

STRATEGIES FOR THE IMPROVED RETENTION OF STUDENTS

**DRAFT Report to Philip Glotzbach, President, and Charles Joseph, VP for
Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty ~ December 19, 2003**

I. Membership of the Committee on Retention

John Brueggemann (co-chair), Pat Oles (co-chair), Jon Ramsey, Mark Hofmann, Gordon Thompson, Mary Lou Bates, John Young, Ray Rodrigues, Ann Henderson, Joe Stankovich, and Sue Layden as visiting consultant.

II. Charge to the Committee

During spring 2003, FPPC, CEPP, and the President's Staff examined various quality and budgetary issues linked with our overall student census. The central question was whether we could incrementally raise the total average census by 100 students while still preserving, perhaps enhancing, the quality of academic and out-of-classroom life at the College, and whether this growth could be accomplished through improved admissions activity, through the increased retention of students, or a combination of both approaches.

Early in the fall 2003 semester, President Glotzbach asked Dean Joseph and Dean Oles to assemble a group to examine attrition and retention at Skidmore and to report to the President by December 19, 2003. John Brueggemann, Associate Dean of the Faculty, and Pat Oles, Dean of Student Affairs, were asked to lead the discussions. On September 9, the Committee framed its overall goals as follows:

The Retention Group intends to develop initiatives that will maximize the number of students who choose Skidmore, receive a first-rate education, and graduate in a timely fashion. With this basic goal in mind, we will investigate the rates and patterns of "yield" and "retention" in an attempt to identify any factors that systematically shape students' choices. We will also examine the quality of academic life and the quality of social life at Skidmore to discern if there is any relationship to patterns of yield and retention.

We recognized immediately that our ambitious tasks would require us to undertake the following:

- a) Clarify our underlying assumptions about the desirable components of "quality" at Skidmore and about the means for reaching such goals.
- b) Assemble and analyze available data regarding yield and retention and create new data comparisons as well.

- c) Enrich the data with our more anecdotal experience with students as a valuable if less empirical aspect of the retention picture.
- d) Balance our interests in a long-range, far-reaching, and expensive programmatic approach to these questions with a desire to deliver practical suggestions to the President that might achieve more immediate impact.
- e) Link our suggested strategies to a clear assignment of responsibilities in order to implement and assess the results.

Our weekly discussions made increasingly clear that successful, quality-centered retention requires a very broad plan of action, starting with the smart and committed students whom we hope to attract to Skidmore in greater numbers, developing strategies for increasing the yield of such students, attending to the early engagement of our new students with exciting--and often interconnected--academic and co-curricular opportunities at the College, strengthening of the faculty mentoring system (especially to help first and second-year students get connected and to explore their academic, personal, and career aspirations), and facilitating sophomore transitions to the junior year. We also realized that the broader program, with respect to both retention and quality, will require, over time, a dramatic commitment of resources to our residence hall and dining facilities and to our building an after-hours, on-campus social program that is positive and compelling.

Our most immediate recommendations, in section three below (pages 3-6), attempt to define useful steps to take in the short term, while section five (pages 13-22) addresses specific target groups of students. The truth is, however, that there is not always a set of common characteristics within the higher-attrition or lower-achievement “groups” that data itself brings to our attention; thus, the more targeted strategies that we outline in section five might work well for some members of the group but may have only a tenuous link with the needs and interests of others. The largest improvements in retention will probably not derive from such targeting; rather, the biggest gains in retention as well as quality of life are more likely to be the outcome of an ambitious project to improve quality and rigor from the point of admission through graduation, and both inside and outside the classroom. Section six of our report on “Broader Contexts” (pages 23-27) may indeed hold more keys to the challenge before us than some of the target-group suggestions of section five.

***** III. Executive Summary and Priority Recommendations *****

The report which follows in sections IV-VI, and Appendix I, summarize the information gathered about the current retention picture, identify a number of specific groups suggested by the data which could be targeted for both recruitment and retention activity, and focus on both short and long-term strategies that could be applied to enhance the intellectual and social climate within which Skidmore students pursue their academic goals.

Some number of the recommendations can be implemented with minimal fiscal expenditures; however, they cannot be accomplished without the dedication and commitment of faculty and staff to these enterprises – this will mean expenditure of time and energy but will, we hope, result in more positive experiences for both students and faculty/staff. The longer-term initiatives do indeed involve some number of personnel lines, capital projects, and the investment of financial resources, perhaps obtained through campaign pledges and donations. These larger projects also involve a major reinvention of how we interact with our students and what we expect of them. The goal would be to find that we lose very few students who indicate a lack of challenge at Skidmore, and those who do depart before graduation do so grudgingly.

Research gathered for this review reinforces what we knew to begin with: Skidmore's retention rates are less than we would desire and should be, given the quality of the entering student body. We can and should do better. The first place to start is during the recruitment process. The report recommends a series of initiatives that would involve identifying specific candidates who have much to offer the Skidmore community, both in terms of their academic capacities and goals and because of their diligence and commitment, and then engaging with those students during the "courting" phase and into their first years at Skidmore. On the other end of the student life cycle, students leave the College either because they withdraw voluntarily or because they are academically dismissed or are suspended for social misconduct. In teasing out the details of the data, it became clear that specific sub-populations present different stories. For example, students who come from backgrounds similar to HEOP/AOP students but who do not have the advantage of those support programs are much less likely to succeed in the same numbers as their peers; the same is true of international students who are faced with language and culture barriers; women students are much more likely to withdraw; a significant number of sophomores find that they are still unconnected even after three or more semesters; and some number of high achieving students find a lack of challenge in the curriculum or lose patience with an environment that focuses on parties and too often is defined by the few who are bad citizens. The report therefore includes recommendations specific to the problems we believe are associated with a selected number of these populations. In some instances, however, so little is known about the specific needs of these students, further research is proposed as a next step.

Given that fiscal resources are not unlimited and time is an equally precious commodity, the group has elected to focus particular attention on the following major areas for consideration, each of which is then explored in more detail in sections V and VI of the report:

A) High achieving applicants: enlist more faculty (especially) and staff to join Admissions in recruiting high achieving students in various areas of study (and

perhaps leadership accomplishments), applicants whom we particularly want to attract to Skidmore. This would call for an expanded version of the efforts made for Filene and Porter Scholars and for Honors Forum students. The recruitment strategies must, as the report makes clear, be coupled with organized efforts to connect these ambitious students immediately with strong faculty advising and with an individual academic project or learning community. In other words, it's not enough to get them here; we must also connect them with an exciting set of opportunities. (See pages 18-19 of the report.)

B) Non-HEOP/AOP minority students: both to address the higher-than-expected attrition rate of these students and to enhance diversity at Skidmore, we should immediately coordinate our resources in the Dean of Studies Office, HEOP, and Multicultural Affairs to support these students' academic and social needs. (See pages 16-17 of the report.)

C) The pre-major experience: there are a number of relatively short-term things we can do to improve the classroom and residential richness of student experience before the time when students find a niche, often more inspiring and supportive, as they move into their major fields of study (see pages 21-22 of the report):

1. Postpone or rescind admission to some of the students whom we have admitted but whose final high school records then force us to re-evaluate their offer of admission (those postponed could be obligated to earn grades of B in two courses at another institution in order to have their acceptance restored);
2. Develop a more intellectually and socially challenging orientation in September, one that introduces new students to the highest expectations and the exciting opportunities of our learning community;
3. Elevate the importance and effectiveness of the faculty mentoring system for first-year students—an activity that should be linked with first-term courses and is assessed and rewarded;
4. Direct staff in the Dean of Studies Office to explore with appropriate staff and faculty the experience of pre-major students, especially sophomores, in order to develop a more engaging set of opportunities and anticipations for these “in between” students (whom we too often lose to drift, attrition, or bad behavior);
5. Develop more intentional housing assignments (by fall 2005) for new students in theme houses, within learning communities directed by faculty and staff teams, and in some cases according to class year;
6. Charge CEPP to rekindle discussions of academic standards and expectations, including a discussion of the role and impact of student evaluations on standards; then recommend changes to CAPT;
7. Recommend to Admissions and CASA that we consider no longer requiring SAT scores as part of the application process, since the current

version of the SAT (to be changed for the high school class of 2006) is in fact a poorer predictor of academic performance at Skidmore than high school GPA;

8. Recommend to the Committee on Academic Standing that the CAS offer fewer waivers of minimal continuation standards and/or require more leave/waivers (so that poor performing students can show their readiness to rejoin Skidmore by earning good grades for a semester at another college). Also link some of the waiver decisions with the student's social record at the College.

D) Campus social life: while much of the improvement in campus atmosphere will come with long-term programmatic and capital investments, there are some things that we could accomplish quickly. We need in general to create a late-night campus environment that is active in positive respects while the students work and socialize through the hours long after staff and faculty have gone home (see pages 23-27 of the report):

1. Extend the hours of the Sports Center so that students can use the fitness and recreational facilities longer into the evening and for longer on the weekends;
2. Develop more late-night programming on campus that coincides with the hours when students are most active (ca. 10 p.m. to 3 a.m.);
3. In a similar vein, establish "4th meal" resources on campus for students during their especially active hours (ca. 10 p.m. to 3 a.m.).
4. Interrogate the effects derived (for the individual and for the community at large) from quicker and/or more abundant dismissals or suspensions of bad-behaving students, in contrast to a more developmental approach to ameliorating the poor behavior without separating the student from the College. Further, how many of the behavioral issues will disappear once we have cultivated a more challenging Skidmore environment?

The report also presents a discussion of the larger question of community at Skidmore. The section entitled "Broader Contexts" (pages 23-27) tackles a series of issues surrounding how campus social life might be more closely tied to the classroom experience. The proposed changes discussed in this section emphasize that these two components of students' lives need to work in tandem, and in particular, the social dimensions of campus life need to be modified in order to both "confront students who are not motivated to perform up to their potential" and provide healthy and reasonable alternatives to the party scene. The recommendations here echo the discussions CEPP members have been having about the first-year experience and the ways in which faculty members can both model and mentor what is most desirable in student behaviors. Residential options that have clear adult presences could be tied to curricular offerings; residence halls can also include spaces for academic pursuits, and programming within the halls can encourage links between course work and out-of-classroom endeavors; recreational programs that are accessible and available can make a major difference in student choices for what they do with unscheduled time; and experiential learning options

earlier in students' careers, coupled with interactions with junior and senior level students who are engaged in serious work, can connect students in ways with which we have little experience to date. These recommendations, therefore, are intended to contribute to the larger conversation that is under way and dovetail with other proposals.

IV. Summary of the Data and Target Groups

A) What We Know About Admissions Yield: Enrolling the Best Students

The Admissions Office has developed two rating measures to identify the strongest possible candidates for acceptance. The Academic Quality Rating (AQR) originally combined such factors as the high school GPA, SAT scores, the quality of the high school attended, participation in enrichment opportunities such as honors programs or college course work available to high school students, and guidance counselor recommendations. In Fall 2003, the SAT variable was removed from the AQR in order to track each variable independently. Students with the highest SAT scores now may not necessarily have the highest AQR scores. The Personal Quality Rating (PQR) includes such items as the student's active role in high school clubs and organizations, volunteer activities, leadership roles in school or community organizations, and any other activities that would identify the student as having the kinds of social and citizenship qualities welcomed at Skidmore.

The AQR is the primary variable used in tracking yield--i.e., enrollment after the offer of admission. Presumably students with higher AQR scores will be likely to get offers at competitor institutions and may be less likely to enroll at Skidmore unless they feel that Skidmore offers them a unique opportunity for challenge and engagement. Over the past three years, the yield rate in the AQR-10 (the highest) category has increased from 5.6% to 8.6%. However, yield rates on spring 2003 offers in nearly all the other AQR categories decreased, thus moving the overall yield rate down to 14.8%--down from 17.4% the year before. Even the yield of AQR-6 candidates dropped from 43.3% to 28.3%, making yield predictions for the fall 2004 difficult. Yield rates by AQR for students offered financial aid awards are higher in every AQR group when compared to those who have no need or do not apply for aid. No-need students who are academically successful have their choice of institution, and thus are difficult to enroll. As an example, the yield on non-need AQR-10 students was a mere 6% in 2003, while the yield on AQR-10 aided students was 15%. Clearly aid is a factor in enrolling the most desirable candidates who require financial assistance. On the other hand, the yield rate on females with a 10 AQR rating was 10% while the yield on male AQR-10 students was under 4%. The yield on AQR-10 multicultural students (a much sought after group) was also under 4%, and the yield on recruited AQR-10 athletes (the scholar-athletes we hope to bring to campus) was 0%. Clearly there is progress to be made in these arenas.

Another factor in determining the make-up of the class is the number of enrolled students lost over the summer. Known as "summer melt," anywhere from 7% to 12% of the class withdraws before classes begin. If this number could be reduced, fewer students would need to be accepted, increasing selectivity. Various strategies are employed to increase yield, all of which center on connecting the student to the institution in positive ways, and the earlier the better. Students who make the effort to come to the campus, interview, stay overnight, or participate in a special program may already be disposed to enroll, so it is difficult to know if the relationship is causal, but students who engage in these activities are more likely to enroll.

The increasing importance of the internet as a source of information about the institution adds complexity when attempting to influence candidates' decisions. For the Fall 2003 recruitment season, over 1200 of the approximately 5900 applicants had no official

contact with the Admissions Office prior to applying. This illustrates the increasing role of the web in disseminating information. The yield rate on this group was a healthy 21%.

Priority action would be to focus attention on increasing yield in the top AQR categories, probably without the SAT scores included, and to increase yield overall, since the AQR or high school GPA is the best identified predictor of the Skidmore GPA (while the SAT by itself is not very predictive of academic success or retention). Indeed, the Retention Committee recommends that CASA consider a shift in policy regarding the SAT and the Skidmore admissions process. For too long the SAT has been regarded as the benchmark for college admissions. Our own data suggest, however, that both the high school performance and our Academic Quality Rating (with the SAT removed) are better predictors of success at Skidmore. Removing the SAT as a required element of the admission application may have several positive effects. The admission staff would rely more heavily on the high school record in assessing a student's application. In addition, we might attract more high ability students who have not performed well on the SAT.

B) What We Know About Retention and Attrition at Skidmore College

~ The General Picture

Like all higher education institutions, the College is required to track the completion rates of student cohorts, using federal methodology. Each fall semester, the Institutional Research Office (IR) identifies the entering first-time/full-time matriculated students for that term and then uses this group as the basis for calculating the retention statistics known as "cohort survival" and "graduation rate." Given the possibility of medical or personal leaves, withdrawal and readmission, and other unforeseen circumstances, not all students complete within the more typical four-year time frame. The College therefore reports a six-year survival rate, the figure used for comparison with other institutions. Historically, approximately 10% of a given entering cohort does not return for the sophomore year, and another 7% to 9% fails to return in the junior year. Skidmore's six-year graduation rate for the Class of 1999 was 77% (Skidmore's rate has tended to fluctuate between 75% and 80%), below the median rate of 80% for the new 17-college peer group. Only five of those seventeen peer schools had graduation rates lower than Skidmore's for that year. Skidmore's five **aspirant** colleges with a median graduation rate of 90%, routinely report graduation rates 10-15% higher than Skidmore.

The retention rate of students early on appears to be negatively influenced when the incoming class is relatively large. Because our two most recent experiences with this phenomenon were the result of an unexpectedly higher yield on admissions offers, quality of life issues in the residence halls and class availability were difficult to control, and more students transferred to other institutions—for example, 11.3% of the 643 students who entered in Fall 1999 left after the first year. Equally disturbing is the trend noted for sophomores, students who should be moving into the major and therefore experiencing a stronger academic focus and connection to the institution by that point in their undergraduate careers. Yet we lose 7% - 9% of these students in the transition from sophomore to junior year. As is the case at many colleges, we currently give little organized attention to the issues and interests of sophomores and need to do so.

~ Sub Group Differences

In analyzing regression models utilizing data from six entering class years, several variables were identified that best predicted voluntary withdrawal, disqualification, and cumulative Skidmore GPA. Athletes were found to be much less likely to voluntarily withdraw from Skidmore, perhaps explained by their strong connection to the institution and teammates fostered by participation in a team sport. Beyond that finding, AQR score and sex were the two strongest predictors of withdrawal, disqualification, and Skidmore GPA. Students with higher AQR scores, most specifically those with a score of 10, were more likely to remain enrolled and had higher grades. This finding is further discussed in the next section – Quality Indicators. Female students are much more likely to voluntarily withdraw, whereas male students are more likely to be disqualified, even when controlling for other input variables measuring aptitude and academic achievement. Withdrawing students, both male and female, are similar to graduating students when comparing SAT and Academic Quality Rating (AQR) scores and not controlling for other factors; therefore it is unlikely that lack of ability is a primary reason for departure. However, withdrawing female students often report when surveyed a greater dissatisfaction with the lack of diversity on campus as well as problems associated with cliques that make forming friendships more difficult. The reported lack of campus social options is another often-cited reason for withdrawal.

In looking at withdrawal and graduation rates by ethnic background, it became clear that participation in the HEOP program needed to be included as a factor in the analysis. Being part of the HEOP program greatly reduces the odds of either withdrawal or disqualification for all participants. Graduation rates of program students often exceed 90%. One can probably credit the combined effect of adequate financial aid, targeted academic and social support, intervention strategies, and the communal aspects of the program for this success. When HEOP students are excluded from the calculations, non-white students are disqualified at a rate twice that of the white students; however, the withdrawal rate is only slightly lower than that found for white students. This greater disqualification rate contributes to a lower graduation rate for non-HEOP/AOP, non-white students. Of the cohort reviewed (five class years), 23% of those disqualified or administratively separated were non-white, an over-representative figure given that only 12-14% of the campus population including HEOP students is identified as being of color.

In particular, African American students not participating in the HEOP/AOP program had significantly lower graduation rates than similarly classified HEOP students. Although the numbers are small, the four-year graduation rate average of 65% for this group compares poorly to the 91% rate for black HEOP students—a remarkable distinction, given that the HEOP students are by definition less well prepared for college level work at the point of entry and less able to handle the financial stresses of attendance at a school like Skidmore. In addition, 23% of the black, non-HEOP population was dismissed or disqualified, as compared with 0% of the black HEOP group.

Another group of concern is the international students. These students withdraw at a much higher rate than the population as a whole (29.3% versus 19.5%) and are disqualified or dismissed at a higher rate as compared with the entire population (9.8% versus 4.8%)—leading to a mere 61% graduation rate, even lower than the non-HEOP African American students. Asian students are the only other group with a below-

average graduation rate (73%), and although this difference is slight, and the result of only a slightly higher disqualification rate, it runs counter to national trends, where Asian students either rival or surpass their white peers in degree attainment.

~ Quality Indicators

Once at Skidmore, the institutional GPA is the best-identified predictor of withdrawal, and obviously disqualification. Students with higher GPAs are less likely either to withdraw or be disqualified. The relationship between GPA and departure is largely a result of students in the bottom quintile of Skidmore GPA. Students with a cumulative Skidmore GPA less than 2.77 are much more likely to be disqualified or to withdraw. The fact that students with lower GPAs are asked to leave is no surprise; however, the fact that graduating students had higher GPAs when compared with withdrawn students seemed to run counter to commonly articulated concerns that we lose a considerable number of our best students. This may be explained by the fact that junior and senior students, as a whole, have higher cumulative averages, and withdrawing students perhaps do not stay at the institution long enough to show the effect of taking courses in the major or of mastering study and research skills. Nevertheless, withdrawing female students do have SAT scores that are, on average, 10 points higher than graduating females. No difference was noted for males. Whatever the disparities may be between community perceptions and the data, it is still appropriate to say that any loss of high-achieving students is less than desirable, and more attention needs to be paid to challenging these students early on in their Skidmore careers.

Looking at variables from admissions reports, overall, students voluntarily withdrawing from Skidmore have similar mean SAT and AQR scores to those who graduate. However, disqualified students have AQR scores a full point lower than graduates, despite similar SAT scores. The AQR score is the best predictor of disqualification as well as voluntary withdrawal when holding other incoming variables constant. On the other hand, higher SAT scores appear to predict a greater likelihood of departure.

Qualitative research recently conducted by professors Susan Walzer and Patricia Colby's research classes uncovered a group of students characterized as "smart slackers": i.e., students whose SAT scores would normally predict academic success but who, for one reason or another do not put sufficient effort into their academic work. These students are less likely to engage with their classes or instructors, and may contribute in negative ways to the overall student climate. In an attempt to investigate possible measures for identifying these students, the I.R. Office examined the records of Fall 2002 entering students with SAT scores in the top quartile of their Skidmore class and with high school GPAs in the bottom quartile of the entering class. Though small in number (around 30 students), this group is much more likely to be male (70%) and white, but have AQR scores similar to the class as a whole. These students do have a lower first-year cumulative GPA as compared with other first-year students, but the first-year withdrawal rate for the smart slackers is lower than those not in the group. (The Walzer/Colby research revealed that these students were often "comfortable" with "getting by" and found it easy to do so.) A Skidmore transcript review for this group of students revealed, however, a wide range of grade patterns, with some students earning very good grades right away, others hitting their stride after a dismal first semester, and others with a very mixed picture of good and bad terms. A subsequent look at students who had a difference in predicted GPA and Skidmore GPA of at least two standard deviations had a

wide range of SAT scores. Thus we suggest that more research is needed if we are to predict and act upon the smart slacker syndrome. Whatever may be the number of such students at Skidmore and the probably diverse reasons for their sloughing off, we need to identify ways to improve or at least stabilize their level of academic involvement.

In addition, a few students each year are identified by Admissions as being at risk as entering students. These students had positive high school records, were accepted and enrolled, but during the last semester of high school showed a decline in performance for one reason or another. Admissions identified the names of the students who were placed in one of three categories in each of the past three years: those showing a decline but not sufficient to warrant any action on the part of Skidmore; those who were sent a letter of warning but who were not required to respond; and those who were sent a letter and required to respond in writing, explaining how they will approach their studies at Skidmore (they are also required to meet early in the term with the Dean of Studies Office to review the academic plan of action, Skidmore expectations, and support services). These students, in the second and third groups, are known to our offices as “Bates Letter” students and do surface in disqualification reviews now and again. A review of the GPAs of the three groups showed that the students in the middle group (i.e., the mid-range of poor performance in the last term of high school) performed the worst of the three. Starting spring 2004, both groups that receive letters of concern from Admissions will be required to respond. (Again we would stress that the three groups of students represent a very small number; thus it is hard to make valid distinctions among their performance levels at Skidmore.)

C) Why Students Leave: Identified Problems

~ Social Environment

Six of the nine most frequently cited reasons for voluntary departure from Skidmore center on social and general campus environment concerns. The following issues top the list of reasons given by withdrawn students for leaving:

1. Lack of diversity and the perceived isolation of Saratoga
2. Preference for a larger university setting
3. Difficulty finding a social group where the student feels that he/she “fits in”
4. Campus social life defined as too focused on alcohol/drugs/partying
5. On-campus social life not what had been expected
6. Inability to find co-curricular activities of interest

Students tend to transfer to larger institutions in more urban settings (for example, NYU and Boston University), places where they feel they can find more activities and groups of compatible interests. Even students who do not leave complain about peers who are unengaged, residence halls that are difficult to study in, and behaviors and values inconsistent with their own.

~ *Academic Environment*

Withdrawn students completing the Withdrawn Student Survey do indicate some concerns about academic issues:

1. Variety of courses too limited
2. Peers less motivated academically than they would like
3. Sometimes not challenged enough academically, and courses not sufficiently stimulating.

Because the survey respondents are more likely to be both female and in the higher GPA categories, these responses are not necessarily surprising. Anecdotal evidence from interviews with withdrawing students suggests that some students who transfer for social reasons are willing to make the tradeoffs to get into an environment that is more diverse and urban. Many of these students praise the Skidmore faculty and indicate that they miss the personal attention and interactions they had with their instructors, but they indicate they are happy with their new settings, often saying that they can find more students like themselves as well as activities that meet their social requirements.

Accepted students completing the Admitted Student Questionnaire first associate such characteristics as “friendly,” “fun,” and “comfortable” with the Skidmore image. Secondly, they indicate such terms as “intellectual,” “challenging,” and “selective.” Further, students admitted for fall 2001 viewed Skidmore as even less challenging and more comfortable than students entering five years earlier. This may be an effect of an increasingly capable pool of students from which we draw enrolled students. First-year students in particular noted a combination of higher importance but lower satisfaction ratings for such items as the College community’s acceptance of different lifestyles/backgrounds, on-campus social life, a sense of community on campus, and faculty advising. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results reinforce these findings, with first-year student responses disappointingly low for many items associated with academic and social support, advising, and academic challenge.

Unexpectedly, the “choice ranking” of Skidmore by enrolled students (Skidmore as first choice, second choice, etc.) appears to be unrelated to the likelihood of withdrawing. In an initial analysis, limited by cohort size, the assumption that students who rank Skidmore as less than their first choice would be more likely to transfer from Skidmore was unsupported. However, in that study, disqualified students were more likely to report that Skidmore was not their first choice. These tentative findings will need to be tested again with additional data as it becomes available.

V. The Target Groups: Strategies, Costs, and Timeline

As suggested above, we sifted through a great many data comparisons, including AQR and SAT yield and performance rates, students in academic difficulty (probations and waivers), attrition in different class years, students achieving at middle and higher academic levels, gender and ethnicity distinctions, the performance and retention of athletes, the performance of Bates-letter admits, and CIRP, NSSE, and Withdrawn Student Survey data. The available evidence helped us center our most immediate recommendations regarding yield, engagement, and retention on the following groups and determined the attention needed for each.

For the purposes of this report,

- **yield** means actually enrolling more of the talented and diligent (and also diverse) students whom we want to come to Skidmore;
- **engagement** means connecting these students (indeed, all students) to the best aspects of our academic and co-curricular life, and doing so as early as possible in the student's career;
- **retention** means helping the students we enroll to stay with us and graduate;
- **success** means helping the students reach higher levels of academic and co-curricular achievement, including when they consider graduate schools, graduate fellowships, and career pathways.

The possible target groups identified by our data comparisons and direct experience with Skidmore students include:

1. non-HEOP/AOP minority students **(a priority)**
2. international students **(a priority)**
3. students on academic probation or "waiver" of minimal continuation standards, and Bates-letter students **(a priority)**
4. under-achieving students (for example, the students identified as "smart slackers" in the Student Cultures Research conducted by Susan Walzer and Patricia Colby)
5. high achieving special recruits--for example, Porter, Filene, and Honors Forum candidates **(a priority)**
6. slotted athletes
7. women students who are dissatisfied with the campus environment
8. pre-major students **(a priority)**
9. students seeking a broader educational venue and facilities **(a priority)**

(See the tabular summary below of target groups and recommended actions)

Student Group	Yield	Engagement	Retention	Success
Non-HEOP Minority students	X	X	X	X
International students	X	X	X	X
Probation and Waiver students		X		X
Under- achieving students		X		X
High achieving students	X	X	X	
Slotted Athletes		X	X	X
Women		X	X	
Pre-Major students		X	X	X
Students seeking broader opportunities		X	X	

There are clearly several ways of grouping the various target populations identified above, and the categories sometimes overlap as well:

1. those enrolled students whom we lose in disproportionate numbers: non-HEOP minorities, international students, women students, students experiencing academic difficulty, students seeking more diversity of academic and social experience, and sophomores in general
2. students whose numbers we want to increase at Skidmore and whose engagement we want to encourage: high achieving students, minority students, and international students
3. students under whom we want to light a fire and whom we want to retain only if they contribute more successfully to the academic tenor of the College: smart low achievers and students on probation and waiver

Accompanying such targets for attention are two questions:

1. *Should we do more to engage the lower achieving (often male) student and enlist more faculty and staff resources to recruit and yield the diligent and higher achieving student?*
2. *Once the students are enrolled, how much staff and faculty time should be committed to the student who is underperforming and/or engaged in behaviors detrimental to the campus climate?*

The Retention Committee is more inclined toward attracting and retaining the talented, diligent, and well-behaved student and creating an environment and policies less tolerant of the student who often acts out badly or who drifts into academic failure through his or (less often) her own demerits. The College would be better served by letting go of the severely underperforming student through the disqualification process and the bad-behaving student through

suspension or dismissal. Such cutting of our losses would release more time for us to attract and engage the midrange and high-performing students and (by the absence of the few) improve the quality of campus life for students in general.

The next seven pages offer recommendations regarding selected target groups for improved retention and success (and see appendix I as well).

Target Group A: Non-HEOP/AOP Minority Students

We need more study of these students' admissions profiles and interests and the issues that make them less successful than we would like. In general, the non-HEOP minority students whom we admit (around 50-75 each year) have AQR and SAT scores that fall between HEOP/AOP and regular admits. The reality of their weaker entering profiles argues for a support structure. At the current time we provide no special academic support and only modest social support to these students. Thus their entering scores over-predict their GPA outcomes at Skidmore, while HEOP/AOP students' entering profiles under-predict their performance and persistence to graduation.

Assuming a population of 75 entering non-HEOP students, we should develop a program that emulates the HEOP/AOP structure. Identify these students as "Scribner Scholars" or "Skidmore Scholars," and stress their potential for growth and achievement rather than their disadvantages and deficits. (Given the national data on SAT scores for minority students, these students are likely to score in the top quintile for their racial/ethnic backgrounds—therefore the label of "scholar" is appropriate.) The program will require special admissions screening to locate the minority students of best potential, a summer bridge program, and ongoing academic and social support. The key resources will be faculty time (primarily for the bridge program), increased administrative staff, and more office space. Like HEOP, the program will be mandatory to those admitted under its auspices, but participation will be largely co-extensive with the larger campus (as it is in HEOP).

Costs: the office space for one additional staff person can perhaps be done with minimal construction within the HEOP space (say at a cost of \$5,000). Three additional faculty members to teach in the one-week summer bridge program will cost \$3,000. Two full-time staff members will be $\$40,000 \times 2 = \$80,000$ annually. Student costs for the one-week summer bridge program will be $\$900 \times 75 \text{ students} = \$67,500$. We should add an additional \$500 per student for supplies and activities each year ($\times 75 = \$37,500$). Thus the total annual projected cost for the extended HEOP/AOP model is approximately \$188,000, not including the one-time capital expense.

Some of these costs may be off-set through other means. We may be able to secure a grant to help defray the costs of the summer program. Depending on the number of these students who are New York State residents, there will be State Education Department funds available for student aid (though NYS support becomes less reliable each year). In addition, if the typical graduation rates for HEOP (90% plus) hold up for the extended AOP, compared to the non-HEOP minority students (about 73%) and the general student body (about 75%), we stand to gain in terms of lower attrition rates. This could involve direct savings and indirect benefits to stability and diversity.

Timeline: recruit first class 2004-5; hire staff and create office space 2004-5; hold first enhanced bridge program during summer 2005.

Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs works with HEOP Director, Dean of Studies Office, Multicultural Student Affairs, and coordinates with Admissions.

Target Group B: High Achieving Special Recruits

Currently this cohort includes Porter Scholars and Honors Forum students. The Filene Scholars are usually high achieving as well, though they are selected primarily for their talents in music. The Honors Forum and Filene students already receive the type of faculty attention during recruitment and after they are enrolled that we would like to see provided to other recruited groups as well. The faculty who attend to the Porter Scholars are rapidly developing a strengthened support structure for these students. Our central recommendations are that we both expand our targeted recruitments of high achieving students in various fields of endeavor and commit ourselves to providing stimulating opportunities to these students once they arrive on campus (a follow-up plan that Skidmore often fails to provide). Especially powerful during recruitment is our showing subsets of students that we value them, want them to join us for particular reasons, and will offer an exciting link or project once they arrive (some schools define a student-faculty collaboration before the student arrives on campus).

For example, the Science Planning Group is considering means of both attracting more of the Porter candidates to Skidmore (there are 180 of them) and for engaging the designated Porter Scholars in a science research project in the first or second-term of study, and/or connecting them quickly with senior-level science students as peer mentors.

Recruitment and engagement strategies of the Porter sort should be applied to other high achieving applicants as well. For example, while the Honors Forum students currently receive special phone calls and letters from faculty, a formal welcoming ceremony, and a first-semester class that brings them together (HF101), increasing numbers of these students want a research project in their first or second term of study. Many of the students have already done serious research in high school, and some have won regional or national recognition for their work.

We believe that a similar model of faculty outreach for recruitment, and engagement after enrollment, should be applied to other target groups of high-achieving applicants to Skidmore. We could undoubtedly identify other desirable applicants in the humanities and social sciences. If our pilot efforts for recruiting in various disciplines prove successful, we anticipate that other academic departments and programs will be eager to commit energy to enhance their own cohorts of new students.

Timeline: engage more faculty in recruitment efforts with Admissions during spring 2004 (for the Class of 2008). Establish a goal of recruiting 10 new high achieving students for fall 2004 and 30 for fall 2005.

Costs: for each targeted group we project the following expenses: \$100 to each faculty member who helps Admissions in recruiting top students (letters, phone calls, and in some cases direct interactions); \$300 to each faculty member who sponsors a first-year independent study or research project; \$300 of Skidmore Shop credit for each student; funds to support more social interactions with the targeted students throughout the first year at Skidmore (\$75 per student).

We recommend a start-up program involving 30 *First-Year Research Fellows*. This model would cost \$1000 for faculty recruitment efforts (10 faculty), \$9000 for faculty sponsorship of research projects, \$9000 for the bookstore credits, and \$2250 for various student activities—for an annual total of \$22,500.

Responsibility: Admissions, the Dean of Faculty Office, Dean of Studies Office

Target Group C: International Students:

All of the SEVIS (visa compliance) and social support currently provided by Skidmore to international students (and much academic advice as well), depends on perhaps 5% of one staff person (Barbara Opitz) in the Dean of Studies Office. We need both to provide more support to this at-risk population and to increase their numbers on campus (current total census of international students is 22 if we count those needing an F1 visa; we also have others with permanent US residency and/or dual citizenship, and US students who live abroad). We propose a one-third-time staff position to coincide with increased recruitment of international students as part of our diversity agenda—with a suggested census of 70 (F1) international students by fall 2006. This person can coordinate resources among Admissions, Dean of Studies, International Programs, alumni, and parents. We need ESL expertise as well, both for some of our international students and some minority students. The ESL person could provide direct support and also train a cadre of student (or staff) tutors to enhance our ESL support structure. We envision a three-day special orientation program for the international students and ongoing support for their academic and social needs—to include a systematic involvement of international students with the IA program and with study abroad students. We believe we could also draw upon some staff volunteers to help mentor the international students. Other ongoing needs include preparing faculty to anticipate the different perspectives required to address non-US students in their classrooms; increasing financial aid to international students; creating events for international students during, for example, Parents Weekend and the Thanksgiving break; addressing the resistance of some international cultures to seek counseling or other help; linking our international students with other international populations in the Capital region; and providing more reliable storage space for international students and housing during the break periods. We can attract highly qualified international students if we dedicate \$350,000 in financial aid to this group (10-12 students @\$35,000).

Timeline: begin enhanced orientation for our 12-15 new international students by fall 2004. By fall 2006 have a total census of 70 international (F1) students on campus, with 20 engaged in the summer program

Costs: when recruitment has fully evolved, provide a three-day special orientation program for 20 students each summer = \$8500; ongoing annual program support = \$5000 (based on a total census of 70 international students); external provider of ESL tutoring = \$15,000; one-third staff commitment to international students = \$14,000. Thus the total annual cost (with the census increased over time to 80 students) = \$42,500. The financial aid amounts to \$350,000 annually.

Responsibility: support after admission could remain linked with the Dean of Studies Office or be centered in the Office of International Programs—in each model coordinating with Admissions, the Director of the Intercultural Center (if this position is filled), and with the Office of International Programs.

Target Group D: Pre-Major Students, Sophomores in Transition

As the data shows, after we lose 9-10% of the first-year class, we lose another 8-9% of the sophomores. There is a good deal of literature on so-called “sophomore slump” and on transition and retention programs for sophomores. Skidmore has never undertaken a systematic study of these students and never assigned any person the responsibility for addressing sophomore issues. So some degree of progress should not be hard in this area. (We would not want, however, to see resources diverted from the very critical need to build an exciting academic, social, and advising program for first-year students.) The in-betweenness of sophomores may suggest their malaise: they are no longer newbies at college but not yet very mature; they are figuring out their academic, life, and career interests but not yet moving along an established path; they are approaching some exciting possibilities for majors and study abroad but perhaps not seeing that far ahead; and while they may feel they have paid their dues, they have not yet reached “seniority” for the more attractive course and residence hall choices.

Strategies might include the following:

- Develop faculty mentoring strategies that help sophomores imagine and pursue their emerging interest in majors, internship, study abroad, and career pathways—to say nothing of other critical life choices;
- Highlight through the Office of International Programs the study abroad options that welcome sophomore students;
- Develop some peer research teams to explore sophomore interests;
- Appoint a member of Student Affairs or of the Dean of Studies Office to spend a percentage of his or her time with the literature regarding sophomores, developing advising and other strategies, and organizing focus groups of and activities for sophomores;
- Improve the residential facilities for all students—part of which is to eliminate the sophomore ghetto of Moore Hall;
- Improve the on-campus facilities and social program for all students;
- Highlight summer internship and other summer opportunities for the rising sophomore and rising junior.

Timeline: pursue planning conversations during the 2004-2005 academic year and launch a program by fall 2005.

Costs: this might require another half-time position (\$16,000) or faculty release time (\$8000) if we cannot find a person on Student Affairs or in the Dean of Studies Office who can start devoting significant time to sophomore issues. The costs for improved residential and other social facilities are covered in another section.

Responsibility: shared responsibilities among the Dean of Student Affairs, Dean of Studies Office, and Dean of the Faculty Office.

Target Group E: Students Seeking a Bigger and More Diverse Environment

Information from the Withdrawn Student Survey suggests that the very qualities that drew some students to Skidmore morph into their reasons for seeking more cosmopolitan and diverse environments, especially universities or colleges located near or in a large city (see page seven of this report). Skidmore's coherence and familiarity as a small community, and the quickly-mastered resources of Saratoga Spring, no longer offer a large enough world. If one adds to this view the dissatisfactions expressed with the quality of social life on campus and with co-curricular opportunities and facilities (also on page seven), one sees why some number of students strike out for new territory.

CEPP discussions are, we believe, on the right track: Skidmore needs to recast itself less as a "destination" and more as a "portal" for exploring larger venues in the US and in countries abroad. That many, many Skidmore faculty incorporate larger-world perspectives in their courses is unmistakable. Our location in Saratoga, however, offers more pastoral pleasures than opportunities to encounter the artifacts, events, and people that represent the life beyond our 400 acres.

The central strategies for informing and satisfying our students' expanding horizons are being addressed by CEPP and its subgroups. We recommend some or all of the following:

- Expanded study abroad opportunities for more students in more class years;
- Rapid growth in Skidmore-sponsored short-term programs that provide anchoring components (in effect, field trips) for the more conceptual and inward-focused activity of the classroom;
- A more attractive marshalling of our extensive internship possibilities, including at-cost summer internship credits;
- A systematic extension of our affiliations and partnerships with organizations in the US (for example, visiting student partnerships with a university in Boston and in NYC, affiliation with an historically black college, affiliation with Native American and Hispanic schools and organizations, semester-long internships with environmental, science-research, and social and political activists, and affiliations with major museums.)

The on-campus environment of enriched social and co-curricular facilities and opportunities is addressed in the next section of our report.

Timeline: planning in 2003-2004 and implementation beginning 2004-2005.

Costs: undetermined at this time, except that the extension of study abroad is covered by revenues projected by the Office of International Programs.

Responsibility: CEPP, Career Services, Dean of the Faculty, Dean of Student Affairs, Dean of Studies, Special Programs.

VI. Broader Contexts for Student Recruitment, Engagement, Success, and Retention

This is the time to recall earlier cautions regarding the target groups for improved retention contrasted with the “big picture” of the campus environment. In the final analysis, retention and quality issues depend more on long-term improvements in attitudes, behaviors, opportunities, and facilities than on discrete programs centered on various subgroups. Recall too that most of the withdrawn students’ stated reasons for leaving Skidmore reflect their concerns over an inadequate social, co-curricular, and, to a lesser degree, academic environment:

- Lack of diversity and the perceived isolation of Saratoga
- Preference for a larger university setting
- Difficulty finding a social group where the student feels that he/she “fits in”
- Campus social life defined as too focused on alcohol/drugs/partying
- On-campus social life not what had been expected
- Inability to find co-curricular activities of interest
- Peers less motivated academically than they would like

Here are our reflections on this very complex topic.

Community is an elusive concept with varied meanings, but community is critical to satisfaction, persistence, and accomplishment. It involves a sense of belonging, commitment to shared values and purposes, participation in meaningful ritual and celebration, and a concern for the common good. The negative opinions *withdrawn* students express on various measures of social satisfaction *reflect our failure to involve them in the community at Skidmore and insufficient attention to programs that build and support community life.*

Following the demise of *in loco parentis* in the mid 1970s, Skidmore adopted a more hands-off approach to residential and social programming, an approach that encouraged students to make their own decisions and to reap the rewards of adult self-governance and suffer the consequences as well. This value system, conceived as promoting the students’ emerging adulthood, led to student staff in the residence halls, student control over the student activity fee, and meager investments in social and recreational space and programming. The fiscal challenges the College faced at the time—moving from the downtown to the new campus and developing a first-rate academic program—and students’ preoccupation with their rights were closely aligned, and until recently the system was satisfactory.

Nearly thirty years later in Skidmore’s history, however, as we look at the problems with retention, the negative impact campus culture has on intellectual tone and accomplishment, and the interests of our finest students, we see a need for *a more authoritative institutional stance coupled with a greater investment in the social and residential program.*

Although there is much to admire about student life at Skidmore—a tradition of student leadership, active clubs and organizations, a close relationship with Saratoga Springs, and a campus that literally sings with creative expression--the College faces several important challenges. We must strengthen the link between the academic and residential program, especially for first and second-year students, close Moore Hall and complete the move to the “new” campus, and expand our residential capacity to bring the students living in off-campus apartments back to the campus. We must also confront a student culture that at

times impedes engagement and detracts from excellence. We must improve social and recreational facilities so they more effectively support community life. We must also modernize the dining facilities.

Over the past decade, CEPP and other faculty groups have repeatedly discussed rigor and the level of “comfort” or support students require. The report of the Subcommittee on Academic Excellence dated April 1995 stated, “a certain sense of complacency in requiring less than demanding levels of study exists because the community as a whole is not endorsing a more rigorous approach. Are we really asking all of our students in all of our classes to stretch, to struggle, to confront difficulties squarely?” The Distillation Report (2001) identified nurturing versus challenging as one of three issues Skidmore needed to balance better. The proposed academic vision echoes these themes: “we should also become more willing to confront students who are not motivated to perform up to their intellectual potential. Establishing a higher degree of academic excellence will demand an increased sense of responsibility for both faculty and students.” The NSSE is a new survey, but the findings confirm what admissions and anecdotal data have shown for several years: Skidmore is attracting better, more committed students, and in turn those students are demanding a rigorous and challenging academic program.

The residential program must confront the same questions Academic Affairs is asking. Is Skidmore requiring enough from students? Is the Honor Code rigorously enforced? Are the residence halls decorous enough to permit study, creative work, and quiet reflection? Does community life at Skidmore promote personal responsibility and active citizenship? Is a concern with nurturance, support, personal attention, and student satisfaction diverting attention from a more fundamental concern with growth and responsibility?

The general goals elaborated above are critical to excellence and the plans discussed below are ambitious. Together they confront problems on campus while building on our strengths and furthering our ambitions. They require changes in policy, staffing, and capital investment.

A) Residential Life Proposal

1. Close Moore Hall and house all students on the campus.

Every constituency—students, parents, staff, faculty, alumni, Trustees—considers Moore Hall a problem, and they have been very vocal about their concerns. There is some evidence that Moore Hall exerts an independent effect on retention, and it clearly disrupts student regard for the College during the latter half of the first year, and throughout the second year for those assigned there.

Timeline: we understand the planned residential initiative anticipates closing Moore Hall in January '06.

Costs: we have not investigated the costs, but we understand the proposed residential life initiative will be self-supporting. If so, the positive impact on the student experience should yield measurable retention and financial benefits.

Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs and VP for Financial Affairs.

2. Develop intentional links between the first-year academic and residential life programs.

We hope the new academic vision includes a first year experience formally linking the residential experience with the first-year academic program. Several approaches—learning communities, theme dorms, class dorms or clusters of halls with distinct identities—hold promise. The committee respects the faculty’s prerogatives in these matters. However, we believe that a first-year program that promotes fuller, more purposeful connections among first-year students, faculty, and staff and includes co-curricular and social programming will address some of the concerns identified in the survey data.

We also endorse developing a more intensive staffing model in the first-year halls, including both professional as well as student staff selected because of their interest in working with first-year students.

Timeline: a fully elaborated program awaits the faculty’s consideration of the proposed academic vision. However, we believe the residential life program could begin developing a new staffing model in first-year halls as early as September ’04.

Costs: replacing two under graduate Head Residents with two professional hall directors would involve an increase of approximately \$40,000.

Responsibility: CEPP, Dean of the Faculty, and Dean of Student Affairs

3. Reduce crowding

The residence halls are extremely crowded during the fall semester. First-year students live in crowded conditions, and they must often wait until second semester to move from untenable living situations. We believe the residence halls should leave some number of rooms unoccupied during the fall semester in order to permit room changes when needed.

Timeline: a fully elaborated program awaits the faculty’s consideration of the proposed academic vision. However, we believe the residential life program could begin developing a new staffing model in first-year halls as early as September ’04.

Costs: making 5 rooms available would reduce revenues by approximately \$25, 000.

Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs

B) Campus Life Proposals

The central role of alcohol in social life is a problem made all the more difficult because of the relative paucity of support for alcohol-free activities, especially late at night on the weekends. The College should develop a “late night program” in Case Center during the weekends, increase the hours the Sports Center is open, provide more support from media services, transportation, and other offices for student activities, and serve a fourth meal.

The lack of performance, recreation, and social space on campus is a serious problem. Various academic departments control most of that space and use it fully in support of the

academic mission. The social use of these spaces must always yield to academic purposes. The College must invest in a space suitable for concerts, events, and parties—a full-fledged community center or student center of the sort we often see on the campuses of our comparison group. The space should be conveniently located but separate enough so that noise does not disturb the library, students in the residence halls, or neighbors. We are pleased the proposed residential life initiative includes additional recreation, performance, and study space. We believe these resources will exert a positive influence on student retention.

1. Late Night Program

The social opportunities available to students living on campus (the vast majority of them under 21), are downtown and at off-campus parties after 11:00 PM on weekend nights. Discussions about increasing the programming have failed because of staffing expense as well as the programming expense. SGA is willing to commit student activity funds to a late night programming effort, if the college will also commit funds to leadership activities, food service, and campus safety.

Timeline: 9/04.

Costs: Keeping the Spa open until 2:00 AM Thursday to Saturday (3 part-time, 9-month employees): \$51,000, with some of the cost offset by sales; late-night student affairs staffing on the weekend: \$12, 000; and additional support from Campus Safety: \$12,000. Total Cost \$75,000.

Responsibility: Dean of Student Affairs

2. A Fourth Meal

The dining hall is an important social context, a place where students talk with one another and relax. Skidmore’s dining halls are antiquated, loud, and outdated in every respect. We understand the proposed residential life initiative includes renovating and modernizing the dining halls. We believe the College should respond to student schedules and include a “fourth” meal in the dining plans.

Timeline: 9/04

Costs: there are several possible approaches to a fourth meal. Consequently, we have not developed an accurate estimate of these expenses. If the College develops a late night program schedule as described above, the staffing in the SPA will cover some of the expenses involved in this program.

Responsibility: Dean of Students and Director of Food Service

C) Rigor

As discussed above, we believe Skidmore must raise social and academic standards and expectations. Some of the efforts in this regard are changes in policy that do not require new programs or expenditures. Community discourse about engagement, rigor, and excellence must lead to policies and practices. While we see the need for more discussion, we believe there is a developing consensus in the community about the need for changes in the first-year program and our practices with problematic students.

1. Develop a longer, more compelling Orientation to academic and social life at Skidmore, a structure that fully informs students about Skidmore's mission and values, curriculum, and community codes. The delivery modes for such perspectives should be shaped by interdisciplinary exploration, case studies, provocative inquiry, problem-solving, and debate, and depend much less on admonitions and exhortations.

Timeline: 9/04

Costs: there are several different ways to approach a fuller orientation program. Integrating an academic program into the current pre-orientation model would involve additional expense of nearly \$300,000. A more modest campus-based approach involving faculty as part of a broader first-year initiative might bring the additional cost to less than \$100, 000.

Responsibility: Dean of Students, Dean of the Faculty, and Dean of Studies

2. The College should carefully evaluate leaves, waivers, and re-admission decisions and decline to allow problematic students who require extraordinary levels of intervention to continue at or return to the College.

3. Promote a full campus-wide discussion about standards of student conduct and evaluate the Honor Code and Integrity Board system.

VII. Assessment of the Results

Numerous reports were generated and analyzed in order to complete this study. Some number of those research projects will need to be replicated over time in order to monitor progress in meeting the proposed goals. We will especially want to monitor yield rates in the AQR 9 and 10 categories, with particular attention on the enrollment of targeted student populations. The most obvious measure for monitoring progress in the goal for increasing retention will be the overall graduation rate of the next several entering classes. Specific attention, however, will need to be given to tracking the progress of students in the subcategories identified in this report. Reports may include such breakdowns as:

- Retention and graduation rates for non-HEOP/AOP minority students by ethnicity with comparisons to HEOP/AOP students and white students
- Enrollment, retention, and success of international students
- Analysis of retention rates by sex, AQR, and SAT
- Comparisons of predicted GPAs to actual GPAs to better identify characteristics of under-performing and over-performing students
- Success rates of accepted students identified by Admissions as having significantly lower high school senior grades
- Subsequent progress of students who are placed on probation or waiver
- First year and sophomore fall to fall retention trends
- Academic success of slotted athletes
- Graduation rates of high achieving students, with comparisons of Honors Forum and non Honors Forum students and merit scholarship winners

The College undertakes a full series of surveys, the most recent addition being the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Because we have cross-sectional trend data provided by past administrations of these surveys, we will be able to monitor any significant changes in student responses, paying particular attention to the first year student responses and to withdrawn student reports. We can also tailor specific institution questions, permitted in a number of these surveys, in order to track specific engagement measures over time. Whenever possible, we recommend that the College employ longitudinal rather than cross-sectional assessment. Such assessment is costly and time consuming but the resulting data is undoubtedly more substantive and less ambiguous.

If necessary, we can supplement survey research with qualitative focus groups and tie institutional and departmental assessment initiatives to an investigation of student satisfaction and engagement. Two of our recommendations, that of increasing academic standards and developing a first-year experience program, will require academic assessment of the all-college curriculum and the majors.

The all-college surveys and studies currently administered on a rotating basis include:

Admitted Student Questionnaire (ASQ): This questionnaire measures how admitted students perceive Skidmore academically and socially. It identifies what factors were important to students when deciding to enroll and how Skidmore rated on such key factors. Analyses are performed by non-enrolling and enrolling students to better

understand any differences. Peer and normative data are available to identify leading competitors for our admitted students.

Admissions Validity Report (College Board): This study determines the strength, individually or combined, of High School GPA, SAT I, SAT IIs, and AQR, in predicting first year GPA. It helps identify under-performing students after the first year who may be at risk for not completing their degree. A predicted GPA can also be calculated for prospective students.

Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Survey: This survey offers a profile of the incoming class. Many of the incoming habits and work ethics students have in high school account for much of their engagement and performance in college, regardless of what the college does. Students report their expectations of the college experience; degree and career goals; values, attitudes, and life goals; and reasons for attending college. The College will monitor changes across survey years and examine the type of student Skidmore enrolls and their pre-college characteristics. National normative data is available for students at similar institutions. The College has the option of administering the CSS (College Student Survey), the follow-up to the CIRP, to seniors thereby obtaining longitudinal data on CIRP items.

Skidmore First-Year Survey: This is survey was designed internally and provides a better understanding of the first-year experience. Administered near the end of the freshman year, the instrument asks about any change in student abilities for key areas of concern. Students are also asked to rate the importance of and satisfaction with crucial college experiences. Combined with direct assessments of student learning, this can give us critical information about our curriculum and support efforts during the first year. This is the first instrument in a battery of surveys (first-year, senior, and alumni) designed to track student abilities, attitudes, and behaviors longitudinally. In this panel study, responses are also linked to institutional records if the student has given his or her permission.

Skidmore Advisee Survey: The Advisee Survey asks students about the quality of advising and the advisor. A supplemental survey is given to faculty regarding their perceived role in advising and expectations they have of advisees.

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE): The NSSE is a national cross-sectional survey of first-year and senior students. The instrument was developed by assessment experts and focuses on learning and engagement once enrolled. Unlike US News rankings, the study places less emphasis on the input measures and more importance on output measures. The five benchmarking areas are: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment. Normative data is available for students attending similar institutions. Skidmore may want to consider participating in the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) in the future to identify any gaps between expectations and reality.

Skidmore Senior Survey: The Senior Survey is the second Skidmore survey in the series of instruments designed to track changes in students longitudinally. The focus, once again, is on abilities and satisfaction, specifically in relation to the results obtained

from the same students during the first year. The survey reveals any change in abilities and gaps between importance and satisfaction of fundamental college experiences.

Skidmore Withdrawn Student Survey: This survey solicits information from students voluntarily not returning for their sophomore or junior year at Skidmore. These former students are asked why they didn't return to Skidmore and what institutions they are currently attending.

Skidmore Alumni Survey: The Alumni Survey is the third and final instrument used to obtain longitudinal panel information from Skidmore students. It will be administered for the first time in spring 2004. The survey will target students five years after graduation. Emphasis will be on academic program and preparation for life after Skidmore. Responses will be linked to Senior Survey data and institutional records to better understand Skidmore's contribution to growth and learning beyond commencement.

APPENDIX I

This section of the report includes very preliminary strategies recommended for other target populations whose retention and success are of concern. In each case a good deal more research needs to take place before an effective approach can be created.

Target Group: Students in Academic Difficulty

We need to decide whether the at-risk students on academic probation or waiver need more support than they currently receive from the Dean of Studies Office and the faculty advisors or a different variety of help—or whether we want to let go more frequently than we do of the students who fall below minimal continuation standards. It is certainly humane and rewarding to see a probation or waiver student grow in commitment and success: our study of four recent class years showed that 53% of the students who were granted a waiver of minimal continuation standards were retained and graduated. On the other hand, a number of these students remain at a low level of performance, and it is also a very time-consuming operation to monitor and “keep after” such students. Further, when they are drifting and failing (as almost half of the waiver students do), they drag down the academic environment for other students and for the faculty. The Retention Committee is inclined, as we suggested on page ten of this report, not to retain the student who lingers near or below minimal continuation standards or who does not rebound from a one-time “probation” (note that around 19% of our students, over 70% of them male, do experience one or more probation semesters).

If the College decides, however, to continue with current policy and practice regarding low-achieving students, we recommend that the Dean of Studies Office and the Committee on Academic Standing re-examine the reasons for extending waivers of minimal continuation standards after the first term of study. We also recommend that students who are struggling academically enter into a required a time-management and learning skills structure developed by the Dean of Studies Office. Poor distribution of one’s time (and low commitment to academic work) may be the one common behavior pattern of students whom we see on probation and waiver. The time-management program would also connect the students as needed with Peer Tutors and the Writing Center.

Timeline: begin CAS and DOS study in spring 2004 and implement time-management by fall 2004.

Costs: weekly help from a learning strategies specialist external to the College, at an annual cost of \$8400 (7 hrs. per week x 30 weeks @\$40 per hr.).

Responsibility: ongoing help and supervision from the Dean of Studies Staff and the Dean for First-Year Students (if this position is lodged in the Dean of Studies Office structure).

Target Group: Under-Achieving Students

Under-achieving students represent one of our biggest challenges, in that they fit comfortably within our current student culture, usually find it easy to get by academically, and don't have much inclination to leave Skidmore unless they are disqualified. We should, first of all, admit fewer of these students when we can identify them. An alternative strategy would be to guarantee their mid-year transfer to Skidmore if they earn a semester of strong grades at another college (the success of each potential transfer's effort could be determined by the Committee on Academic Standing). Once the students are with us, our effort should be to light a fire under them as early as possible in their Skidmore careers, at the same time not rewarding them, in effect, by providing special opportunities not available to other students who are both smart and diligent. Even though our particular data choices identified only 30 "smart slackers," much anecdotal and survey evidence suggests that many more of our students choose to get by comfortably at Skidmore rather than to exercise their full potential.

The long-range challenge is to move our student culture toward a striving mode and to raise classroom standards, so that the under-achieving student feels more out of place in the academic community and does not garner "B" grades for a minimal commitment of time and energy. We need also to learn more about male student culture at Skidmore, since 70% of the data-identified smart slackers seem to be white males--and they may concurrently have a negative impact on the generally more diligent and accomplished female students who express dissatisfaction with Skidmore. Thus while the smart but under-achieving students usually don't attrit, their presence at Skidmore may contribute to the attrition of others. (As a point of contrast, 85% of the students with low SATs and high grades in high school are female; they earn higher grades at Skidmore than those we classified as slackers and also withdraw at a lower rate than the general population.)

We propose the following: early identification by faculty observation, followed by first-year connections with faculty advisors who will help these students develop specific academic and personal goals, make one especially stimulating faculty connection in a field of interest to the student, and help with a formal time-management plan. We also suggest a mid-term intervention organized by the Dean for First-Year Students (if lodged within the Dean of Studies Office). Again, the transformation of student academic culture at Skidmore is the best way both to discourage slacker behavior and to encourage their more interest in the life of the mind.

Timeline: coordinate this "program" with broader efforts to foster an improved student culture, and try a pilot version of the admissions/advising effort for fall 2004.

Costs: this is probably the least attractive assignment for a faculty advisor, but we don't feel that we can put new funds into this particular component of advising. That move would require a broader consideration of the place of advising in faculty workload and in the system of faculty assessment and reward.

Responsibility: coordinated by Dean of Studies Office/Dean for First Year

Target Group: Women Students

Women students at Skidmore are more likely than their male counterparts to have earned strong high school records, and earn significantly higher grades at Skidmore in almost every discipline and at every course level. They also voluntarily leave us at a higher rate than the male students. They are far less likely to be on probation or waiver (around 75% of all probations are earned by men) and much less likely to be disqualified, and they are heavily over-represented in all academic honors groups such as Periclean, Phi Beta Kappa, and cum laude.

We need to consider whether we are sometimes paying too high a cost for targeting male students for admission; better, we need to figure out how to attract more qualified men to the campus and to capture their more serious interests. At the same time, we should figure out how to create a more engaging and supportive environment for our women students. Some strategies include:

- Gaining insights, through focus groups, from women students who have found their way at Skidmore;
- Enlisting women faculty and staff as mentors for the women students;
- Studying male cultures at Skidmore—something we have never done—to see how we might improve the entire co-educational environment;
- Develop a dozen learning communities with residential and co-curricular links, involving perhaps 12-15 students in each with two course connections in each cluster.

Timeline: in 2004-2005 see whether one of the social science courses or the Women's Studies faculty might undertake a study of women's academic and social experience at Skidmore; undertake similar research for the male student population; propose strategies and policies toward the end of 2005, to include a pilot program of learning communities for fall 2005.

Costs: Offer a total of \$5000 to support the needed research; offer 24 faculty \$300 each to develop learning clusters (total cost of \$7200).

Responsibility: the Dean of the Faculty Office, consulting with the Dean of Student Affairs, Residential Life, and the Registrar, will oversee the creation of the learning communities.

Target Group: Slotted Athletes and the Scholar Athlete

There is no evidence that athletes, slotted or otherwise, leave us in any significant numbers. Athletes quickly find a niche with other team members and with their coach, and at least by the junior year they connect with students in their major as well. The GPA comparisons tend to vary from one team sport to another, though overall the athlete GPAs compare pretty well with the non-athletes. The challenge is not to retain more athletes but to help more of them feel connected to the academic life of the College and to find identity structures beyond athletics. The majority of our athletes do accomplish such connections and become, in the best sense, scholar athletes who are focused and disciplined both on the field and court and in the classroom.

The athletes “slotted” by coaches for special admission treatment deserve more attention since they generally present weaker academic credentials. The Dean of Studies Office and the Athletics Director will gather information on the slotted athletes for CASA examination (first information available in January 2004). Evolving is an early-warning system for this group. In the future we should engage them in time-management training, which would be useful to many other athletes as well. We recommend as well that the Athletics Director and the Dean of Studies Office continue their recent efforts to build more bridges between the coaches and the academic community (by way of the AD). For example, the DOS routinely alerts the AD to athletes experiencing academic difficulty or earning high achievement records, and the AD enlists the often influential position of the coach to reinforce the student’s academic commitments. The DOS and AD are also eager for the coaches to learn more about the academic opportunities, support services, and expectations of the College so that they can feel more connected with the central mission of the College.

Timeline: continue with efforts already in progress; establish time-management structure for fall 2004.

Costs: none anticipated at this time.

Responsibility: CASA, Athletic Director, Dean of Studies Office, and the Associate Dean of the Faculty.