

CLASSROOM PROTOCOLS

NOTES FOR SKIDMORE FACULTY



Skidmore College

Preface

Classroom Protocols offers reflections on the classroom practices that Skidmore faculty have shared with their colleagues over the years and is informed by our collective experience with a wide range of student academic behavior patterns at Skidmore. *Classroom Protocols* was first drafted by Jon Ramsey, the Dean of Studies, for use in New Faculty Orientation. A draft document was reviewed and modified by the Academic Standards and Expectations subcommittee of the Committee on Educational Policies and Planning (CEPP) and then brought for further consideration to CEPP. In the spring of 2002, CEPP gave the Dean of Studies Office permission to distribute *Classroom Protocols* to all faculty for their consideration and feedback. The document is updated each year to reflect curricular and policy changes at the College. The current protocols have also been influenced by student leaders seeking to improve the tone and tenor of academic life at Skidmore. We trust that these notes will contribute to ongoing efforts to enhance classroom experiences for everyone.

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CLASSROOM PROTOCOLS: NOTES FOR SKIDMORE FACULTY

We recognize that each individual faculty member establishes his or her own teaching goals and implements them in ways consistent with his or her own philosophy, pedagogical style, and personality. We are also aware that different disciplines, departments, and programs have their own teaching culture. Quite simply, faculty draw from a range of strategies to guide successful teaching and learning. At the same time, faculty often find themselves engaging with a student culture with general expectations and behaviors that cut across all classrooms. With that in mind, we put forward these suggestions on effective ways to promote high academic achievement and student success.

These recommended *Classroom Protocols* are suggestions and nothing more. Individual faculty will and must make their own decisions regarding classroom goals and protocols. Nothing in these suggestions should be construed as contrary to Skidmore's vigorous support of the faculty's intellectual and pedagogical freedoms. The notes offered here purposely say very little about the content of classroom material or about specific pedagogies; rather, the focus is on general academic structures and expectations that confirm what many Skidmore faculty already do successfully. We hope that the notes help all faculty achieve a better outcome, both for our committed students and for students who at times engage in more frustrating or distracting patterns of classroom behavior.

The faculty and student relationship

Skidmore faculty routinely report that the large majority of their interactions with students are productive and rewarding. Similarly, in course evaluations, advising sessions, and the formal surveys that we conduct each year, the large majority of students speak highly of the faculty's expertise, creative pedagogy, engagement with students in the learning process, and commitment to fairness in evaluating students. Skidmore faculty provide high quality educational experiences in the classroom, studio, laboratory, and other settings. The faculty's commitment to high quality teaching gives us all much to celebrate.

At the same time, faculty also tell colleagues about student situations that are not so rewarding and that frustrate their efforts to ameliorate the problem or, at least, that absorb inordinate amounts of time and attention. It is in this area especially that the notes on what we have called "classroom protocols" may be useful. One never wants, we believe, to create classroom policies and practices that focus primarily on those few students who might, through ignorance or intent, abuse what is generally an excellent teaching-learning relationship. Instead, the policies should be relatively transparent to the many motivated students who do their work without prodding, attend classes regularly, complete assignments on time, and in general bring an eager intelligence to our shared educational enterprise. Within this broad and positive context, classroom policies should help the less motivated or undisciplined student stay on track and achieve his or her best without undue monitoring by the faculty.

Things to keep in mind about students:

While we recognize that students have a wide range of interests, goals, and expectations, we also note common patterns in the way students interact with faculty.

1. Students tell us over and over, as beginning first-year students, that they expect college to be much more challenging than high school, and they expect long academic work hours. They also expect their peers to be seriously involved, both inside and outside the classroom, in academic work and discussions.
2. They also frequently tell us, by the end of the first year or even earlier, that the challenges turned out not to be so different from those they faced in high school, that “getting by” with reasonably good grades is easy at Skidmore, and that they are disappointed in many of their peers’ intellectual commitments. Some students point out such disparities with a degree of disappointment, some with a sense of relief, some with a mixture of these emotions—and some pack their bags and transfer to other colleges.
3. Faculty sometimes think that the students’ expressed disappointment in the tenor of Skidmore’s academic environment is a contradictory affair: the students seem both to desire a more invigorating academic community and at the same time make it hard for faculty to “hold the line” with respect to classroom expectations. The aspect of student culture that enjoys a comfortable and non-competitive academic atmosphere seems at odds with a call for increased challenge and high academic achievement.
4. Nearly all of our students are of traditional college age, 17-22 years old. They are merely seventeen or eighteen years old when they come to us. It should be no surprise that the students often do not behave like adults intellectually or personally, and that they routinely share the following qualities:
 - their seeming social sophistication (due in part to many of our students’ relatively high socio-economic background) sometimes masks fairly typical youthful uncertainties;
 - they often do not know what they want to do with their lives now or in the world after graduating from Skidmore;
 - their energy and commitment wax and wane over the course of a semester;
 - events and opportunities in their personal lives are extremely distracting (or, in their view, are sometimes more important than anything else);
 - they sometimes over-generalize from limited experience (or, in our view, draw completely unfounded conclusions);
 - they can perceive faculty treatment of them or assessment of their work as based on liking or not liking them as individuals;
 - they sometimes do not take in stride what we regard as ordinary life events and issues, but instead respond to them in a comparatively dramatic, emotional fashion;
 - they sometimes experience genuinely serious emotional problems and crises of identity or disruptions in familial or romantic relationships;
 - many of our students use drugs and alcohol, and the effects of this on student academic focus and commitment are a serious topic for all of us to explore;

- they often require adult guidance on identifying academic, personal, and professional goals. Many students expect their parents to be involved in academic advising and decision-making processes.

The list could go on, of course. In recent years, members of the Student Affairs staff have focused attention on students as emerging adults who enter a transitional state as they move across various thresholds in their intellectual and personal development. This development is seldom in a straight line; instead, college students develop at different rates in multiple personal and intellectual contexts, sometimes seeming more adult in their decisions and behavior and sometimes employing strategies that may have worked in an earlier stage of development but that are unproductive in the current context. (We also recognize the inadequacy of such terms as “adulthood” and “maturity” in describing developmental processes that stretch across a lifetime and are often age and culture-specific.)

There are other issues, more academic than those listed above, and perhaps even more pervasive, that may help faculty to keep in mind as they plan and conduct courses:

- college faculty were usually not typical undergraduate students: generally, they started out with greater intellectual discipline and were much more committed to their studies; they liked school so much that they decided to stay there as professionals.
- the student classroom behavior patterns that we thought we could once take for granted (diligence, timeliness, taking notes, academic integrity, respect and civility, politeness, etc.) may now require an instructional activity to establish.
- the foundational skills that we thought we could once take for granted (clear writing, critical reading and thinking, quantitative reasoning, research skills, etc.), now usually require instruction in nearly every classroom.
- the students’ familiarity with key national or world events and issues can seldom be assumed by the faculty, nor should faculty expect students’ sense of history to extend back more than 8-10 years, when they were around eight or ten years old; further, their pop culture points of reference are almost never those of the faculty, they change with amazing rapidity, and they are not uniform across various youth communities.

2) In the light of the observations above, Skidmore faculty are, or have the capacity to be, extraordinarily influential in the students’ lives. Students themselves, as well as the literature on such topics, bring this powerful influence to our attention all the time. And with increasing frequency students are asking for more guidance and faculty involvement in their academic and co-curricular interests and development. Skidmore faculty have the ability to shape and enhance students’ academic lives and their co-curricular and extra-curricular experiences.

Engaging students in the educational process

It probably goes without saying that the most essential means of getting the best from and for students is to develop teaching strategies and structures that take their interests into account and engage them actively in shaping the learning experience. Many pedagogy sessions and other faculty discussions have been devoted to this topic. The effective Skidmore faculty member is probably *both* “guide on the side and sage on the stage.” While there is clearly a broad spectrum of effective teaching approaches among our faculty, and an equally broad array of cognitive inclinations among the students, in general our students tend to respond well to the following:

- courses that make clear what is expected and when; for example, course syllabi and class sessions that provide explicit learning goals (i.e., what information, ideas, methodologies, modes of understanding, skills, and values the faculty member hopes the students will learn in the class), assignments and deadlines, grading criteria, and attendance policies;
- courses that have a visible and coherent structure, direction, trajectory, and destination: in other words, courses in which the parts construct a larger picture and which make sense of things at critical points during the learning experience;
- courses that provide regular, timely, and consistent feedback to let students know “how they are doing.”
- courses that involve problem-solving, case studies, interdisciplinary approaches to the objects of study, glimpses of things yet-to-be-understood by the discipline, and values discussions. At the same time, it is worth noting that current students are often less patient with unanswered questions, unresolved ironies, and intellectual conundrums than were students in the 1960s and 1970s, even though such things still need to play an important part in their college education;
- courses in which the content and methodologies relate to the larger college curriculum and other disciplinary areas and make connections to pre-requisite courses;
- courses that, while not pandering to students’ immediate interests, can find points of relationship to the world they live in;
- courses that invite students to express their views. Here one faces the challenge of helping students distinguish mere opinion from informed argument.

Teaching in the diverse classroom

Skidmore’s student population is becoming increasingly diverse across a range of social identities, including, but not limited, to race, ethnicity, national origin, first language, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic and first-generation status, religious and spiritual tradition, and ability status. While the college reports that 60% of Skidmore students are women, 27% are domestic students of color, and 10% are international students, these numbers do not fully capture the diversity within our classrooms or its related complexities. For instance, some transgender-identified students might prefer to use gender neutral pronouns; moreover, the growing multiracial and transnational adoptee population complicates our understanding of racial categories.

Given these changing demographics, faculty might consider the following strategies for effectively engaging with a diverse student body:

Self-Awareness and Professional Development

- Be aware of one's own social identities and their power-related implications;
- Identify personal biases and stereotypes that might affect the classroom environment (e.g., performance expectations of particular groups of students);
- Avoid making assumptions about the group memberships of students; instead, rely on self-identifications;
- Admit lack of expertise with diversity issues and/or acknowledge discomfort with particular topics, when applicable. This encourages transparency and helps to establish a safe, co-learning environment;
- Attend professional development workshops to learn and/or refine related competencies and skill sets.

Course Design and Pedagogy

- Review syllabi for inclusive language, goals, and practices (e.g., develop make-up policies for absences due to religious observation);
- Incorporate diverse readings, examples, and assignments into the course (e.g., select course material that reflects the contributions of historically marginalized groups; avoid over-reliance on heteronormative, Eurocentric, or Christian-focused examples; be aware of how particular assignments might differentially [dis]advantage specific groups);
- Allow for cultural differences in modes of communication;
- Use a variety of pedagogical techniques (e.g., lecture, collaborative learning, small group work, discussion) to meet differing learning styles and needs;

Group Dynamics

- Create community norms or ground rules before discussing sensitive, diversity-related topics;
- Foster a safe and inclusive space by modeling appropriate forms of engagement. This often requires mutual sharing and risk-taking;
- Be conscious of the (in)visible social identities within the classroom space (e.g., can all students afford the books required for the course? What name, and related pronouns, does the student prefer to use?);
- Remain attentive to non-verbal modes of communication (e.g., body language or facial expressions) and how they may affect group dynamics;
- Observe the power dynamics, and amount of voice, particular students (or groups) have in the classroom (e.g., what perspectives are present, or absent, during the discussion?);
- Avoid tokenizing, stereotyping, or dichotomizing social identity groups and students assumed to be members of those groups (e.g., do not explicitly or implicitly expect students of color or international students to respond when discussing race or nationality-related issues);

- Interrupt discriminatory language or behaviors when they emerge in class;
- Engage classroom conflict in a constructive manner; learn how to intervene and use conflict as a "teachable moment."

The course syllabus

According to the Middle States Association, every course must have a syllabus, and we must retain syllabi (generally in department and program collections) for a period of time. The syllabus serves many practical purposes, as suggested below, and it is also an important conceptual announcement of how the course offers an organized educational experience to achieve particular ends.

There has been a lot of reference to syllabi in recent years as contractual in nature. In certain respects, this is true, but faculty need also to preserve sufficient flexibility in the pace, content, and pedagogy of their courses in order to reshape the course as student interests and abilities suggest, as hot topics appear during the semester, as a particular approach seems not to be working well, as the faculty member gets a new idea for the course structure, and so on. The balance between fixed and definite versus evolving expectations, as reflected in a syllabus, is mostly a matter of common sense and good faith: students should be able to count on an organized and thorough treatment of the announced course content, on consistent evaluation criteria that do not diminish their opportunities to succeed, on a clear rationale from the faculty member (and often with some class discussion) when the course makes a significant departure from the syllabus design, and on sufficient advance notice of changes so that the student can make adjustments in his or her academic work schedule. If fair-minded practices of this sort are observed, both the students' desire to know what to expect and the faculty's need for a degree of flexibility, expert judgment, and spontaneity can be honored.

Course syllabi should generally attend to the following, and there are many formats in which this might occur:

- The title and basic content of the course;
- The instructor's name, office location and office hours, and usually the office phone number and faculty e-mail address;
- A presentation of learning outcomes—in other words, an unfolding of what the instructor hopes the students will learn in the course or be able to demonstrate at various points in the course. These can include the mastery of sets of information, the development of skills and techniques, the learning of methodologies, the understanding of various epistemologies, etc.;
- The organizing principles and underlying assumptions of the course: for example, the organizing concepts and themes, or the kinds of skills or knowledge to be acquired;
- A list of assignments and other course expectations sufficiently detailed for the student to see how the organizing principles are actually realized in the course content (students, like all individuals, usually like to know why, or for what purpose, they are doing things);
- Deadlines for all assignments and what consequences there will be if a student does not meet the deadline. It is also good to explain to students in a *positive* way why deadlines are

important for maintaining the educational structure and philosophy of the course—it is easy for students to assume that organizing forms are merely arbitrary bureaucratic rules rather than heuristic structures;

- The criteria by which the students will be graded and evaluated (it is also a good practice to state the percentage weight that will be given to each assignment). Note that the faculty member needs to state his or her *strongest* expectations up front; one might later, in certain circumstances, want to moderate evaluative criteria, but one cannot legitimately *raise* the bar once the criteria have been set forth;
- Statements regarding the instructor's response to academic integrity violations— particularly if a “zero tolerance” policy is pursued—the handling of Title IX issues, acknowledgment of the college's conscientious religious observance policy, whether or not students may take the course S/U, and the rights of students with documented disabilities to seek an academic accommodation. Students seeking accommodation should be directed to the Coordinator for Student Access Services (see below).

Academic Accommodation

In typical years, more than 7% of Skidmore students provide documentation related to a physical, psychological, or learning disability that qualifies them for academic accommodation. In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, it is necessary to provide students with disabilities meaningful access to all college programs and activities and to the individualized accommodation necessary for them to have an equal opportunity to succeed.

We have a responsibility to inform students with disabilities about the process of requesting accommodations, and faculty should include a statement on each syllabus that encourages students to consult with the Coordinator for Student Access Services if they have a documented disability. A disability statement such as the following will establish a line of communication and indicate to students that you are open to discussing their need for accommodation:

"If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation, you must formally request accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator of Student Access Services (mhegener@skidmore.edu). You will also need to provide documentation that verifies the existence of a disability and supports your request. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center."

Student behavior patterns and the classroom

These comments focus more closely on various behavior patterns that may frustrate faculty and the motivated students in a classroom. With increasing frequency, Skidmore students themselves have been expressing frustration with some of the class-related behavior patterns that both faculty and motivated students find distracting, demoralizing, and unfair to the many diligent students who want to give serious attention to their studies.

1) *The tone and nature of faculty and student relationships*

Clearly there is a wide spectrum of how faculty and students define their interactions, and no single approach to formality, informality, partnership, or accessibility can describe what is effective for different personalities and different disciplinary cultures. The one recommendation that we have heard from faculty is for the instructor to *let the students know how he or she hopes to interact with them*. If there once existed some degree of pre-defined relationship between college students and faculty, that has long since evaporated. We have found that many students are eager, or at least receptive, to having the faculty member let them know how to interact with them. Faculty can do some of this directly as the course begins, though the faculty member's consistent modeling of the expected relationship is probably the most effective way to convey expectations to students. It may be that students need to be taught, for example,

- how they should address the faculty member;
- where the faculty member falls along the spectrum of "expert," "guide," "educational partner," or "friend";
- to what extent the faculty member shapes and oversees the classroom experience or expects shaping input from the students;
- what degree of independent thinking and research the faculty member expects from students, and how much special help the faculty member will or will not provide;
- to what extent, for what academic or personal purposes, and through what channels of communication, the faculty member is available to the students.

This list could be extended through many other complexities of human relationships; there is no simple way of saying what works best and is most appropriate. Some number of the faculty have told us that the most effective balance is a friendly desire to help students understand things coupled with clear messages about high expectations and the setting of objective and uniform standards of judgment. Further, faculty comment on the challenge of letting students know that the instructor's liking or not liking the student has no bearing on the instructor's evaluation of them. In a similar vein, in research conducted at Skidmore, students have commented frequently on their desire to be treated fairly and equitably by the faculty. The main point of this section, however, is to stress the need for faculty to define for students what is expected of them in the student-faculty relationship.

2) *Attendance*

As with every topic of this sort, faculty hold a range of views on whether the students' regular attendance is of particular importance. No faculty member wants to monitor student behavior on this level, and it is tempting to regard students as adults who are only hurting themselves when they attend classes irregularly. Some disciplines, moreover, are more comfortable than are other disciplines with regarding the evidence of exams, papers, and projects as sufficient proof that the student has mastered the course material or failed to do so. Faculty decisions about student attendance are complex and need, we believe, to consider such questions as the following:

- One has first to ask what constitutes the course one is teaching. If the course has something to do with what the faculty member says or presents in class; what questions students raise or ideas they propose in class; and, in general, the texture of interactions that often occur in the classroom, studio, and laboratory, then the students' presence in class and acting as informed participants become important threshold considerations.
- The type of college Skidmore claims to be also comes into play. Were we a distance-learning school or a large university (not to equate the two), then the activities of submitting papers and projects and taking exams might be sufficient to conclude that the student has completed the course and deserves credit for it. Skidmore presents itself to the world, however, as a college that cares deeply about close faculty and student connections in the learning enterprise and about the richness of the students' classroom involvement with the faculty and with their fellow students.
- The issue of course *credit* provides another important point of focus: setting the course grade aside, under what circumstances is it meaningful for us to award the student's course experience and performance a certain number of credits toward the Skidmore degree?
- Faculty also wonder whether an attendance policy promotes or undercuts the student's emerging adulthood. The conclusion may be that students need to make their own adult choices, but one needs also to consider, we believe, that a threshold criterion for success in the adult world of jobs and professions is the need to show up every day and work established hours. If part of our task is to prepare students with the perspectives and discipline that will help them succeed in the larger world, then perhaps we should present a model of classroom experience different from that of merely doing what one wants when one wants to.
- While some may claim that students who do not attend and participate in classes are only hurting themselves, we should be mindful of the ways lack of participation may harm the broader educational environment. According to the observations of more motivated students and the perception of many faculty, the poor attendance of some students can drag down the morale of the academic experience for other students. Motivated students also sometimes feel that the poor attendance of some students is unfair, even if there may be grade penalties for poor attendance. In any case, a potentially good group dynamic can be impaired by the spotty attendance (and lack of preparation) of some number of students. Faculty have often voiced the same concerns because of the effect on their own morale. They sometimes even feel responsible for bringing the missing students up to speed later on.
- Many Skidmore faculty do consider the students' attendance as important to the individual and collective course experience. It is common for faculty to give some weight in the grade to attendance or to participation in general. For example, it is common to see syllabi that dock the grade according to an explicit formula after the third, fourth, or fifth unexcused absence. Other faculty take a stance that is, in students' perception, less negotiable than this, in that the student is warned of impending failure after the third absence (or some other benchmark). One advantage of the precipice approach to attendance, in contrast to the sliding-scale of consequences, is that the definitive failure point is less likely to lead to negotiations and ambiguities in the minds of students. Students who are already inclined toward irregular attendance tend to use the sliding scale of consequences to calculate how many classes they can afford to miss and still get by. Some number of faculty who have

embraced a more clear-cut, less negotiable attendance policy find that, as a result, they seldom have to deal with the close monitoring of attendance.

- Finally, even in the absence of a more stringent course attendance policy, faculty are expected to honor the minimal expectation set in the *Faculty Handbook*: “any students who miss more than a third of the [class] sessions may expect to be barred from final examination. In such cases, the course grade will be recorded as *F*.”

3) Classroom breaks

Many faculty have expressed frustration with the late arrivals, early departures, and frequent bathroom breaks of some students, to say nothing of early departures for vacations and late returns after the break. The more focused students also regard these patterns as distracting and rude. These comings and goings constitute an unnecessary disruption of the academic process of the classroom, but faculty sometimes feel awkward when addressing the problem. This is, we submit, another area in which faculty cannot take students’ behavioral assumptions for granted. If their comings and goings have been tolerated for a long time, students may simply not realize what effect these patterns have on their instructors and classmates. They thus may need to be initiated into more acceptable patterns. Some faculty have found fairly comfortable means of letting students know just what patterns are expected and why. If all faculty were to address these issues with students, we could probably eliminate most of our frustrations with students’ comings and goings.

4) Extended periods of absence

Every semester some number of students (sometimes with parent involvement) request fairly long periods of time away from classes. This usually happens because of a physical or emotional illness and less often because of a planned event of importance to the family. Such requests have been of ongoing concern to the faculty and to the Office of Academic Advising. While each case needs to be considered on its own merits and in relation to the specific courses in which the student is enrolled, here are a few guidelines and practices to consider:

- Very seldom do we find a family commitment that ought to take priority over the student’s commitment to his or her studies. The faculty are thus encouraged to hold the line (tactfully but firmly) on most requests from students and parents for excused extended absences.
- The faculty’s sympathy for a student’s illness needs always to be balanced against our primary commitment as an educational institution: that is, our chief priority is the integrity of the student’s course experience and the quality of the credits awarded toward his or her Skidmore degree. These balances have to be expressed carefully so that we make clear the educational philosophy informing our decisions while not seeming insensitive to student problems.
- Both our Counseling Center and Health Services can be of inestimable help to students who are confronting stress, emotional illness, and physical illness. As these offices have often said, the illness itself does not make the student less responsible for meeting academic and other commitments if the student chooses to remain enrolled in courses. Our counseling and medical professionals do not help make excuses for students. They instead help them with

both occasional and chronic difficulties and discuss with students their health-related and academic responsibilities.

- Skidmore does not have an apparatus for brief leaves of absence during the semester. In many cases, a student facing prolonged illness should make a more serious decision and take a full semester's leave (or perhaps greatly reduce their course schedule) rather than try to juggle health problems and academic commitments.
- As a rule of thumb, the Office of Academic Advising regards a medical absence of one week as supportable for most students in most disciplines, two weeks of absence moves toward the outer edge, and three weeks may call for a tougher decision from the faculty and the student.

Each faculty member needs, of course, to come to her or his own conclusions based on their academic discipline and their assessment of the student, but we urge faculty to take a firm stance when responding to prolonged absences. The Office of Academic Advising staff often advises faculty and students on how best to manage prolonged absences; the office staff is available to help with this complicated topic.

5) *Honoring the academic calendar*

An ongoing concern of faculty and members of academic and student affairs staff has been students who trim our thirty or so weeks of instruction and final exams. We send the strongest messages we can to students and their families about the necessity of our having the students' full attention during the entire academic calendar. We encourage faculty not to be persuaded by the myriad reasons that some students (and too often their parents as well) provide for leaving early and returning late. The final exam schedule is a particular point of challenge.

The *Faculty Handbook* makes it clear that students must observe the times of and places for their scheduled exams. The issues are maintaining a serious commitment to the full academic calendar (a big morale issue), fairness to all students (equality of convenience or inconvenience), and the integrity of the exam processes (nearly every year we have a cheating incident made possible by students taking the exams at different times). Faculty need to be explicit about the exam schedule, exam integrity, what students will be expected to demonstrate on the exam, and how much time will be allowed for the final (if fewer than the usual three hours).

Of course, faculty themselves need to honor the entire academic calendar if we are to expect the same from students. A few points to consider:

- By faculty legislation, "written final examinations may not be given in whole or in part prior to the scheduled examination period." Although individual instructors have every right to schedule quizzes, hourly exams, and written assignments at the times they deem appropriate during the semester, final exams—those more cumulative and culminating tests which can be construed as "final" in nature—should be reserved for the final exam period. The final exam period may also be used to schedule non-cumulative exams, critiques, and projects. The goal is to preserve the last several weeks of the semester for *instructional* time and allow students to handle their end-of-semester load in a thorough and responsible manner.

- Skidmore policy does not allow the scheduling of events during Study Days that would distract students from study and review opportunities. Faculty may not hold exams and final presentations during this period. Review sessions to prepare for exams are acceptable as long as they are not mandatory. Additionally, curricular and co-curricular activities that are not directly related to academic work should not be scheduled by any department, program, office, or committee.
- The Monday and Tuesday prior to Thanksgiving are instructional days. Faculty thus should not cancel class or excuse absences during this period. Making special exceptions puts pressure on faculty colleagues to do the same and dissuades students from adhering to the full academic calendar.

6) Student participation and accountability

Motivated and diligent Skidmore students, of whom there are many, want to be informed participants in shaping their own education and expect to be held accountable for class preparation, work of high quality, timeliness, and regular attendance. With increasing frequency, the students complain among themselves or to the faculty when they believe the less diligent students are not being held to the same standards. They think it is unfair and demoralizing when this seems to be the case. In working over the years with many hundreds of students facing serious academic difficulties, the Office of Academic Advising has found that the dilatory or drift student is often more likely to succeed academically if he or she is held accountable to classroom standards and expectations, whereas such students are very likely *not* to succeed if they are left to their own choices and rhythms. If we are interested in their academic survival and in promoting their emerging adulthood, it is useful to provide strong external academic and behavioral structures until the point at which the student internalizes such commitments. Our experience is that the vast majority of students in serious academic trouble, including those who are disqualified from further study at Skidmore, have plenty of intellectual ability and may reward the faculty's extra educational efforts.

It is important, of course, to help students feel involved in and responsible for the courses they are taking. This is undoubtedly the most important aspect of classroom accountability. Faculty sometimes express frustration that some students repeatedly come unprepared to class and seem to feel no embarrassment about being an uninformed and uninvolved warm body. Motivated students often object to what they perceive to be special treatment of students who are not meeting classroom responsibilities. Faculty have the right to expect all Skidmore students to take full advantage of their academic opportunities and to meet the standards and expectations set forth by the faculty.

7) Respect, civility, and politeness

The large majority of Skidmore students act in a civil, respectful manner toward one another and toward the faculty. Students also usually understand that dialectical exchanges and disagreements in and outside the classroom are an important dimension of the life of the mind in a college environment. It can no longer be taken for granted, however, that all college students will act with respect and civility. Every member of our community, not least of all the faculty, has the right to expect civil discourse in the exchange of ideas and perspectives. Faculty are

encouraged not to ignore or be intimidated by a student who does not observe an appropriate degree of respect (allowing, of course, for the disagreements and frustrations that all individuals experience and have the right to express). Faculty should confront inappropriate behavior, when possible addressing it outside the classroom but in a secure setting (for example, in one's office but with the knowledge of neighboring colleagues). If faculty need advice or help with a problematic student relationship, they should consult with a department or program colleague, their department chair or program director, the Associate Dean of the Faculty for Student Academic Affairs, Office of Academic Advising staff, or with the Dean of Students and Vice President for Student Affairs. These offices and colleagues will be glad to offer strategies or even to meet with the faculty member and the student if the faculty member desires.

8) Disruptive or threatening student behavior

Skidmore has some experience with what seems to be increasing across the nation's college campuses: students who act in an intimidating or threatening way toward their fellow students or toward the faculty and staff, or whose behavior seriously disrupts the academic processes of the classroom. We do not know enough about this phenomenon to analyze its causes, but we do need to prepare ourselves to respond effectively.

Faculty do not all share the same level of comfort with addressing disruptive behavior; each faculty member must first assess his or her individual level of comfort and willingness to address the inappropriate behavior with a student. The Associate Dean of Faculty for Student Academic Affairs, the Counseling Center, and the Office of Academic Advising have all engaged in numerous conversations with faculty who request suggestions on how to approach a potentially troubled student. Others are not comfortable with any interaction and ask the Associate Dean or Office of Academic Advising staff to intervene on their behalf. .

In some extreme cases of disruptive and/or disrespectful student behavior, it may be necessary for an instructor to request that the student be placed on a "behavior contract" that clearly delineates the instructor's expectations and the consequences of failure to meet them or that the student be withdrawn from the course in order to ensure the educational rights of other students, to protect the personal and pedagogical rights of the instructor, or to protect the personal or academic well being of an individual student. Such a request is handled through a deliberative process involving the instructor, department chairperson or program director, and the Associate Dean of the Faculty for Student Academic Affairs. The process is described in detail in the *Advising Guide, Faculty Edition* and in the Committee on Academic Standing's (CAS) Operating Code. Both documents are available on the Office of Academic Advising's website. As described in the *Student Handbook*, formal charges of sexual and gender-based misconduct are investigated by the Title IX Coordinator and brought before an Administrative Hearing Board. Questions about this process may be directed to either Joel Aure, Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator, or the Associate Dean of Faculty for Student Academic Affairs.

Academic integrity and the ethics of scholarship

Academic integrity is another area in which today's college students generally need instruction. One cannot assume that students will know about the different resources and discovery processes available in different academic areas, how to use these resources with discrimination, how and when to move ahead with one's own ideas, the rules of evidence and research, the usefulness and limits of collaborative learning projects, or the strict college protocols for acknowledging the work of other students and scholars. These issues must become an integral part of classroom instruction, in many cases even at the 300-level, if we expect students to understand and honor our value system and to grow as scholars. While faculty regularly discuss academic integrity issues with students, all faculty from time to time confront cheating, plagiarism, and other academic integrity violations. Here we offer some strategies to consider and the steps to take if you discover an integrity violation:

- Establish your integrity expectations clearly and positively as part of the intellectual process and content of each course. Consider, for example, including an academic integrity statement on the syllabus.
- Consider devoting time in class, and through your syllabus, to proper citation methods for your course or discipline. Define the limits of allowable collaboration.
- If you believe you are facing a case of student academic dishonesty, consult Skidmore's *Definitions and Guidelines* (published online in the *Student Handbook*, in the *Academic Integrity Handbook*, and accessible as a stand-alone document through the Office of the Associate Dean of the Faculty for Student Academic Affairs' academic Integrity portal).
- Talk privately with the student about your suspicions or certainty, trying to treat the issue in a relatively dispassionate and objective manner. Try not to be impressed or swayed by initial student anger, denial, tears, or special pleading; rather, address the evidence, the problem, and the expectations of the Honor Code. (This advice stems from backlash problems we sometimes encounter when a faculty member becomes too personally and morally connected to the student's integrity violation.) Keep a written record of your interactions with the student.
- If you decide to respond directly to the infraction, please work within the Skidmore integrity definitions and penalty guidelines. The most typical Skidmore faculty response to a plagiarized paper or to cheating on an exam is to fail the student on that academic exercise; however, more or less severe consequences may be warranted.
- **Report all demonstrable academic integrity infractions, and your response, in writing to the Associate Dean of Faculty for Student Academic Affairs.** (Note that Skidmore faculty have committed themselves to full reporting in the *Faculty Handbook* and through subsequent faculty legislation of 1995 and 2000.) You should also supply a copy of the academic material in question and, for a plagiarism, a copy of the source or sources. Failure to report an infraction may help hide a recurrent pattern across several classes. It also results in unequal justice.
- You may prefer to request an Administrative Board hearing. Consult the Associate Dean on this option and the process. Note that a student who denies responsibility may also request a formal hearing.

- If the reported infraction turns out to be a second offense, the Skidmore faculty expects that the appropriate sanction for the student is a one-semester disciplinary suspension. The student may ask that an Administrative Hearing Board review their case. In this circumstance, the faculty member involved in each infraction may be invited to participate as affected parties. Note that the vast majority of infractions are single offenses and are resolved as the individual faculty member intends, without a formal hearing being requested or required.

Grades and grading practices

Grading is often one of the most sensitive areas when we discuss academic standards and expectations. These notes will skirt the question of whether grades at Skidmore are inflated and, if so, what the causes of that phenomenon might be. Instead, here are a few practical suggestions about grades:

- As has been suggested in the previous section about the course syllabus, a faculty member's grading criteria need to be carefully stated up front so that students know how they are going to be evaluated, including the relative values of the different course assignments. This practice not only responds to a common desire to know how one is to be judged but also guards against debates later on.
- It is also useful to set forth the quality criteria to be used on the various assignments, whether revision and rewriting of assignments are acceptable, and the penalties for late or missing work. For example, does missing work count as a zero, or is it treated the same as an "F" for a submitted project of poor quality?
- A few departments or programs (or at least faculty teaching in the same area of a department) have successfully joined forces in agreeing upon and announcing grading standards. These agreements have strengthened the faculty's ability to award grades with greater consistency, with an enhanced sense of quality standards, and with improved objectivity. We also encourage discussions of this sort among faculty.
- Some faculty have successfully implemented a policy that simply does not allow for any late work. If one makes this clear at the outset of the course, and explains why the course assignments move along according to a desirable intellectual pattern and developing skills, students will generally rule out the possibility of attempting to hand in late work. If the faculty member does hear a serious extenuating reason, he or she might decide to accept the one late assignment but then make clear to the student that any late work in the future will not be accepted. This unambiguous practice can actually reduce or eliminate the faculty member's monitoring of assignment deadlines.
- The grade of "Incomplete," according to long-standing Skidmore principle, is supposed to be used rarely and only for the student "who has diligently completed a substantial amount of the course work but who, because of serious and unforeseen academic, medical, or personal difficulties, has been unable to complete the work for the course" (quoted from the section on "Grades" in the [Skidmore College Catalog](#)). Each semester the Committee on Academic Standing (CAS), during its biannual review of student academic records, expresses concern that some number of Incompletes depart from this practice because of misplaced sympathy on a faculty member's part. In other words, the student awarded the Incomplete has not been

diligent, has not completed most of the course work, and seems to have no serious extenuating circumstance. Sometimes, in fact, the student has hardly ever been involved in the course and still receives the opportunity to complete the work. The CAS is concerned about the (eventual) awarding of credits and grades to students under these circumstances and about the fairness to other students whose records are up for review with respect to minimum continuation standards.

- A student has the right to be informed in a timely and clear manner of the basis for the evaluation of his or her academic performance in a course, and a student is entitled to fair, equitable treatment in his or her academic relationships with members of the faculty. In most, if not all instances, the College expects any misunderstanding regarding grading will be resolved informally, either in writing or in discussions, between a student and an instructor.
- Legislation in the *Faculty Handbook* says that no grade, once it is turned in to the Registrar, may be changed, except for computational or clerical error or in the special case of an appeal of a final failing grade (see below). Faculty adopted these restrictions to be fair to all students, to ward off grade mongering requests, and to bring each term's complex process of awarding some 11,000 grades to a close. The Office of Academic Advising and the Committee on Academic Standing are very supportive of the strict limitation on grade changes. When the Office of Academic Advising receives grade complaints from students (usually about final grades), staff explain these principles to them. Sometimes the staff suggest cooperative ways in which the student can ask the faculty member how he or she arrived at the grade—not so that the grade can be changed but so that the student can learn something for improving work in the future.

In Spring 2010, the faculty adopted a grade appeal policy pertaining to final failing grades. The policy to appeal a final failing grade is described in the *Faculty Handbook* (Part Two, III, D). This policy does not apply to non-failing final grades or to grades received on individual course assignments.

- A few students each year vigorously pursue grade disputes not addressed by the policy to appeal a final failing grade. Students who wish to question a particular grade (for an individual assignment or for the course as a whole) should do so *soon* after notice of the grade has been given. They should request an explanation of the grade from the course instructor, who holds final responsibility for his or her grading criteria and judgments. If, after consultation with the instructor and the department chairperson, the student believes the grade reflects a severe bias or unfair practice on the part of the instructor, the student may present evidence to the Committee on Academic Freedom and Rights (CAFR). However, CAFR does not hear routine grade dispute cases that should be resolved within the department. Note that CAFR does not have the authority to change a grade, but the committee can consider inquiries, complaints, and formal charges of violations of academic freedom and rights related to grades (in addition to a range of other matters concerning academic freedom and rights brought to the committee's attention by any faculty member or student).

Handling the student course evaluations

Faculty continue to re-examine the structure and purposes of the student course evaluations. In the current system, each course must be evaluated both by the short form supplied by the Dean

of the Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs Office and by whatever longer form the individual departments or programs use. Students are sometimes skeptical about the effect of their evaluations of faculty; they are also concerned that faculty may connect the student's name with his or her evaluation. It is a useful practice to let students know that the evaluations are important to the faculty as they assess their teaching efforts and that the evaluations are considered in promotion and tenure processes. It is also useful to let students know exactly how the evaluations will be handled and to assure them that the faculty member will not be able to connect comments with individual students.

Many faculty administer the evaluations the last class day. Note that faculty being evaluated should never handle the short or long-form evaluations but should have them collected and returned to the department or program office by a member of the class or another appointed person. Faculty should never view the long-form evaluations until the student name has been removed and until after his or her grades have been submitted. We also strongly advise that faculty leave the room when course evaluations are being administered. Students sometimes complain that the faculty member's presence adds an element of pressure to the process, making it seem less confidential.

Office hours and advising

There is no Skidmore standard for the number of faculty office hours each week, though usually we mention 3-5 hours per week as a benchmark, with other hours by appointment. The [Faculty Handbook](#) (Part I, VII.C.4) on academic obligations mentions that "Faculty members will post and observe regular office hours for consultation and guidance of students and will report those hours to the department Chair."

Academic advising

The Office of Academic Advising is committed to supporting and enhancing a strong academic advising system and views advising as an extension of teaching. Staff in the Office of Academic Advising regularly conduct conversations with faculty about the quality and status of advising at Skidmore. We need to determine the most compelling means of bringing students and faculty together for advising, how advising enriches the students' academic and personal experience (according to student as well as faculty perspectives), where advising fits into faculty workloads, what credit and recognition faculty might achieve for good advising, how we might assess the quality of advising and improve its effectiveness, and how we will integrate new electronic resources with advising and registration processes.

We treat advising as a significant part of our teaching mission, not as a mechanical process or as the advisor's giving or withholding of permission. As the *Advising Handbook, Faculty Edition* states, "Good advising is both information-based as well as reflective and philosophical. The faculty advisor can help the student comprehend issues of intellectual and personal growth as well as discover a wide variety of intellectual, personal, and career-related links beyond the student's immediate experience. A faculty advisor can also encourage the advisee to consider new opportunities and raise new questions about his or her academic life, help the advisee clarify

intellectual and personal aspirations, and help the student appreciate the relationships between liberal learning and life after Skidmore.” Faculty advisors often provide specific information and broader contexts, often suggest questions or options to be explored, and direct students to the resources they might need; however, students themselves remain centrally responsible for their academic choices.

Advising is a significant educational responsibility of all full-time Skidmore faculty. In most cases, faculty who have just joined the institution are not assigned advisees, though they may be asked to advise during their second or third year of teaching. The Office of Academic Advising works with the First-Year Experience program as well as department chairs and program directors to make advising assignments for new, incoming students (for first-year students and transfer students). First-year students register for a section of the SSP-100 Scribner Seminars and the instructor acts as the student’s academic advisor and mentor. For transfer students, whenever possible, the connection is made through a course taught by the advisor and/or the student’s anticipated major.

Students remain responsible for officially requesting a change of advisor (especially at the time for declaring a major), though the Office of Academic Advising and the department chairs and program directors are glad to guide the selection. The Office of Academic Advising coordinates the faculty advising system, informs its practices, offers workshops to improve advising quality both on an informational and philosophical level, and provides back-up for the more complex issues related to advising.

Students seeking a greater academic challenge

Individual faculty are the greatest resource for students eager for more sophisticated work, improved dialogues with other students, and special opportunities for research. Faculty often work with such students within the regular course structures or suggest that students consider other credit-bearing activities, including courses offered through the Periclean Honors Forum, independent study projects, or an interdisciplinary minor. Faculty also might recommend that students meet motivated students through Periclean Honors Forum events or other student cultural and academic organizations, participate in the annual Academic Festival, locate a stimulating internship or volunteer service project, or plan a course of study abroad. Skidmore also has a variety of undergraduate research opportunities, including the faculty/student research program during the summer and Student Opportunity Funds for projects during the academic year. The College also provides support for faculty working with students on national merit scholarships and fellowships and graduate studies. The Office of Academic Advising and the Student Academic Development Coordinator is pleased to guide motivated students toward these and other options. First-year students also might be advised to consult with the Director of the First-Year Experience on a range of possibilities.

Students experiencing academic problems

As in the case of students seeking academic challenges, Skidmore’s faculty are noted for offering to help students in their classes who want to work more successfully. In their teaching and

advising roles, faculty are also urged to become familiar with formal academic support services provided by the Office of Student Academic Services, which provides peer tutoring services, organizes study groups, and offers programs on enhancing study skills. The office staff also includes the Coordinator for Student Access Services. Students may also wish to consult with The Philip Boshoff Writing Center, the World Languages & Literatures Resources Center, and the MCS Computing Lab.

The Office of Academic Advising also counsels many students and faculty each year regarding a range of academic difficulties. Office staff welcome inquiries or suggestions from faculty on all matters affecting students' academic lives.

An important part of Skidmore's response to students in serious academic jeopardy is the system of notices for unsatisfactory work. The Office of Academic Advising maintains an [Academic Alert form](#) for reporting unsatisfactory work to office staff as well as to the student and his or her faculty advisor.

While faculty are not required to use Academic Alert notices, they are our only means of responding on several useful levels to students in jeopardy and our only way of knowing if students are floundering in more than one course. The notices have many times proved an effective means of getting the student's attention. The Office of Academic Advising has a carefully defined process for using the notices, depending on the student's class year (for example, usually devoting more attention to first-year students than to seniors) and degree of jeopardy (for example, making a more concerted response to students who are already on academic probation). Staff also use the notices to recommend appropriate referrals to the Office of Student Academic Services (including the Coordinator for Student Access Services), the Counseling Center, Health Services, the Office of Residential Life, and other offices and programs.

Resources for faculty

Department chairs, program directors, and other faculty colleagues

A department chair or program director is, among other things, responsible for the quality of instruction in his or her academic unit and can often be an excellent resource, especially for newer members of the department or program. Chairs and directors are experienced faculty, and they also tend to hear about a broad spectrum of faculty teaching strategies and student responses to the various teaching efforts. Individual colleagues can often serve a similar purpose. Some departments and programs have in fact developed a coherent department culture that can help guide and support faculty within the discipline. We encourage all departments and programs to consider whether they can come to similar "cultural" agreements, ones that are especially devoted to helping integrate new faculty into the more successful department and program expectations and processes.

Center for Leadership, Teaching, and Learning

Skidmore's Center for Leadership, Teaching, and Learning is dedicated to the support and advancement of effective teaching and learning practices and to the professional development of all members of the campus teaching community. The Center works with faculty, program directors, and administrators to further develop and sustain a culture at Skidmore that values and rewards the teacher/scholar/citizen. The Center's primary mission is to promote effective, diverse, creative, and innovative learning environments in which all our teachers and students can excel.

The Associate Dean of the Faculty for Student Academic Affairs

The Associate Dean is a resource for faculty, students, and families regarding any academic policy matter, including those related to student academic standing and integrity, term and graduation honors, special academic opportunities, disruptive behavior in the classroom, advising, and the curriculum. The Associate Dean works closely with the Registrar's Office, the Office of Academic Advising, the Office of the First-Year Experience, the Opportunity Program, and the Office of Off-Campus Study & Exchanges to administer the academic program. The Coordinator of Credit-Bearing Internships and Project Funds and the Student Academic Development Coordinator also report to this associate dean.

The Associate Dean of the Faculty for Faculty Affairs

The Associate Dean is vitally concerned with the effectiveness of teaching at Skidmore and supports high quality teaching in many ways, including, for example, orientation for new faculty, faculty development workshops, department-centered discussions, faculty grants, and pedagogy discussions. The Associate Dean can help organize or contribute to discussions of every academic nature. The Director of Faculty Development and the Office of Sponsored Research report to this associate dean.

The Office of Academic Advising

The Office of Academic Advising oversees Skidmore's faculty-based advising system and participates in reviewing and reporting student academic status. The office is committed to fostering strong academic standards while at the same time offering academic support, special academic opportunities, and guidance for all students. The Academic Advising staff are involved in many of the faculty's academic processes and committees and offer assistance in developing and implementing academic policies, curricular goals, and advising resources. The Office collaborates with Student Academic Services to provide support services for students, addresses academic problems or dispute resolution, and handles interactions among faculty, students, and parents.

The Offices of the Registrar and Institutional Research

The Offices of the Registrar and Institutional Research inform faculty discussions and inquiries with data, histories, and ideas. The Registrar's Office participates in the majority of curricular decisions made by the faculty and, where appropriate, bears the responsibility of monitoring (and enforcing) the results for individual students. The Office of Institutional Research conducts major surveys that sample our students' academic experiences and curricular and co-curricular

expectations and supports offices institution-wide with data and analysis to inform decision-making.

The First-Year Experience Program

This office works with the personal transitions of first-year students to college life, with their developing intellectual and personal interests, and with leadership opportunities for all students. The Director of the First-Year Experience can provide guidance on these opportunities and can suggest how students might merge and mutually enhance their academic and co-curricular aspirations.

Off-Campus Study and Exchanges

More than half of our students complete part of their studies in a program abroad, and many more pursue international course work at Skidmore. The Office of Off-Campus Study & Exchanges can help students and faculty explore exchange programs in the United States and Canada and international educational options in just about every part of the world in connection with every field of study.

The Dean of Students and Vice President for Student Affairs

The Dean of Students and Vice President for Student Affairs oversees a broad range of programs and services designed to promote academic success, co-curricular life, and personal development. The DoS/VPSA and the resources of the Student Affairs staff help inform faculty discussions as well as respond to individual cases.

Student Academic Services

The Office of Student Academic Services provides a wide variety of services to promote academic achievement and help students take full advantage of the academic opportunities available at Skidmore. As part of the college's commitment to academic excellence, the office serves all students interested in improving their academic performance, attending graduate school, or working as a tutor on campus. The office organizes peer tutoring and study groups, and offers one-on-one or small group academic support. Student Academic Services also offers support to students who receive Academic Alert notices. The office works on a variety of issues with international students, students of color, and athletes. Student Academic Services sponsors workshops and provides assistance to students submitting applications for specialized post-graduation scholarships. The office also provides English as a Second Language (ESL) support and works with students with disabilities.

Career Development Center

Among its many functions, the Career Development Center provides students and faculty with explicit information on links between a college education and careers and professions, graduate school information, and a vast library of internship possibilities.

The Counseling Center

While staff in the Counseling Center must hold in confidence their counseling interactions with individual students, the staff can provide informed general advice to faculty who believe they are

working with a student facing a temporary or chronic emotional difficulty. Staff can also give advice on making an effective referral to the Center.

Other Resources

There are so many other resources at Skidmore to help faculty with academic and classroom-related issues that the list could go on at great length. Among the many areas to be mentioned in this context are:

- *The Philip Boshoff Writing Center*
- *Health Services*
- *Residential Life*
- *Opportunity Program*

Concluding reflections

Within the bounds of good sense and fairness, and within the frameworks that the faculty as a whole or the academic departments and programs have formally embraced, individual Skidmore faculty are responsible for deciding just how to conduct their courses, what materials and perspectives to include, and what educational goals are to be achieved. The suggestions contained in this document cannot and should not infringe upon that extraordinarily important principle of academic freedom or upon the many case-by-case decisions that good instructors must make in relation to their students.

With that central principle in mind, we encourage faculty to continue to discuss teaching priorities and strategies and the challenges of enhancing and sustaining academic standards and expectations in an effort to come to further areas of general agreement. Individual Skidmore faculty experience has already shown that classroom structures and protocols that are philosophically grounded and carefully explained to students actually lead to *less*, not more, faculty monitoring of students and imposing of penalties. Such structures can enable both faculty and students to set aside the administration of the rules and focus their full attention on the academic substance of the course. The academic tone and tenor of the College will be strengthened by strong and more uniform expectations from the Skidmore faculty as a whole. In turn, we believe that the majority of our students, including some number of those who are currently under-achieving, will rise to the occasion and achieve academic excellence.