

SKIDMORE COLLEGE SELF-STUDY

FINAL REPORT

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Executive Summary

In our self-study, Skidmore College explored the ways in which our faculty and curriculum challenge our students to engage their own education. In this context, we asked, “What does engagement mean?” and searched for the relationships between engagement and learning. We also used the self-study to further the implementation of our new Strategic Plan, and to strengthen our understanding of its parts. In the spring and fall of 2004, as we began our work on this self-study, a group of faculty working on assessment collected responses from the faculty as a whole and helped us to generate a definition of student engagement:

We understand students to be engaged when they demonstrate that they are learning actively and energetically; when they extend their learning beyond an individual course, and even beyond their academic curriculum; when they pose questions, undertake extra work, collaborate effectively with each other, draw connections, think critically, take responsibility, show enthusiasm for and commitment to their learning—in a combination of some or all of these.

This definition guided our work as we considered multiple aspects of student engagement with their education. We focused on three major concerns: our residential college students’ experience in their first year; their understanding of the natural sciences; and their grasp of intercultural issues in domestic and global contexts.

Our concerns for student engagement converged with the mission of the College to shape the design of the self-study. Our initial charge, stated in the design for the self-study, emerged directly from our mission, which declares: “The principal mission of Skidmore College is the education of predominantly full-time undergraduates, a diverse population of talented students who are eager to engage actively in the learning process.” Our self-study design asked, “How eager are they? And how engaged? How might we engage them more in their own education as we understand it?” Those questions framed our charge. Further, our Strategic Plan, *Engaged Liberal Learning: The Plan for Skidmore College: 2005-2015*, provides the foundation for this report, with its emphasis on engaging students and encouraging them to become informed, responsible citizens. Our three foci—the first year, the sciences, and domestic and global interculturalism—also resonate with the objectives of our Strategic Plan.

As we proceeded with this self-study, we observed distinctive features and substantive connections among the work of the three subcommittees devoted to each segment of the Middle States report. We noted in particular one common and powerful factor: an irrefutable causal relationship between engaged faculty and engaged students. We also saw the importance of collaborative relationships among faculty and staff in the complex project of developing and assessing new pedagogies and programs, extending service learning and study-away opportunities, locating resources, recruiting targeted student populations, and reaching our students in every aspect of their college lives. We began to redefine the role of our Special Programs in our conception of who

we are, who our students are, and what unusual resources we might develop there to further student engagement—a process that is still very much underway and is not fully reflected in this document. And we saw the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery emerge as an unusual and exciting medium of engagement.

I. The First-Year Experience Re-examined

Our focus on the students' first year resulted from ongoing work led by the then Dean of the Faculty Charles Joseph and the Committee on Educational Policy and Planning. When we participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) two years ago, some of the results confirmed what we had known anecdotally about our educational successes and disappointments, while other data in the report surprised us. Most striking were the data that suggested our first-year students are less engaged than we might expect (in contrast to our seniors, who appeared the opposite). These data and others gathered in recent years spurred work that was already under way to reconsider our first-year curriculum. Our integrative Liberal Studies curriculum had been groundbreaking when it was implemented in 1985, and had flourished with some amendments for two decades; but there were signs that it was time for a new approach to our students' first year. As this report on our emerging First-Year Experience (FYE) suggests, we have applied our collective philosophic mind to the creation of a more sustainable, more engaging, more demanding, and no less ambitious program, based upon the interdisciplinary Scribner Seminars, launched in fall 2005. Scribner Seminars allow faculty and students choice of subject matter, enable faculty to model their scholarly life for students, and introduce students to a rigorous academic program. The faculty have committed to teaching writing and critical thinking, including the uses of evidence and the differences among methodologies.

The faculty have also committed to increased mentoring of their advisees, who are students in their Scribner Seminar. This program is much more explicitly a “first-year experience,” not an introduction to college learning that relies to a great extent on one self-contained course. It is, rather, a determination to infuse September Orientation with more stimulating academic content, to integrate mentoring with FYE teaching, to create a far more intentional out-of-classroom life for the new students, and to revisit a number of academic themes throughout the first year by means of performances, lectures, panel discussions, and exhibits. A further important step will be to create a stronger living-learning environment within the student residence halls—which have too often been the places to distract students from their educational pursuits.

As the FYE chapter makes clear, we need to strengthen the partnerships among faculty and staff that will make it possible to deliver a much more seamless Skidmore academic experience, one that does not compete weakly with student social choices. The report outlines many of the current perspectives and opportunities offered, for example, by a rich and thoughtful agenda of cocurricular events, and by plans to incorporate more powerful learning activities in the residence halls. Our recommendations urge that we continue on course, implementing our vision for the FYE in all of its dimensions and gauging how well it is meeting our goals.

II. The Natural Sciences: Current Strategic Planning and the Role of Student Engagement

Chapter II of the self-study report outlines the motivations for strengthening the natural sciences at Skidmore and connects these motivations to student engagement issues. We want the natural sciences to help us achieve not only a more balanced curriculum but also a more fully engaged student body. We believe that strengthening the natural sciences will attract a student body that is more intellectually diverse, more engaged, and academically stronger, within the sciences and across the College. This chapter argues that we cannot continue to strengthen the College academically and offer a balanced curriculum unless we invest significantly and strategically in the natural sciences now and over the coming decade.

In this chapter, the term “student engagement” necessarily has a different meaning than it does in the other chapters of this report. As we consider where and how our students in the natural sciences are most engaged, we realize that it is even more urgent for us to increase the numbers of students who study the natural sciences at Skidmore, to increase the natural science faculty to enhance the resources available for teaching and learning in the sciences, and to build the wherewithal that sustains a robust community of scientists on our campus.

Despite considerable growth and strong leadership in the sciences over the past decade, the natural sciences at Skidmore remain underpopulated and underfunded relative to our peer schools. Skidmore’s history is that of a college strong in the arts, the humanities, the social sciences, and preprofessional programs. This profile influences our ability to recruit students and faculty in the sciences, and to obtain funding for laboratories, pedagogy, and research. With 13% of our students majoring in the critical natural sciences—about half the numbers of our peer schools—we must bring more students into the natural sciences and assure that they are fully engaged in their studies. This strategy must begin with recruitment through Admissions and Financial Aid and continue by ensuring that our science programs are modern, challenging, and attractive to students who harbor interests in the natural sciences. Finally, we must do more to establish a culture of science at the College and to further the public understanding of science both on campus and in the community. All of these aspirations complement the initiatives outlined in the Strategic Plan to increase the number of science majors, science faculty, and resources needed to support their teaching and learning.

This is a multi-faceted project involving several interconnected initiatives. To engage more students more effectively, we must extend and strengthen our collaborative research opportunities, which we know to engage students effectively, and find ways to acknowledge the faculty work that guides these projects. We will strengthen our interdisciplinary programs in the sciences—Environmental Studies and Neuroscience—and form a new one called “biological chemistry.” We know these programs introduce students to the content and the research of contemporary science and prepare our students to enter graduate studies and professional scientific work.

We continue to modernize our pedagogies and to assess student learning and engagement. For example, we are developing more inquiry-based labs, sending teams to SENCER workshops, moving from a straight lecture space to lecture-lab arrangements,

and fostering interdisciplinary research in teams with service-learning components. To foster greater awareness of science on campus, we will develop cocurricular programming and infuse science into other areas of the College (for example, into the First-Year Experience). Finally, we are developing a more ambitious Admissions initiative that will allow us to increase the numbers of natural science students entering the College.

III. Student Engagement with Domestic Diversity, Global Awareness, and Intercultural Understanding

For more than three decades Skidmore has been striving to enroll a student body in the residential college that reflects the increasing racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of the United States; to attract a more genuinely diverse faculty and staff; to create more courses and programs that examine both global and domestic cultural differences as defined by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, and sexualities; and to enhance study-abroad opportunities for our students—not, we should say, with much clear sense that these goals have been interconnected in much of our thinking before this. We have attempted all of this for the sake of equitable access to higher education and for the educational enrichment—indeed, for the transformation—of all of our students, and of our community as a whole. This chapter examines candidly where we have made gains (or failed to), where we have much room for improvement, how and to what extent these goals are interrelated, and what we hope to accomplish in the years ahead. It complements our Strategic Plan, which places both domestic diversity and global understanding among our top four priorities for the coming decade. The plan locates our goals for a more truly diverse community firmly within a framework of our goals for student “understanding and achievement.” Thus, for the first time, we are leading with the question of what we want our residential college students to learn, and how they are most likely to do it, whether on campus or abroad.

In the process of discussing this chapter, we clarified two separate but related motivations for our goals of increasing student engagement with matters of cultural difference related specifically to underrepresented groups. One is our wish, articulated above, for our students’ education to lead them to greater intercultural understanding, analytic insight, and capacities for communication. A second, even more powerful motivation is for our students to learn about and advocate for social justice in the context of both American culture and the place of Americans in the world today. We wish for all of our students not only to learn more, but also to engage in that learning in a way that will stay with them well beyond their courses, cocurricular experiences, and dormitory conversations at Skidmore. The questions we must address now have to do with how best to make that extra degree of intensity happen.

Through long and sometimes contentious discussions of the material in this chapter, we have come to believe that we need more dialog, more engagement, more learning on the part of students but also of faculty and staff. It is clear that matters of intercultural difference are engaging, once we ensure that the dialog begins. And we know that we need to think more comprehensively about our students’ experiences at Skidmore: to ensure, for example, that all of our students regularly encounter and

engage with students, faculty, and staff from backgrounds that are both different from and similar to their own; that they have ample contexts to learn about race, ethnicity, and other kinds of differences in their coursework and in the cocurriculum; that they have the opportunity to study abroad or off-campus in ways that will immerse them in other cultures and challenge many of their assumptions. We need thus to strategize in multiple directions at once: to recruit more faculty, staff, and students of color, as well as more international students, faculty, and staff; to develop more courses; to restructure the leadership so as to coordinate curriculum and cocurriculum more effectively to engage the students; to introduce intercultural learning early and often in the student experience; to send more students away for study off-campus; and to develop ways to help them integrate that learning with their education as a whole.

Many of these steps are already well under way. We have much to learn about whether and where our residential college students are learning to become true intercultural citizens (and we do not likely all agree on what that would mean). But it is clear that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift: it is both exhilarating and, at times, difficult and even profoundly painful. We are making measurable progress towards our goals, and this report has contributed to the progress. Much remains to be done.

As we complete revisions to this self-study in January, 2006, over two months after we wrapped up our community discussions and stopped soliciting suggestions for changes, we can see how much we have accomplished in the year and half since we began the process. To an unprecedented degree, we have been talking for all of these months about where and how and why our students are engaged in learning. Some of those conversations have not taken us very far; others have opened up new ways of thinking about things. At the outset of this self-study, we were not sure we knew how to talk about student engagement in the natural sciences, in intercultural understanding, or in the first-year experience. We knew how to talk about hiring people, about developing courses or programs, about changing requirements or providing offices. Collectively, we knew little about how to recognize or gauge deep engagement. We had yet to talk as a community about how to structure courses, assignments, or experiences so as to encourage engaged and enduring learning. But individually, it became clear, our faculty watch for the engaged student, plan for the unforgettable class, design the compelling assignment, and know a great deal about student engagement that they have been willing to share with colleagues.

As we read narratives and reports and began to put them together and to generalize about them, a picture emerged of the kind of engagement we want to see pervasively throughout the College. It is a picture of students working long hours, arguing with each other, peering at objects, poring over books and computer screens, and writing intently. It is also a picture of faculty and staff looking over their shoulders, collecting specimens with them in the Adirondacks, introducing them to teachers in Antigua, showing them how to use the microscope or the software, staying late after class or a meeting, pushing them to take the next mental step. The challenge for us now is to continue to turn this localized knowledge into models and also generalized habits of engaging teaching and effective collaborations across the College.