

**Civic Engagement at Skidmore**  
**A Survey of Students, Faculty, and Community Organizations**  
**Spring 2005**

In the Fall of 2004, sociology professor David Karp and the students<sup>1</sup> of Sociology 226 “Social Research Design” conducted a study of civic engagement at Skidmore College. Here we summarize our major findings.

**Civic Engagement at Skidmore College**

The president of Skidmore College is a member of [Campus Compact](#), “a national coalition of more than 900 college and university presidents committed to the civic purposes of higher education. To support this civic mission, Campus Compact promotes community service that develops students' citizenship skills and values, encourages partnerships between campuses and communities, and assists faculty who seek to integrate public and community engagement into their teaching and research.” The new strategic plan for Skidmore, entitled “Engaged Liberal Learning: The Plan for Skidmore College: 2005-2015,” gives particular attention to [civic engagement](#): “We will prepare every Skidmore student to make the choices required of an informed, responsible citizen at home and in the world.” Recently, the College received a grant from the Mellon Foundation to develop civic engagement as part of a larger effort to create “a more engaging and guided learning environment.” We define civic engagement as a multidimensional construct that includes the following:

- Volunteering: Student participation in community service that is not course-related.
- Service Learning: Experiential learning that links community service and academic coursework.
- Community Based Research: Research that involves students, faculty and community partners with the goal of solving community problems.
- SENCER: Science Education for New Civic Engagements and Responsibilities. Interdisciplinary, problem-based courses that apply scientific investigation to contemporary problem solving, i.e., a course of AIDS. “[SENCER](#) engages student interest in the sciences and mathematics by supporting the development of undergraduate courses and academic programs that teach “to” basic science and mathematics “through” complex, capacious, and unsolved public issues.”

**Study Design**

The project had several components: a comparative study of peer institutions through a content analysis of websites and surveys and interviews with students, faculty, and community organizations.

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- *Comparative Study of Peer Websites:* We conducted a content analysis of websites, focusing on volunteer, service learning, and community-based research at Skidmore and its 16 [peer institutions](#).
- *Community Organization Survey and Interviews:* The Skidmore Volunteer Coordinator, Michelle Hubbs, maintains a list of community organizations. Although this is not an exhaustive list of all organizations, we were primarily interested in those with a pre-existing relationship to the College and who could speak to recent experiences with student volunteers. Of the 63 organizations on the list, we were able to conduct telephone interviews with staff at 23 agencies (response rate = 37%). Six face-to-face follow-up interviews were conducted.
- *Student Survey and Interviews:* An anonymous, online survey was administered to a random sample of 210 Fall 2004 on-campus matriculated students. After repeated follow-up requests for participation, we obtained responses from 111 students (response rate = 53%). Fourteen face-to-face follow-up interviews were conducted.
- *Faculty Surveys and Interviews:* An anonymous, online survey was administered to all faculty with voting privileges in the Fall of 2004. According to the Office of the Dean of Faculty, this included 242 individuals. 126 faculty members responded (response rate = 52%). Twelve face-to-face follow-up interviews were conducted. In addition, faculty were polled by email to identify service-learning courses taught in Spring 2005.

## Results

### *Comparative Study of Peer Websites*

How much does Skidmore and its peer institutions prioritize and advertise civic engagement on their websites? To what extent do they promote volunteering, service learning, and community based research? Who belongs to Campus Compact, and who has participated in the NSF-funded SENCER initiative? Table 1 reports these results. Note that they reflect only website presentation, and may obscure activities at these colleges that are not highlighted on their websites.

The table indicates that nearly every college, including Skidmore, maintains a website to assist students in local volunteering. Most institutions also belong to Campus Compact. About half of the institutions participate in SENCER, including Skidmore. Nine schools have service-learning websites, and we recommend that Skidmore do the same. Of the schools with websites, most report the number of service-learning courses taught in a given semester. These range from 13 to 19 courses.

**Table 1. Civic engagement at Skidmore and 16 peer institutions.**

Rank	College	Community Service Webpage	Service-learning Webpage	Community Research Webpage	Center Name	Campus Compact	SENCER
1	<a href="#">Bates College</a>	Yes	<a href="#">Yes</a>	Yes	<a href="#">Harvard Center</a>	Yes	Yes
2	<a href="#">Connecticut College</a>	Yes		Yes	<a href="#">Holleran Center for Community Action and Public Policy</a>	Yes	
3	<a href="#">Hamilton College</a>	Yes		Yes	<a href="#">Levitt Center</a>	Yes	Yes
4	<a href="#">Kenyon College</a>	Yes		Yes	<a href="#">Rural Life Center</a>		
5	<a href="#">Franklin &amp; Marshall College</a>	Yes	<a href="#">Yes</a>			Yes	Yes
6	<a href="#">Gettysburg College</a>	Yes	<a href="#">Yes</a>			Yes	Yes
7	<a href="#">Oberlin College</a>	Yes	<a href="#">Yes</a>			Yes	
8	<a href="#">Trinity College</a>	Yes	<a href="#">Yes</a>			Yes	
9	<a href="#">Colgate University</a>	Yes	<a href="#">Yes</a>			Yes	
10	<a href="#">Sarah Lawrence College</a>	Yes	<a href="#">Yes</a>			Yes	
11	<a href="#">Wheaton College</a>	Yes	Yes			Yes	
12	<a href="#">St Lawrence University</a>	Yes	Yes			Yes	
13	<a href="#">Skidmore College</a>	Yes				Yes	Yes
14	<a href="#">Dickinson College</a>	Yes				Yes	
15	<a href="#">Vassar College</a>					Yes	Yes
16	<a href="#">Union College</a>	Yes					
17	<a href="#">Bard College</a>						Yes
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>

Only four schools describe their active participation in community-based research. Our most recent strategic plan calls for the development of the Center for Civic and Environmental Sustainability Through Action Research (CESTAR). In sum, our analysis leads us to believe four colleges are lagging behind us (Vassar, Bard, Union, and Dickinson), placing us 13<sup>th</sup> among the 17 institutions. However, should we *develop a service-learning website*, increase our regular delivery of service-learning courses to *twenty per semester*, and *launch CESTAR*, we will catapult to the front of the pack!

### *Community Survey*

The purpose of this element of our study was to identify community agency satisfaction with student volunteers and willingness to enlist future volunteers. Eighty-seven percent of respondents were at least “somewhat satisfied” with student volunteers. One commented that students “had an excellent work ethic and were reliable. I found that they did very well as teachers to our students and they developed good relationships with them.” Nevertheless, 40% of the respondents described a variety of problems from unreliable attendance to lack of preparation or training. This problem seems to be most relevant to student volunteers rather than service-learning projects, where faculty supervision and incentives tend to resolve these issues. Ninety-one percent of the respondents were interested in having more student volunteers; 81% were interested in collaborating on community based research projects. *Our central conclusion from this survey is that there is both a need and an interest in the local community for student volunteers and for service-learning projects in particular.*

### *Student Survey*

The purpose of the student survey was to identify student experience, satisfaction, and willingness to participate in service-learning projects. We highlight key findings below:

- Seventy-nine percent of students had volunteering experience prior to attending Skidmore. Seventy-nine percent were aware of volunteer opportunities at Skidmore, 40% had volunteered while at Skidmore, and 93% of those who had volunteered were satisfied by their experience. Eighty-four percent wished to volunteer in the future. Forty-four percent supported the idea of a volunteer requirement.
- Thirty-six percent had service-learning experience prior to attending Skidmore. Sixty percent were aware of service-learning opportunities at Skidmore, 20% had taken a service-learning course, and 95% were satisfied by their Skidmore service-learning experience. Seventy-nine percent expressed interest in taking a service-learning course in the future. Forty-six percent supported the idea of a service-learning requirement.
- Seventeen percent had participated in a community-based research project prior to attending Skidmore. Thirty-eight percent were aware of community-based research opportunities at Skidmore, 11% had participated in community-based research while at Skidmore, and 100% were satisfied by their research experience. Sixty-eight percent were interested in participating in community-based research in the future. Thirty-seven percent supported the idea of a research requirement.

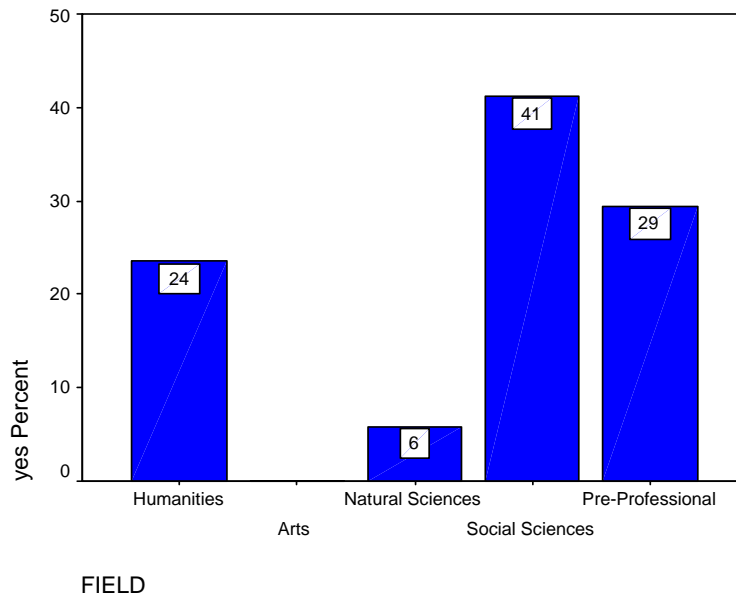
*We conclude from these findings that student interest in academically based civic engagement outpaces current capacity—by a lot.* As one student argued, “I think that in order to graduate that students should participate in such activities that will help prepare them to be active contributing members of society. I think that an important part of education is preparing students to enter the world both as ready to fulfill their personal goals in their careers, but also recognizing the responsibility that they have as citizens. These goals of education are strongly interrelated and should be enforced.” Not all students would support a requirement, but most claim they would embrace the opportunity voluntarily.

### *Faculty Survey*

The purpose of the faculty survey was to gauge faculty commitment to student civic engagement, especially through service learning and community-based research. Our first major finding is that 33% of the faculty place civic engagement as a “high priority” for themselves (86% as a “high” or “moderate” priority), but only 3% believe it to be a high priority for the College. Forty-seven percent believe it to be a low priority for the College.

Second, 14% of faculty have taught a service-learning course. Sixty-two percent are willing (22% very willing; 40% somewhat willing) to teach a service-learning course in the future. Figure 1 reports the distribution of service learning by field. As can be seen, no faculty from the arts and few natural scientists responded that they have used service learning.

**Figure 1. Percent of faculty who have taught a service-learning class by field.**



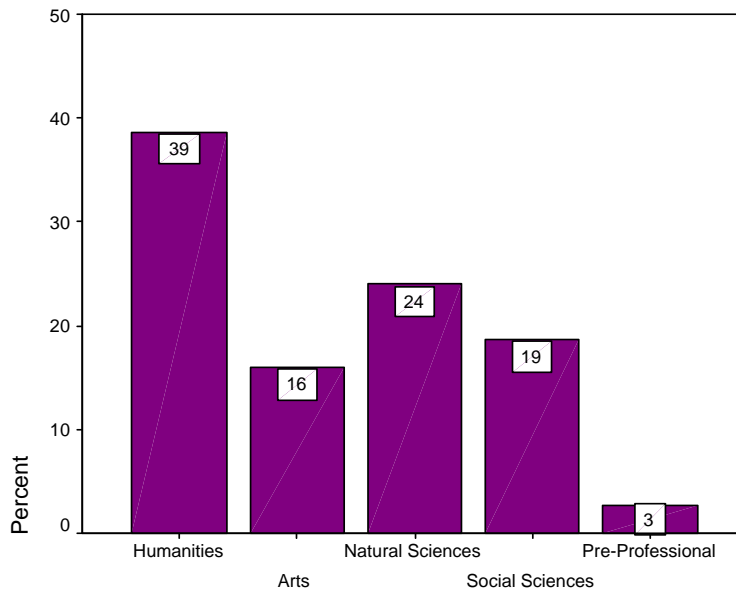
Of the 641 classes taught in the Spring of 2005, fifteen service-learning courses were delivered at Skidmore (2.3% of the total). These courses served 257 students (see Table 2), although some duplication of students is likely. Notably, of the fifteen service-learning courses, eleven (73%) are from pre-professional and interdisciplinary programs. This suggests how poorly service learning is integrated into the traditional liberal arts curriculum.

**Table 2. Service-Learning Courses Spring 2005**

Course Number	Course Title	Professor	Enrollment
1. AN 352C	Public Archaeology	Laurie Miroff	4
2. ED 104	Intelligence(s) and Learning Environments	Joyce Rubin	24
3. ED 200	Child Development and Learning	Ruth Andrea Levinson	19
4. ED 200	Child Development and Learning	Donna Brent	19
5. ED 261D	Bilingualism in Schools	Leonora de la Luna	21
6. ES 375	Case Studies in Environmental Sustainability	Karen Kellogg	10
7. EX 127	Human Anatomy and Physiology II	Colleen Grossner	22
8. EX 242	Principles of Nutrition for Health and Performance	Colleen Grossner	14
9. HF 202	Great Books Practicum	Catherine Golden	11
10. MB 240	Coaching and Teamwork Service-learning Experience	Tim Harper	25
11. MB 355	Business, Ethics and Society	Chris Kopec	22
12. SO 329S	Criminal Justice	David Karp	18
13. SW 222	Introduction to Social Work	Crystal Moore	23
14. SW 334	Social Work Practice with Groups, Organizations, and Communities	Peter McCarthy	11
15. SW 382	Social Work Field Practicum	Peg Tacardon	14
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>257</b>

Third, 63% of faculty believe it would be somewhat or very difficult to make use of service learning in their discipline. This indicates an important obstacle and the need for faculty support. Surprisingly, Figure 2 disaggregates this perception of difficulty by field. Notably, a relatively small fraction of art and natural science faculty see service learning as difficulty to apply; yet it is those faculty that have the least experience using it.

**Figure 2. Percent of faculty who believe it would be difficult to apply service learning to their field.**



Fourth, 30% of the faculty has worked with students on community-based research projects. Fifty-nine percent are interested in working on such projects in the future. Sixty-three percent would support the development of a community-based research center at Skidmore. These findings again suggest the need for faculty support. *In sum, faculty support for academically based civic engagement is strong, echoing student and community interest. Yet participation is weak. We believe, with proper support, civic engagement at Skidmore could grow substantially.*

*Faculty Perspectives.* Commentary by faculty reveals widespread support for increasing civic engagement at Skidmore. For example, one faculty member argued:

I think it should be a very high priority. My own preference is that we should require service learning when they walk into the College. I think it should be a part of the first year experience. I also know that I'm in the minority on that point. I don't think it will happen overnight, but I think we need to be a lot more serious about civic engagement at the College. I feel our students have a great deal to contribute. I feel like it was something missing from my life as an undergraduate, that I never had that experience at all....[Students] will be able to sharpen their critical thinking abilities, which I and other professors argue is at the center of a liberal arts life. And they will be able to gain a practical ability along the lines of interacting with community

members in a job-like setting. And they will gain an understanding of what needs to be done in society.

Of course, not all faculty support civic engagement through service learning or community-based research. Although a minority view, one faculty member articulates why students should *not* be involved in such efforts:

Liberal education requires careful, sustained thinking, and a ruthless questioning of one's most cherished opinions, even and especially about *justice*. Political action, or “solving community problems,” entails an *end* to such questioning. It requires acting on firmly held convictions, rather than submitting those convictions to the still, small voice of reason. Linking these two radically different activities would seriously damage liberal education at Skidmore. It would further politicize the curriculum, encourage indoctrination rather than genuine free examination, and take our students still further from the difficult but rewarding task of thinking. It would allow the examination of timeless human problems to be eclipsed by the implementation of dubious, unexamined if sincerely “felt” attachments to particular causes. It would subordinate the life of the mind to the immediate, often poorly grasped political demands of the here and now. It would pander to the vanity of students instead of engaging them in the vital contention that makes them *uncomfortable* with the opinions they happen to have been raised with. Precisely to the extent that it is “successful,” it would be a disaster.

## **Conclusion**

The recent strategic plan calls for greater academically based civic engagement. In particular, it seeks to:

Engage faculty conversation about the value of responsible citizenship and its place in the Skidmore curriculum. Develop, support, and enhance pedagogical innovations such as service learning, collaborative research, and project-based learning to support the application of knowledge beyond the classroom and promote meaningful connections between students' academic experience and personal lives.

Our findings from this study suggest that there is ample community, student, and faculty support for civic engagement coupled with weak current capacity. Although dissenting opinions exist, more than enough members of the faculty, student body, and local community express a desire for greater civic engagement and a willingness to participate. If a coherent implementation strategy is adopted—one that is particularly focused on service learning in the disciplines—we may be able to achieve large gains and fulfill this strategic goal.