

**Report to the**  
**Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students**  
**of**  
**SKIDMORE COLLEGE**  
**Saratoga Springs, NY 12866**

**By**

**An Evaluation Team representing the**  
**Middle States Commission on Higher Education**

Prepared after study of the institution's self-study report  
And a visit to the campus on March 6-9, 2016

**The Members of the Team:**

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**AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT**

**President:**

Dr. Philip A. Glotzbach

**Chief Academic Officer:**

Dr. Beau Breslin, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty

**Chair of the Board of Trustees:**

Linda G. Toohey

Former Executive Vice President,  
Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce  
Saratoga Springs, New York

## **I. Content and Nature of the Visit**

Skidmore College is a highly selective, independent, liberal arts college that enrolls approximately 2,500 undergraduate students from 45 states and 60 countries. The College's mission statement focuses on preparing students to continue their quest for knowledge; to make the choices required of informed, responsible citizens; and to link theoretical and applied learning. The College balances a commitment to the liberal arts and sciences with preparation for professions, careers, and community leadership.

Skidmore offers the Bachelor's degree. It has no branch campuses, no additional locations, and no distance or correspondence education programs.

Skidmore chose to conduct a selected topics self-study focused on integrative learning. A generalist review was conducted prior to the team visit. The self-study was conducted by a steering committee that included two faculty members, staff from throughout the College, and two students. It was chaired by Dr. Beau Breslin, Dean of the Faculty and Vice President of Academic Affairs, and Dr. Sarah Goodwin, Professor of English and Faculty Assessment Coordinator. Five working groups composed of faculty and staff (and in one case two students) drafted the initial reports that led to the final self-study document.

## **II. Affirmation of Continued Compliance with Requirements of Affiliation**

Based on a review of the self-study, interviews, the Certification Statement supplied by the institution, and other institutional documents, the team affirms that the institution continues to meet the Requirements of Affiliation in *Characteristics of Excellence*.

## **III. Compliance with Federal Requirements; Issues Relative to State Regulatory or Other Accrediting Agency Requirements**

Based on the separate verification of compliance with accreditation-relevant provisions of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 and, as necessary, review of the self-study, certification by the institution, other institutional documents, and interviews, the team affirms that the institution meets all relevant federal and state regulations and the requirements of other Department of Education recognized accreditors.

## **IV. Evaluation Overview**

A generalist review conducted prior to the visiting team's arrival on campus concluded that Skidmore College is in compliance with all 14 Standards of Excellence. Our team found a community that is passionate about its liberal arts mission, the linking of theoretical and applied learning, and the exceptional preparation it provides its students for careers, professions, and community leadership. The self-study focused on integrative learning and involved many members of the campus community in data collection, self-reflection, and the development of recommendations to themselves. The visiting team echoed many of these self-recommendations in their suggestions for improvement, including an affirmation of the proposed revisions to the general education requirements. In addition, the visiting team's suggestions supported the self-study's recommendations to become more deliberate about the concept of integrative learning, to promote a clearer understanding of it, to develop physical spaces to support it, and to provide a more consistent assessment of it.

Skidmore's recent increase in the diversity of the student body with respect to domestic students of color, international students, first-generation students, and students with high financial need has been

remarkable. However, the self-study acknowledges that there is still much work to be done to provide a welcoming campus and classroom climate. The creation of a new Chief Diversity Officer position is one indication that Skidmore is serious about facing this challenge, as is their new approach to faculty searches. The visiting team also suggested some opportunities for curricular expansion that would support Skidmore's diversity and inclusion goals.

Skidmore has made great progress in the areas of civic engagement and sustainability, as they consider the concept of responsible communities. Their examination of how they currently teach values and ethics within academic departments and through co-curricular programming has led to the visiting team's suggestion that academic and student affairs collaborate in leading discussions about where students are learning values and ethics and what they should be learning.

The recommendations made by the visiting team focus on learning assessment and institutional assessment and are intended to help Skidmore strengthen areas in which they have already made tremendous progress. In fact, all of the suggestions and recommendations put forward in this report are directed toward helping to make an exceptionally strong institution even stronger.

## **V. Compliance with Accreditation Standards**

A generalist review conducted in November, 2015, concluded that Skidmore College is in compliance with all 14 Standards of Excellence. The generalist report was submitted separately.

## **Chapter I General Education**

### **Summary of evidence and findings:**

- Based on direct and indirect assessment of student learning, the faculty and staff at Skidmore recognize that the general education curriculum could better foster integrative thinking and learning, as well as the application of what students learn to complex real-world problems. Therefore, the Committee on Educational Policies and Planning (CEPP) is working to revise several aspects of the general education curriculum.
- The College acknowledges the value of students engaging in critical self-reflection.

### **Significant accomplishments:**

The visiting team commends Skidmore College on the following:

- The Committee on Educational Policies and Planning (CEPP) recognizes the critical role that social justice, ethics, and applied learning play in general education goals and in students' pathways as life-long learners and participants in increasingly global societies.
- CEPP has linked curricular reform to the Goals for Student Learning and Development (GSLD) and acknowledges the importance of: learning about stratification and issues of inequality and justice in both the United States and in a global context; quantitative literacy; and all students' understanding of "modes of inquiry"—specifically Artistic Inquiry, Cultural Inquiry through Language, Examining Values, and Scientific Inquiry.

**Non-binding suggestions for improvement:**

The visiting team suggests:

- A new “considering difference” requirement (to replace the former culture-centered inquiry requirement) which would incorporate the study of diversity and stratification across the multiple identities that individuals occupy.
- The use of self-reflective essays focusing on difference (including stratification, privilege and power), which could be integrated into existing first-year writing classes, as well as other courses to assist in integrative learning.
- Building on Lucy Scribner’s commitment to education of the “mind and the hand” by considering the application of general education to real-world problems.
- Providing professional development and support to faculty for the revision of courses and new course development related to the proposed new general education requirements.
- Documenting a plan and timetable for the approval, development, and implementation of the proposed changes to the general education requirements.

**Chapter II****From the First-Year Experience to Life Beyond College****Summary of evidence and findings:**

- Data from many sources indicate that integrative learning is infused and sequenced across a student's time at the College, both in the curriculum and co-curriculum, and leading into careers and engagement with the world after graduation.
- The College's policies, programs, and most curricular emphases, spanning a student's time at the College, can be linked to the integrative learning paradigm.
- Evidence supporting sequenced integrative learning is not always easily interpreted; however, as noted in the self-study report, "integrated learning is lurking in plain sight, though sometimes in formats difficult to assemble and present" (p. 20).

**Significant accomplishments:**

The team commends Skidmore College on the following:

- The First-Year Experience successfully incorporates opportunities for reflection, through the Reflection and Projection (RAP) essays; the Scribner Seminars, which facilitate students' cross-disciplinary exploration and reflection; and the Peer Mentor program.
- Student participation in ELLPs (Engaged Liberal Learning Practices), which are inherently integrative, has increased significantly in recent years, especially in student-faculty summer research projects.
- The interdisciplinary team-taught Apocalypse Project (with different names in succeeding years) is a notable example of an integrative learning effort, with the goal for "students to develop and apply scientific literacies in an academic setting that blends perspectives from different disciplines" (p. 27).
- Within the co-curriculum, Student Affairs offers a number of programs and opportunities for students to bridge various aspects of their undergraduate experiences. A number of initiatives related to health, wellness, and well-being are quite impressive.
- Skidmore has invested significantly in Career Development to prepare students for life after college.

- The Alumni Learning Census (ALC) is a notable assessment tool for graduates, and the College should be especially proud of graduates' perceptions regarding the importance of writing and the enhancement of their writing skills at Skidmore.

**Non-binding suggestions for improvement:**

The visiting team suggests:

- Skidmore make a “more concerted and deliberate effort to make the concept of integrative learning a regular part of Skidmore’s language” as recommended in the self-study (p. 34), making this more a part of the College’s culture and promoting a clearer understanding of integrative learning, especially for students.
- The College follow its recommendation for "better and more consistent assessment mechanisms for determining where and to what extent integrative learning is taking place at Skidmore" (p. 34). Consistent assessments would provide insight into how to better foster these important interconnections for all students.
- Consideration be given to additional collaborative opportunities between Academic and Student Affairs, such as the inclusion of linkages between the First Year Experience and Residential Life and the Career Development Center.
- Consideration be given to reinstating and/or recreating programmatic offerings oriented around the sophomore experience.
- Engaging all students in reflective opportunities, perhaps through the use of digital portfolios.

### **Chapter III**

#### **Physical and Digital Spaces for Integrative Learning**

**Summary of evidence and findings:**

- The College has made considerable effort to design and build spaces that effectively promote and facilitate integrative learning.
- The Scribner Library, the planned Center for Integrated Sciences, and the Tisch Learning Center provide excellent examples of how the College has supported and aspires to support integrative learning through the design and use of space.
- There is a need for major renovations of some of the academic and co-curricular spaces on campus to foster integrative, interdisciplinary, and collaborative teaching and learning.

**Significant accomplishments:**

The visiting team commends Skidmore College on the following:

- The College has created spaces that are truly interdisciplinary—multiple-use spaces that foster integrative learning, such as the Tang Museum and the Scribner Library. The Library has brought together IT, the Writing Center, English language-learners, and the Center for Leadership, Teaching, and Learning—along with digital collections and preservation.
- The College has developed an ambitious plan for the creation of a Center for Integrated Sciences to support the Science Vision and to promote collaborative and shared learning across the sciences.

**Non-binding suggestions for improvement:**

The visiting team suggests:

- Conducting a space utilization study and developing a campus-wide plan that focuses on spaces that will promote and facilitate integrative learning and provide faculty and staff with opportunities to explore new pedagogies and technologies.
- A continued focus on prioritizing the financing and construction of the Center for Integrated Sciences and communicating progress on this important initiative regularly to the College community.
- Renovations to the Tisch Learning Center to address faculty and student needs for flexible space, the use of technology, and collaboration.

## **Chapter IV Diversity and Inclusion**

**Summary of evidence and findings:**

- The faculty and staff at Skidmore recognize that diversity and inclusion are important aspects of their Goals for Student Learning and Development and are critically important in advancing integrative learning. In exploring these areas in the curriculum and in the co-curriculum, students will not only learn about difference, multiple/intersectional identities and social justice, but they can also strengthen their critical thinking and writing abilities, their verbal communication skills, and their knowledge of ethical perspectives. These aspects of academic learning and skill-building are vital to active participation in a global society and to addressing real-world problems.
- Despite their successful efforts to further diversify the population of students, faculty, and staff at the College and to develop programming to address diversity for the entire campus, the College acknowledges that there are still several areas that need to be addressed to create a more inclusive community.

**Significant accomplishments:**

The visiting team commends Skidmore College on the following:

- The College has experienced a remarkable increase in the diversity of the student body with respect to domestic students of color, international students, first-generation students, and students with high financial need.
- There has been significant and sustained improvement in the faculty search process, including the addition of a diversity advocate on each search committee and special attention given to unconscious bias in faculty hiring.
- Five distinctive programs address a broad range of diversity issues on campus, foster applied, integrative learning, and address the Goals for Student Learning and Development: 1) The Intergroup Relations Program; 2) The Tang Museum ; 3) Bridges to Skidmore ; 4) Study Abroad, including unique European experiences that treat the city as a classroom; and 5) Skidmore Educational Experiences beyond Campus (SEE-Beyond).
- The Intergroup Relations Program (IGR) is the first minor of its kind in the country and builds capacity to discuss matters of racial equity and justice.

### **Non-binding suggestions for improvement:**

The visiting team suggests:

- Centralizing and coordinating the various diversity and inclusion efforts across campus. The new Chief Diversity Officer position should be helpful in providing such centralization and coordination.
- Addressing the need to increase the percentages of ALANA students and faculty on campus, with attention to both recruitment and retention.
- Continued consideration of alternative pathways to diversifying the faculty, including opportunity hires and hiring faculty at advanced rank.
- Consideration of the development of an Africana Studies Program, which would not only provide a strong addition to the curriculum, but could also assist in the recruitment and retention of a more diverse group of faculty and students. Alternatively, Skidmore could consider the development of an Ethnic Studies Program, which would encompass the study of African American, Asian American, Latino, and Native American populations, societies, and cultures.
- Consideration of additional curriculum on the Global South, including courses that focus on African and Middle Eastern societies. The addition of such courses may expand student study-abroad interests and also increase the hiring of international faculty and domestic faculty of color.
- Further exploration of the factors that lead to an “unwelcoming” climate for Latino and African American students, including the classroom environment. With respect to the latter, Skidmore might consider training student-faculty teams to explore how to create more culturally-responsive classrooms. Skidmore might also encourage faculty to engage in “universal design” in the development of their courses and syllabi to meet the needs of all students.
- Including faculty of color and international faculty in discussions to better define and explore the retention-related issues, including the campus climate.
- The encouragement of *all* faculty to participate in new diversity initiatives.
- A focus on representation, persistence, and advancement—and the quality of the campus experience—among all constituencies at the College including faculty, staff, and the Board of Trustees.
- Further exploration of the level of engagement of international students, faculty, and staff in the broader college community; and the development of programming to address their needs more fully and advance their sense of belonging.
- A continuation of the assessment of the many diversity programs on campus and their contributions to the Goals for Student Learning and Development and to integrative learning.

### **Chapter V:**

#### **Responsible Communities: Civic Engagement, Sustainability, and Values and Ethics**

#### **Summary of evidence and findings:**

- Skidmore examined integrative learning efforts through the concept of “responsible communities” which are concerned with the greater good. “Responsible communities” are based upon the premise of an interrelationship between: (1) civic engagement, (2) learning about sustainability, and (3) values and ethics. The College posits that the concept of responsible



communities is inherently integrative, continuously combining theory and practice, connecting values and behaviors, and crossing various disciplines.

- Sustainability is presented as an attractive approach for non-secular institutions to study values and ethics, as such institutions often lack histories and traditions pertaining to values' exploration. As stated on page 70 of the final report, "Our tradition around values is more skeptical than inspired."
- In reviewing multiple sources of data, the faculty and staff at Skidmore concluded that the College has made great gains in civic engagement for students and sustainability for the College as a whole. The team also found evidence that the College is falling short of established goals, especially related to values and ethics.

### **Significant accomplishments:**

The visiting team commends Skidmore College on the following:

- Environmental Studies has grown as a major and minor area of study, and 20 study-abroad programs focus on sustainability.
- The Environmental Action Coalition (EAC) and the Sustainability Committee of SGA are active and vibrant organizations.
- The Skidmore Sustainability Office offers work-study opportunities, internships, volunteering, and service-learning courses—and works to integrate curricular, co-curricular, and campus infrastructure efforts around sustainability.
- With regard to civic engagement, Skidmore has obtained the Carnegie Elective Classification in Community Engagement and was awarded membership in Project Pericles. Last year 57 service-learning courses were offered, with 1,000 students enrolled.
- The restorative justice model, which has been recently embraced in the student conduct process, is in line with the principles of integrative learning, in promoting better and deeper understanding about students' behaviors and their effect on the community.

### **Non-binding suggestions for improvement:**

The visiting team suggests:

- The College endeavor to measure how effectively the Goals for Student Learning and Development are being met across the various sustainability initiatives.
- Academic and Student Affairs engage with the entire campus community in a discussion about where students are learning about values and ethics, and what specifically the content of those lessons is in a secular liberal arts college.

### **Other Findings**

- The College community's passion about the vision and mission of the College is clear in each chapter of the self-study report.
- The faculty and staff at Skidmore College have engaged in intense self-reflection as a means of identifying strengths and areas for improvement with regard to integrative learning.
- The Goals for Student Learning and Development are well aligned to the mission of the College, and appropriate efforts have been made to provide opportunities for students to achieve these learning goals.

- The College is appropriately focused on collecting, analyzing, and using information to make decisions, and engaging all constituencies in decision-making.
- Skidmore seems to struggle with a tension between the value placed on the individual versus the collective community. This tension may play a role in the institution's ability to implement change, and it may also be an important dynamic to take into account as the College moves forward with its initiative on responsible communities.

#### **Non-binding suggestions for improvement:**

The visiting team suggests:

- Consideration of a timeframe shorter than the current 10-year span for academic program external review.
- The identification of clear interrelationships between institutional goals, departmental/program goals, and course-level goals.
- Designation of staff within Student Affairs to facilitate and monitor both institutional and educational assessment efforts within the department.
- Consideration of a technology solution to assist with tracking and reporting of institutional and educational assessment results.

#### **Recommendations**

The visiting team affirms Skidmore College's compliance with the standards for accreditation laid out by Middle States. In areas related to assessment, while Skidmore is in compliance with the relevant standards, the visiting team makes the following recommendations to ensure future compliance and more effective creation of the integrated liberal arts experience Skidmore is well positioned to achieve.

The visiting team recommends that Skidmore College build upon its already strong efforts in the area of student learning assessment by

- Developing a documented, organized, and sustained assessment process to evaluate and improve student learning that:
  - is systematic;
  - includes the collection, analysis, and use of direct evidence of student learning in all academic departments/programs including the general education curriculum;
  - provides clear, realistic guidelines and a timetable, supported by appropriate investment of institutional resources;
  - ensures all academic departments are assessing learning outcomes within the assessment cycle and using data for continuous improvement; and
  - includes a periodic evaluation of the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of the institution's student learning processes.

In addition, the visiting team recommends that Skidmore College:

- Refines its institutional assessment plan to focus on institutional effectiveness and to include a structure, process, and timeline for assessment activities. This plan should enable

continuous improvement, through student learning assessment, as well as assessment of the total range of programs and services, to determine their effectiveness in the achievement of institutional mission, plans, and goals.

## **V: Conclusion**

The visiting team thanks the Skidmore College community for their efforts on their self-study and for their candor throughout the process. We offer this report in the spirit of collegiality and peer review and sincerely hope that the ideas presented will assist Skidmore in furthering its goals. They are intended to help make a truly excellent institution even better.

The next steps of the evaluation process are as follows:

- Skidmore will reply to this team report in a written response addressed to the Commission;
- Janet Riggs, as team chair, will submit a confidential brief to the Commission, summarizing the team report and conveying the team's proposal for accreditation action;
- The Commission staff and the Commission's Committee on Evaluation Reports will review the self-study document, the evaluation team report, Skidmore's formal response, and the team chair's brief to formulate a proposed action to the Commission; and
- The full Commission, after considering the information gathered, will take formal accreditation action and notify Skidmore.