Committee was established to provide financial assistance to students in need as a result of the pandemic. Ultimately, the committee was able to distribute \$144,000 to approximately 200 students in the spring process. The fund consisted of individual contributions from the Skidmore community; Student Government Association reallocated funds and an Office of Advancement targeted campaign.

### Criteria for SEF selection:

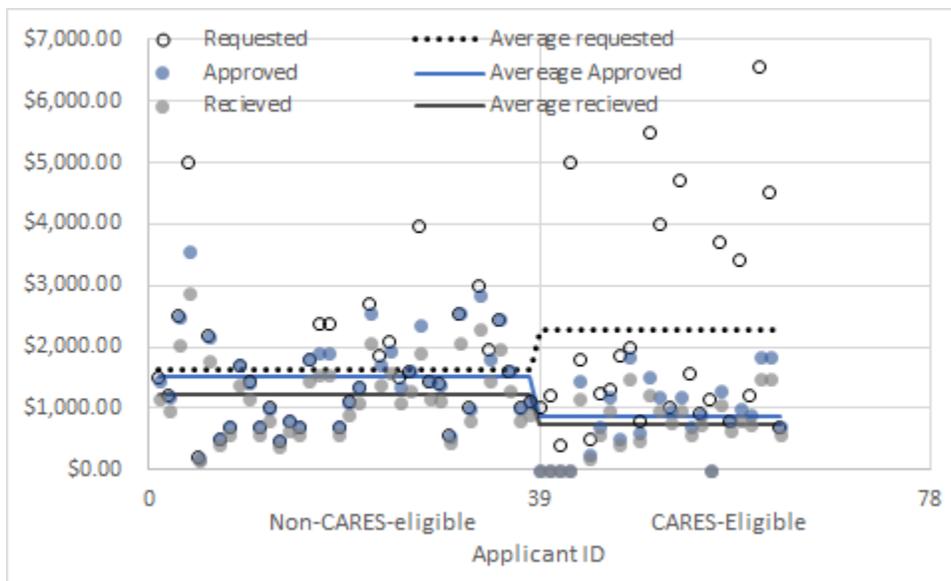
The committee consisted of 10 students who developed a shared set of criteria in which to review the submitted student applications on a case by case basis. The review process included measures to protect the safety and respect of student's identity, while taking steps to embed self-reflection on ways in which their identities impacted their decision making. The committee will look at each request on a case by case basis. The criteria to be taken into account when reviewing each applicant included:

- Demonstrated need
- Utilization of all available resources
- Clarity, thoughtfulness, and thoroughness of the application
- The amount being requested
- Where the student currently resides (on campus vs off)
- Time sensitivity of application
- Urgency conveyed
- The amount being requested based on specific area requests (i.e. housing food etc.)
- The current amount in the support fund
- In order to not overlap with the CARES Act Funding which included specific criteria, the Student COVID funding group provided funding for those **not** eligible for the CARES ACT for the time being.

### *COVID-19 Student Emergency Summer Fund*

In addition to the student emergency fund, a student led committee was established to dedicate funding to support students through the summer. The committee distributed \$75,000 to 58 students with an average award of approximately \$1,000. The goal was to prioritize funding to non-CARES eligible students. As with the previous process, care was taken to protect the identity of the applicant and recognize members' positionality. The committee spent their

final meetings to reflect on our process, discuss future steps, plan communication with students, and respond to feedback. The process for this round of funding totaled about 23 hours: 18 of planning and discussion and 5 hours of personal application review.



This figure shows how much each individual student requested, was approved for, and received. The approved amount refers to the amount the group agreed upon while looking at the individual applications, and the received amount refers to how much an individual was granted after the 19% scale back. The amount each student requested (hollow dot), was approved for (blue dot), and received (gray dot), all line up vertically. The average amount requested by non-CARES eligible students was \$1,632.88, and the average amount requested by CARES-eligible students was \$2,270. Twenty-six out of 38 non-CARES-eligible applicants were approved for the full amount requested (note that these students were not granted their full amount because of the 19% cut made to all students). Three out of 25 CARES-eligible students were approved for the full amount they requested. Five out of the 25 CARES-eligible students were given no money at all. On average, CARES-eligible students requested 40% more than non-CARES eligible students, but on average received 40% less than non-CARES eligible students in accordance with the goal of the committee.

*Federal CARES Act Student Funding*

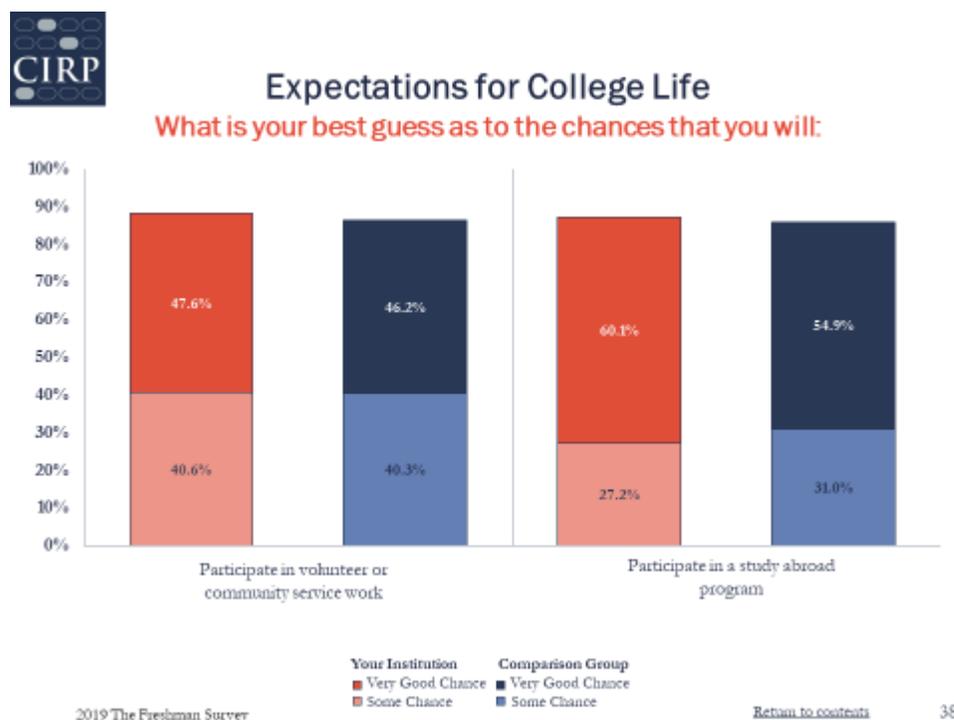
Federal CARES Act student financial grant assistance of \$820,317 was allocated to Skidmore in April 2020. The Financial Aid office developed a survey application which was emailed to all potentially eligible students. That is, students who are US Citizens or Permanent Residents who had completed a 2019-2020 FAFSA. The application was sent to the students in three rounds. The applications were reviewed and awards determined based on the level of student financial need, as well as their request. 399 students received the \$820,317, for an average award of \$2,056. The maximum award mirrored the maximum Federal Pell Grant for the 2019-2020 academic year of \$6,195, per Federal guidance. The award process was coordinated with the Bursar’s Office, so that checks for the amount of the award, regardless of any existing

balance due to Skidmore College, were immediately cut and sent to students' home addresses, or their address of choice. Many students responded with appreciation for assistance during this time, indicating challenging financial circumstances due to the pandemic.

## Surveys

### HERI CIRP Freshman Survey

This study collects information on incoming students before they experience college including college admissions decisions, financing college, high school experiences and behaviors, college preparation, expectations for college- major and careers and expectations for college life. The survey was administered in the summer of 2019 and sent to first-time, full-time freshman. The overall response rate was 52%. The results of the survey were shared with the President's Campus and Institutional Effectiveness committee. The following visual demonstrates an example of the results.



### Withdrawn Student Survey

This study examined the attitudinal reasons students gave for voluntarily withdrawing from Skidmore College. Satisfaction levels on key areas of academic and social concern were also assessed for both the transfer institution and Skidmore. The survey was sent to students who entered Skidmore at any time as a first-time, first-year student but voluntarily withdrew between Sept 1, 2017 and Aug 30, 2019. The overall response rate was 33%. The results were shared with the Enrollment Management Group which contains representatives from across the college.

## Academic Affairs

The disruption brought about by the sudden transition to remote learning following spring break had an enormous negative impact on the annual assessment efforts for departments and programs. The combined disruption of work caused by the intense focus on gearing up for the pivot to remote learning, the infeasibility of completing most projects in this new mode, as well as the increased workload of maintaining remote learning for the remainder of the semester necessarily drew nearly all effort away from assessment work. As a result, just one department (HPPS) was able to complete and submit their annual report. Many others were left as works-in-process and will be completed in 2020-21.

### Information Literacy

The college-wide assessment project for the year was intended to be the information literacy component of the new general education curriculum. Information literacy is one of four literacies that students fill within the major. As such all departments must offer courses that satisfy this requirement. Departments were encouraged but not required to do a direct assessment of student work in this area. Though several departments had intended to take up this work, none were able to complete it due to the pivot to remote learning. As noted above, several of those projects will be completed this year.

### Increasing Visibility of Department Goals

One of the most important goals for the year was to increase the visibility of department and program goals as well as the college goals for learning and development. This work was completed in cooperation with department chairs, program directors and IT staff. The college Goals for Student Learning and Development are now posted prominently with a link on the main "[Academics](#)" page as well as on the [assessment home page](#). Links to department and program goals are now appear on their respective pages, significantly increasing their visibility.

### FYE-QR Testing the Test

As part of the transition to the new general education curriculum, the quantitative reasoning working group developed a new placement test for incoming students. In addition to general quality assurance testing to ensure that the new exam (now online as opposed to in-person) was functioning properly, the QR test was also administered to a group of volunteer students to test both the online examination process and also the validity of the instrument. Last year, the QR working group reviewed the four tests used for QR Placement Based on student responses, problematic poor questions were removed and replaced. Part II questions were embedded into the QR 1 test to verify they were appropriate and to determine appropriate cutoffs for Part I and Part II of the QR Placement Diagnostic. The Part I cutoff determines placement into MA 100 or takes Part II. The Part II section determines placement into FQR or AQR. The working group also did an item analysis on the questions to further validate questions. Once online, student volunteers took the test to help validate the cutoff between FQR and AQR and to revise some of questions for the online format including swapping a few questions to use a better image for graph analysis. Finally, a group of first year students took the test to further validate the online format and cutoffs.

### Academic Department Assessments

As noted above, virtually all department annual assessment work was suspended in the shift to remote learning. For many departments, that work will recommence this year.

#### *Departments that engaged in self-studies*

The following departments or programs completed self-studies for AY 19-20:

- American Studies
- Classics
- Computer Science
- Geosciences
- History
- Institutional Research (self-study completed, external review scheduled Spring 2021)

Six other departments and programs were also scheduled to complete self-studies but were unable to do so given the closure of campus in March. In most cases, they will be completed this year.

- Arts Administration- deferred to 20-21
- Asian Studies- deferred to 20-21
- Education Studies- deferred to 20-21
- Environmental Studies and Science- deferred to 20-21
- Intergroup Relations- deferred to 20-21
- Latin American and Latinx Studies- deferred to 20-21

### Student Survey of Remote Learning

The Academic Planning Working Group was formed in the spring and charged with making recommendations for the fall academic year in light of the pandemic. The group administered a survey to gather feedback concerning students' experiences during switch to remote learning in the spring semester and thoughts and advice concerning the fall semester to support student success. 54% of students responded and the working group used the results to inform their recommendations.

### Faculty Survey of Remote Teaching and Learning

The Survey of Remote Teaching was administered to faculty in May 2020 to assess the faculty experience in the wake of the closure of campus during the Covid-19 pandemic. The survey received over 300 responses and a report was prepared in June. The survey addressed accessing course resources, faculty-student interactions, faculty workload and stress, student workload and stress, and discipline-specific challenges. The survey results identified both challenges and innovations and the results were used to inform fall planning.



## Appendix: Results from the Survey of Remote Teaching and Learning

# Results from the Survey of Remote Teaching and Learning

By

Peter von Allmen, Faculty Director of Assessment  
Amy J. Tweedy, Institutional Effectiveness Specialist

With assistance from

Kerry L. Nelson, Coordinator for Institutional Research and Assessment

The *Survey of Remote Teaching and Learning* was administered in May 2020 in order to assess the faculty experience in the wake of the closure of campus during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this report, we summarize those findings most directly related to the challenges of the remote environment and ideas and innovations that proved useful. The survey data are extremely rich in both regards. With over 300 responses from across all divisions, we have an excellent database on which to rely as we approach a fall semester in which at least some classes will be taught remotely. It was clear in reading the responses that the faculty reacted with positivity, creativity and dedication as they quickly learned and applied new technologies and strategies as well as seeking out new and creative resources to supplement existing materials. We explicitly acknowledge that the survey and our analysis of the data collected addresses just one dimension of what was a highly complex and dynamic series of challenges that included unanticipated and extremely stressful changes for students and faculty alike. While no doubt those stressors are reflected in how faculty taught and how students learned, our emphasis here is on strategies that will help faculty teach and help students to learn under these difficult circumstances.

While some challenges and opportunities were general and applied in some regard to courses in all departments, others were highly specific to division or department. While in some (typically more lecture-based) courses, faculty reported a relatively smooth transition, “high touch” courses common to disciplines such as the physical and natural sciences as well as courses in the arts were impacted most profoundly.

To read the results is humbling and encouraging. As we describe below, in case after case, it was clear that many faculty invested enormous time and energy to create an effective learning environment under the most difficult of circumstances. The goal of this report is create a resource in which we share those experiences that our colleagues found most problematic as well as the innovations that faculty felt were most effective under circumstances that before February 2020, none of us could have imagined.

## Challenges

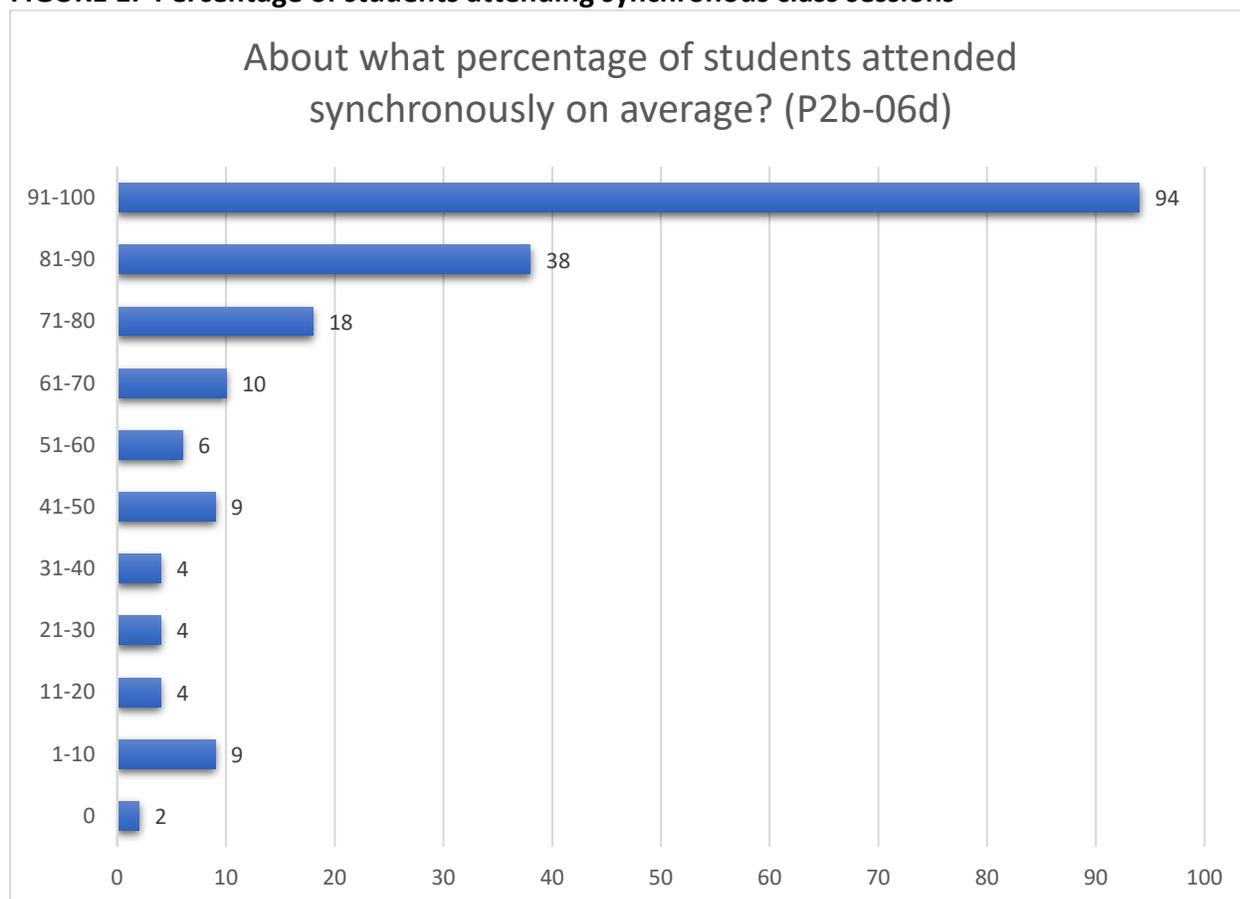
The challenges presented by the sudden shift to remote learning tend to cluster around five major themes:

- Faculty and student access to reliable internet, computing resources, course resources. For international students, added to these challenges were those related to time zone differences?
- Communication with students (faculty student interactions)
- Faculty workload and stress
- Student workload and stress
- Wide ranging challenges specific to particular disciplines.

## Access

The survey results indicate that the problems were not widespread in terms of the number of students or faculty who had difficulty accessing course resources. For example, faculty reported that attendance for synchronous class sessions was over 80 percent in about two-thirds of classes (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1. Percentage of students attending synchronous class sessions**



But to be fully functional for remote learning, all students and all faculty must be able to have access to course resources. For example, if every student does not have internet access and a dedicated machine at their disposal that is equipped with a microphone and camera, those without are excluded from synchronous class sessions. Exacerbating this issue, students who had one problem often had others as well. For example, students in China were faced not only with a 12-hour time difference, but also difficulty in accessing course resources such as live lectures via the internet. Thus, if the college guidance is for synchronous teaching and learning as the preferred mode, it would still require a variety of accommodations or resources for some students. Importantly, the remote teaching and learning survey was administered to faculty only. Results from student surveys can no doubt shed more nuanced light on the issues of access.

As shown in Figure 2, slightly more than 40 percent of faculty indicated that they taught classes synchronously. Another 38 percent used a hybrid model that included some synchronous teaching. About 22 percent indicated that they taught only asynchronously. As noted above,

most faculty comments indicated that students were able to access all course materials, including live lectures. Faculty survey responses indicated that those students who could not had issues with access to the internet, time zone changes, and home environments that were not conducive to focused study. If access issues can be addressed, it is likely that most classes could be taught with at least some synchronous component.

**FIGURE 2. Course delivery methods**



Some faculty with poor internet access chose to deliver their courses asynchronously to avoid problems with Zoom functionality during class. Others went to campus or elsewhere to ensure better service. The burden here was clearly felt unequally as it meant stressful returns to campus combined with travel to and from campus. Additionally, the closure of the public schools created a significant challenge for faculty with younger children as many were forced into an unmanageable circumstance of attempting to simultaneously teach classes, attend committee meetings, and maintain scholarship, all while home schooling children and providing supervision and childcare. Having clearly articulated guidance from the Dean’s office regarding expectations of faculty teaching remotely would no doubt reduce faculty stress.

### Communication with Students

Most faculty felt that Zoom was an effective platform given the circumstance, with many taking advantage of features such as the chat function, breakout rooms and polling. When combined with the LMS (Blackboard for most) and email, most faculty seemed satisfied with their ability to communicate with students, post assignments, collect work and return it. This is not to say

that faculty found remote teaching to be an adequate substitute for in-person teaching. The small liberal arts college model is built on a foundation of close interaction between faculty and students as one faculty member noted, “I have learned the value of personal relationships to our teaching and to the mission of the Skidmore as a liberal arts college.” While Zoom functioned relatively well under the circumstances, especially given that it was not designed for remote learning, teaching remotely fell well short of the usual classroom experience. The problems ranged from relatively simple issues with the functionality of the program to much more nuanced problems with person to person interaction.

Several faculty noted the loss of interpersonal connection. Simply seeing two-dimensional faces does not allow for faculty to read students well in terms of their engagement or understanding. One colleague noted that inspiring students is nearly impossible under these conditions. Several faculty members expressed frustration at how this lost feeling of connectedness created difficulties in prompting participation. Some comments indicated that it may be due in part simply to lack of familiarity and comfort with working remotely. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that some students kept their cameras in the off position (or perhaps did not even have a working camera), making it impossible to have any sort of visual connection with the student or even ensure that they were present. If we are to continue with or someday must return to remote learning, it would be helpful to discuss the extent to which faculty can expect students to keep cameras on. This is no doubt a complex issue as in one sense it may cross a privacy boundary, but in another is perhaps no different than asking students to be physically present in an in-person class.

As an interesting counterpoint, there were many comments from faculty who found Zoom to be a very effective platform for one-on-one meetings. Several faculty indicated that they plan to continue making themselves available in this format. In addition, one person noted that the online environment seemed to help shy students as “some students were actually more interactive online.”

At a more practical level, one colleague noted that in classes larger than 24, it is not possible to have all students on the screen at one time. Our 200-level classes are capped at 26. The lost feeling of connectedness with students as they span two screens may well not be worth the additional two “seats” in the class.

The survey responses indicated that many faculty used programs other than Zoom to communicate, collaborate, and assign work to students. These included Slack, Instagram, FaceTime, Evernote, WhatsApp, Canopy, WordPress, YouTube, Google Drives, Apple Music, Flocabulary, Nearpod, Flipgrid, Vimeo, Tiktok and Spotify. While there was universal high praise for the work of the LEDs staff to provide software and access under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, if we are to remain in remote mode, even partially, it will be important that faculty and students (and LEDs by extension) have clear guidance and expectations about software platform availability as well as necessary training.

The use of remote learning created challenges beyond the classroom experience. Several faculty noted the need to create clear boundaries for students in terms of when faculty will be

available to meet or what represents a reasonable response time to student requests to meet. Some faculty were incredibly generous with their time and offers to meet with students. However, this sometimes ended up with students misperceiving what was fair in terms of faculty availability. Given that students might be in radically different time zones, it would be helpful for both faculty and their students to have guidelines regarding appropriate expectations of availability for consultation and help outside of class.

### Faculty Workload and Stress

The transition to remote teaching was enormously stressful for faculty. With essentially no time to plan or prepare, faculty suddenly found themselves trying to recreate their courses; learn new software; set up offices and teaching space in their homes; teach, mentor and support students, many of whom were also highly stressed; homeschool children; care for sick loved ones; and support co-workers; all in an environment of enormous uncertainty. Given the extent to which all faculty were impacted by this perfect storm of challenges, it is humbling and gratifying to read through page after page of survey results that show the extent to which faculty dedicated themselves to making the best of it in all areas of their work (teaching, scholarship, service).

While faculty clearly rose to the challenge of an emergent circumstance, comments indicated that such efforts are not sustainable. Given the level and extent of stress reflected in the survey, it will be crucial for the college to develop strategies to mitigate as many of these challenges as possible. One suggestion that appears repeatedly is a call for clear, timely, consistent communication from the administration that includes the opportunity for dialogue rather than simple reporting. While a great many comments praised the dedication and work of the president and dean's office, some made clear that the inability to speak with those in decision-making roles added to stress.

### Student Workload and Stress

It was clear from the responses related to students' ability to transition to remote learning that students were extremely stressed. Moreover, the level of stress was felt very unevenly across students. While some students had a relatively smooth, if inconvenient and unplanned shift to remote learning, for others, the transition was traumatic. While faculty responses indicated that they exercised a great deal of flexibility in such cases, most of the students' problems were not readily soluble by faculty (e.g. unstable home environment, lack of internet service, lack of dedicated computer). The frustration over the grading system was just one manifestation of how such challenges bled over into learning and academic performance. Much more detail is surely available from the survey of students. It would be useful to also have the results of that survey summarized and made available for faculty as they plan for the fall.

### Discipline Specific Issues

In addition to the more globally felt impacts of closing the campus were the discipline specific issues. While every discipline faced challenges, the need to wholly reinvent courses appeared to be most acute in courses in the arts and lab sciences. In some cases, these were brought about by the need to access physical facilities (e.g., laboratory equipment, metal working

equipment). In others it was due to the nature of required interaction among students or faculty and students (e.g., music performance and theater). It was in the face of such challenges that the creativity and dedication of the faculty was most apparent. While some of those creative solutions are described in the following section, active intradepartmental communication and collaboration will be a critical step along the path to solutions. Significant challenges with student assessment were mentioned frequently by faculty in many departments. The nature of the problems and potential for solutions was idiosyncratic dependent on the material, but the administration of exams appears to be a more general problem. Specifically, a few faculty noted significant issues with adherence to the honor code during administration of exams and other assessments. Particularly for courses in which closed-book exams are given during class, enforcing the honor code is highly problematic. While one professor reported changing to oral exams and another used a test creator that can change question formats (Classmarker), this clearly will not be practical in all cases. And while test-making software can alter question order or correct response placement in multiple choice exams, many faculty use only open-ended questions and in any case, it does not resolve the issue of students accessing outside resources. Addressing this problem going forward represents a challenge to the integrity of the evaluation process and the role of the honor code at the college.

## Ideas and Innovations

In this section we summarize the innovative teaching methods adopted by Skidmore faculty after the switch to remote learning. While many are not entirely new concepts, they became particularly useful or important after the transition to remote learning. As noted above, the relative ease with which faculty were able to transition their courses depended in large part on the content. Faculty comments tended to fall within two broad categories: technologies (modes), and supplemental resources.

### Technology of Teaching

#### *Flipped classroom and small groups to encourage self-directed learning*

Many faculty noted successful experiments with flipped classroom style format. In several cases, faculty specifically noted that this was something they had wanted to try and being forced to migrate to remote learning created the necessity and opportunity. Some faculty created pre-recorded brief tutorials or demonstrations. Others directed students to completely outside resources for this content. They then used class time (synchronous) to apply techniques or tools learned in the pre-lectures. Having students complete these self-directed learning exercises beforehand allowed space to focus on gaining deeper understanding through work on problem sets, group work and applications during class time.

It was clear that one of the things that faculty missed most about class time was the opportunity for students to interact with one another. Across all divisions, faculty use small groups for discussion or problems sets. Many found that using the breakout room feature in Zoom break out rooms for discussion and small group work worked well. One respondent noted, “Based on personal observation and student feedback, the breakout room was one of

the best features.” Despite the opportunities here, there were cautionary notes as well, as another noted that once they started using breakout rooms, a student complained that they were teaching themselves. Another indicated that while they seemed to work well given that the students had the opportunity to get to know one another in person for half the semester, it would be much harder to implement from the start.

Faculty also liked using the “share screen” option for report outs and presentations. Students can also share screens with one another to check work or share ideas during breakout sessions or report outs. Some faculty even created assignments specifically designed to take advantage of screen sharing for presentations. Zoom also allows students to “see themselves” during presentations or performances. If the session is recorded they can even go back to review and critique the presentation at a later date.

#### *Benefits of recording synchronous class sessions*

A number of faculty noted that recording class sessions has important benefits. Most frequently noted was that students who miss class can view the lecture later. While not the same as synchronous attendance, viewing the actual class session is likely to be far superior to “getting the notes from someone”. This is especially true given that many faculty posted slides, whiteboard content or other in-class resources to Blackboard as a complement to the class recording. Recording class also allows students to go back and review material they do not understand, such as a particular derivation or methodology. This includes pre-recording demonstrations for labs. Recording classes enhances students’ ability to make up missed work. Finally, a few faculty noted that having a recorded version of a lecture would allow them to better keep the class on track in a subsequent offering of the course in the event that they had to miss a session.

Despite the possibilities for benefits described above, some faculty felt that recorded class sessions were problematic as they might reduce attendance, decrease active learning for those that do attend, and create another level of separation between students and faculty.

#### *Using the Polling feature of Zoom*

Several faculty made use of Zoom’s polling feature to gauge student understanding.

#### *Using Word instead of the Whiteboard feature*

While some faculty used the whiteboard feature, its capabilities are limited. Another option is to use Microsoft Word and share screen. Word has a more sophisticated draw feature for graphs and is also better for mathematical presentation as it has a full range of advanced characters. The resulting document can be saved and posted to Blackboard.

#### *Splitting classes into smaller groups*

A few faculty found it useful to divide their classes into multiple groups to facilitate interaction and participation. While they found it effective, it can also be very time intensive as it requires multiple presentations of the same material.

### *Using Zoom outside of class*

Faculty made extensive use of Zoom outside of normal class meetings to stay connected to students. Beyond office hours (used by most faculty), Zoom proved useful in meetings with thesis and independent study students. One faculty member used the 20 minutes before class as an informal meeting time. “The 20 minutes when I was on Zoom before class started allowed me to connect with students in a new way. Some would always sign on early and it was a great chance to connect.”

### *Creating better presentation materials*

Some faculty noted that the transition to remote teaching forced them to produce a more comprehensive and finely tuned set of teaching presentation materials, such as PowerPoint slides. One noted, “I find recording lectures make me more organized and focused.” This is clearly a double-edged sword as creating such materials can be very time consuming.

### Supplemental Resources

Similar to discipline specific challenges, many of the opportunities cited by faculty tended to be discipline specific as well. With this in mind, it would be most productive to have resource conversations at the department level, ideally with documentation to create a written record of which were most helpful and the extent to which they are available. Some examples include helpful online sites for museums, specialized music collaboration software, experts willing to appear (virtually) to share experiences, online tutorials from Kahn Academy, and Central Online Victorian Educator.

More generally, faculty were universal in their praise for the IT department as they worked to obtain supplemental licenses for necessary software. It is clear that if Skidmore is to continue with partial or remote learning in the fall, continued access to such software will be a frontline concern for faculty. In some cases (statistics courses, to name just one) students would be unable to complete the course without such access. Other examples exist across the curriculum.

The other area in which faculty from across the college expressed concern was the Library. While faculty praised the library staff response to the transition to off-campus work (both teaching and research) faculty clearly felt the loss of ILL and access to the stacks. There were a number of requests for more ebooks and/or some form of electronic ILL. Faculty also requested help from library with copyright issues related to posting, copying and using copyrighted materials in an online mode.

## Conclusion

The results of the survey clearly show the extraordinary dedication of the faculty to their work. They contain countless examples of intense effort combined with creative thinking that made a meaningful contribution to students’ learning. This report is intended to capture the multiplicity of experiences during this unprecedented moment in higher education. It is no surprise given faculty’s commitment to an intimate and in person teaching model provided by a

small liberal arts education that teaching remotely felt less legitimate. In some cases, faculty were left to simply make the best of a very bad situation. However, there are also examples of moments where teaching and learning flourished, even if unexpectedly. Faculty found ways to make it work, to learn new instructional technologies, to support students in any way they could imagine, while managing their own individual experiences of this abrupt and profound shift in their professional and personal lives. In this regard, it was clear that as our students were unevenly affected, so too, was our faculty and staff. Structural inequities are not reserved exclusively for our students. Finally, as documented by a recent survey administered by the Chronicle of Higher Education,<sup>2</sup> Skidmore faculty experiences closely mirror those at other institutions across the country. The challenge of the coming year will no doubt require that we learn all that we can from our experience in the spring.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.chronicle.com/article/in-their-own-words-here-s/248989?cid=at&source=ams&sourceId=5194300&utm\\_campaign=campaign\\_1290117&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_medium=en&utm\\_source=Iterable&utm\\_source=at](https://www.chronicle.com/article/in-their-own-words-here-s/248989?cid=at&source=ams&sourceId=5194300&utm_campaign=campaign_1290117&utm_medium=email&utm_medium=en&utm_source=Iterable&utm_source=at)