

The Residential Life Plan (RLP)

This draft statement summarizes current planning for new residential, dining, and social facilities at Skidmore College. Its specific recommendations grow out of the work of a tripartite group formed in the fall of 2002. The plan incorporates recommendations from several reports – “The Distillation Report,” “The Plan for Skidmore,” the proposed “Academic Vision Statement,” “The Athletic Review Committee Report,” and “The Report of the Subcommittee on Academic Excellence” – and follows extensive conversations among students, alumni, faculty, staff, and trustees, most significantly conversations regarding strategic planning, academic vision, retention, and residential facilities.

The RLP reflects our conviction about the importance of the residential experience and the critical contribution the out-of-class experience makes to excellence, learning, and personal development. It also responds to student dissatisfaction with Moore Hall, concerns about the quality of social life on campus, and the need for better recreation and dining facilities.

Vision

Skidmore College is a residential liberal arts college recognized for the excellence of its teaching, the creative and scholarly work of its faculty, and the ability of its graduates. At Skidmore, social and co-curricular life should purposefully complement, support, and enhance the Skidmore academic experience. Students working with their housemates and other residents should foster engagement, creativity, and discourse. Community life in the residence halls should celebrate accomplishment, facilitate personal responsibility, and support responsible and active citizenship. The residential community also provides a “home” where students relax, reflect, and play. These aspirations are borne out by a tradition of student leadership, active clubs and organizations, a close relationship with Saratoga Springs, and a campus that sings with creative expression.

Although there is much to admire about student life at Skidmore, the College faces several important challenges. We must strengthen the link between the academic and residential program (especially for first- and second-year students), complete the move to the “new” campus by closing Moore Hall, and expand our total residential capacity by 200 to 300 beds to bring more of our students now living off-campus back into the residential community. The College will address aspects of student culture that impede engagement and detract from excellence by bringing upper-class students back campus and fostering the contributions these students can make as role models and mentors to younger students. Expanding residential capacity on campus will also reduce detrimental effects to the local housing market. We must improve our social and recreational facilities so they more effectively support community life. We also must modernize our dining facilities so that the dining experience effectively supports our ambitions.

In addition, implementing the RLP will enable the Office of the Dean of Special Programs to engage in further program development and growth, including revenue growth, in ways not

currently possible. Moore Hall's construction and locations impede its full use in the summer; conditions in Scribner Village make attracting some potential users difficult; and the current space available simply limits the possibility for new programs and growth in existing programming.

The general goals elaborated here support the College's commitment to excellence, and they are ambitious. They confront problems on campus while building on our strengths and furthering our aspirations. These plans will require significant capital investments as well as changes in policy and staffing.

As excited as we are about the RLP, we are mindful of the "construction fatigue" on campus as well as concerns about investments in plant diverting funds as opposed to investment in human capital. Even so, we believe that this project is critical to institutional success, and we are convinced we can develop the project as largely self-supporting.

Residential Facilities

You must allow space for contemplation and for play; privacy for thinking and study; and a pervasive atmosphere which will be at the same time serious and gay, somber and warm, traditional and forward-looking...

– *Charge to the Architects and Planners, Josephine Young Case*

The Skidmore is located on an extraordinarily beautiful "campus in the woods." Forty years young, the facility is simultaneously growing and showing its age. Over the past decade, the College has renovated and expanded the Scribner Library, Dana Science Center, athletic facilities, and Case College Center. The next comprehensive campaign anticipates a new music building and renovated classrooms in Filene. Despite these improvements, and others anticipated, significant challenges remain. The move to the new campus remains incomplete, residential facilities are aging and in need of renewal, and nearly a quarter of our students currently live off campus.

The problems with Moore Hall are well known. Its distance from campus, inadequate parking, large shared bathrooms, limited amenities, age, and appearance make it unpopular with students. It is also costly to maintain. This plan assumes the College will close Moore Hall and construct new residential facilities on campus by the start of the 2005–06 academic year.

Surveys of student satisfaction, roundtable discussions with alumni, and conversations with members of the faculty, staff, and Board of Trustees all point to the importance of closing Moore Hall and expanding opportunities for student housing on campus. Moore is traditionally a hall for second-year and transfer students, and many of those students resist the assignment. We believe that closing Moore will improve retention among this group.

We also must renovate or replace Scribner Village. Students like these apartment-style accommodations, but the wood-frame buildings have already been in service 10 years longer

than expected. Any delay in planning for the renovation or replacement of Scribner only postpones the inevitable, and potentially increases the cost of the project.

Although the residence halls on the upper campus are the newest residential facilities with many years of useful life remaining, they will require extensive renovations over the coming years. The College has converted Starbuck and Barrett centers to offices and some of the common areas to residential rooms. Contemporary building codes require sprinkler systems, and students need more space (and electric power) for computers and other electronic equipment, as well as space for study, recreation, creative work, and rehearsal. The College must develop spaces where students living in the traditional residence halls can gather for group study, discussion, play, and social events. The campus must be the kind of place where students can live comfortably and work productively.

Since a full renovation of the residence halls is not possible at this time, the RLP anticipates three phases. The first phase will add approximately 350 beds in 2-, 3-, and 4-bedroom garden-style apartments in an area north of Scribner Village. During this phase, the College will renovate the dining hall and add social space. These additional beds will permit the College to close Moore Hall and house more students on campus. When this phase of the project is complete, the College will have approximately 1,250 beds in traditional residence halls on the campus for first- and second- year students and staff and approximately 650 beds in apartment-style units for upper class students.

The second phase will involve renovating or replacing Scribner Village, and the third phase will involve renovating the traditional residence halls.

Dining

The experience of eating together is critical to community life and student satisfaction. The dining halls are places where students talk with other students, foster friendships, and relax. The dining halls must be comfortable, inviting places where students of diverse backgrounds engaged with various disciplines come together with peers as well as members of the faculty and staff to consider the events of the day. The dining halls on campus presently do not facilitate this kind of interaction. They are old-style “all you can eat” cafeterias open only to students on the meal plan or those willing to pay for a full meal. The rooms are large and loud, hardly conducive to lingering and conversing.

The Spa and Burgess Café complement the dining halls, but these areas are not fully integrated into the dining plan. During the day upper-class students, faculty, and staff use these facilities, while first- and second-year students eat in the dining halls. In the evening, faculty, staff, and students rarely eat in the main dining halls. The facilities and the structure of the dining program unfortunately restrict the social interaction between older and younger students and diminish the sense of community on campus. We believe the dining facilities and program must be organized so that all members of the campus community can routinely dine together.

The College must implement the recommendations of the June 2002 program review of food service, especially those recommendations concerned with more flexible meal plans, including fuller use of a declining-balance or points system, improving the ambiance of the central dining hall, and serving a freshly prepared “fourth” meal.

Social Life

Social life is critical to admissions, student satisfaction, and ultimately student engagement and excellence. It is the “informal” time when a student chooses to be with friends, most often between 10:00 p.m. and 4:00 a.m. A 1996 report detailed numerous fine programs, many of them still in place, but noted several serious shortcomings in Skidmore social life – the connection between social life and alcohol, the need for a late-night informal social space that serves food, the difficulty in using certain locations on campus for larger social activities, and the need to support transportation for weekend outings.

Discussions about strategic planning, the student cultures project, and various surveys suggest that some of the problems with the social life at Skidmore have not changed in the last eight years. The *CORE Survey* and the recent *Princeton Review* remind us of how central alcohol and perhaps other drugs are to current social life at Skidmore. The renovations in Case Center have added office space for clubs and organizations, and the Burgess Café offers limited food service later in the evening than the service available in 1996. But the campus still lacks space for larger student gatherings and performances.

We believe that problems arise in part because of the definition of social life at Skidmore. Social life is often viewed as separate from academic and co-curricular life; it is dependent on the student-administered activities fee; and the College has invested little in social and recreational infrastructure or program. Two issues – common space and recreation facilities and programs – are the most frequently discussed shortcomings. We agree, but these are not the only issues. For example, *Totally Free Movies*, a popular weekend program, shows recent movies in Gannett Auditorium far from food service, in a setting used most often for classes. The lack of resources devoted to residence life programming after 10:00 p.m. drives students downtown and limits student choice. These factors also mean that some students will not feel that they “fit in,” a problem that leads in part to high rates of attrition among first- and second-year students.

Social Space

The need for social space on campus is a longstanding concern in Student Affairs. Indeed, planning for a large social space to complement the occasional availability of the gymnasium, Dance Theatre, and dining halls and the smaller venues in Case Center and Falstaff’s has proceeded off and on for at least 15 years. The All College Council (ACC) Subcommittee on Space Planning met throughout the 1989-1990 academic year and again throughout 1995-1996, and an SGA subcommittee on social space met throughout the academic year 1991-1992. These deliberations always reached similar conclusions: The College needs social space suitable for

large social events and student performances. However, resources were always constrained, and other proprieties took precedence.

The RLP plan includes a large Common Building that will provide space suitable for concerts, events, and parties. This building will be conveniently accessible, but located so that noise does not disturb the library, students in residence halls, or neighbors. This new structure should provide practice and performance space for groups such as the Cabaret Troupe and the Dynamics, and it should be aesthetically appropriate for use during events such as Family Weekend and Reunion as well summer programs.

Recreation

Recreation programs promoting health, fitness, and social interaction also support engagement, satisfaction, and academic accomplishment. Recreational programs influence admission decisions, support community life, and help students develop a healthy lifestyle.

Goal 3 of “The Plan for Skidmore” calls for the College to “enhance recreation, health, and fitness facilities and programs.” In a May 2002 report, the Athletic Review Committee (ARC) discussed the lack of a fitness/wellness program, the limited availability of the pool, weight room, and cardiovascular center for students and employees, the lack of support for scheduled recreational classes, and the low level of attention given to intramural sports. “The ARC Report” also noted the interest among students and employees for reinstating aerobic and yoga classes and recommended employing a recreational director to oversee programming and personnel linked to fitness and wellness, as well as identifying various improvements needed in the intramural program.

“The ARC Report” confirmed Skidmore’s traditional view that recreation was part of athletics broadly defined and properly a division of Academic Affairs. We are not challenging this philosophical or administrative arrangement or the commitment of the department to recreation and fitness. But the intercollegiate program, the physical activities courses, and the research interests of the exercise science faculty are strong competitors for resources and space in the Sports and Recreation Center. The College needs additional recreation and fitness facilities, and we believe including recreation and fitness space in the residential facilities responds to students’ needs as well as national trends. We also believe the College should develop an administrative structure to coordinate the activities of the recreational director envisioned in the ARC report with student affairs programs and staff.

Rigor

The Committee on Educational Policy and Planning (CEPP) and other faculty groups have over the past ten years repeatedly discussed rigor and the level of “comfort” or support students require. The report of the Subcommittee on Academic Excellence dated April 1995 stated that “a certain sense of complacency in requiring less-than-demanding levels of study exists because

the community as a whole is not endorsing a more rigorous approach. Are we really asking all of our students in all of our classes to stretch, to struggle, to confront difficulties squarely?"

"The Distillation Report" (2001) identified the balance between attitudes of nurturing versus challenging as one of three issues Skidmore needed to address. As one alumnus participating in a roundtable stated, "Skidmore is too caring, not challenging enough." The proposed academic vision echoes these themes: "We should also become more willing to confront students who are not motivated to perform up to their intellectual potential. Establishing a higher degree of academic excellence will demand an increased sense of responsibility for both faculty and students."

Results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) suggest that some first- and second-year students at Skidmore are disappointed in their peers, especially for an apparent lack of commitment to academics, and they believe the College does not sufficiently challenge students. The NESSE findings confirm what admissions data and anecdotal evidence have shown for several years: Skidmore is attracting better, more committed students, and in turn those students are demanding a more rigorous and challenging academic program.

The residential program must also consider how to enhance support for engagement and excellence. Are our residential facilities and program sufficient and appropriate? Are the residence halls well designed to permit study, creative work, and quiet reflection? Does community life at Skidmore promote personal responsibility and active citizenship? How can the benefits of returning upper class students to on campus residency improve student culture? This RLP anticipates a thorough review of the residential life program and staffing to study of ways to better integrate the residential and academic programs.

Retention

Graduation rates are lower at Skidmore than those at our peer institutions. Women are more likely than men to withdraw from Skidmore before graduation, but the profile of withdrawing students is otherwise similar to the profile of graduating students. Attrition among first- and second-year students is especially problematic.

Dissatisfaction with social and general campus environment is the most frequently cited reasons for withdrawing from Skidmore. Complaints about a social life too focused on alcohol, a lack of social activities, and trouble fitting in socially are common. Skidmore's reputation as a party school is a long-standing concern recently reinforced when the Fall 2003 *Princeton Review* named Skidmore as the number one school in "reefer madness." More recently, the local community has expressed concern about the behavior of Skidmore students at large parties off campus.

The problem with alcohol and other drugs is not just a matter of reputation. College surveys suggest Skidmore students begin using drugs and alcohol at a younger age than students at other colleges do, and Skidmore students engage in high-risk drinking more often than the students at

peer institutions. The problem is especially serious among first-and second-year students living away from home for the first time and facing many new social and academic challenges.

The College has not invested enough attention and other resources in the facilities and programs that support community life. The fiscal resources required for moving from downtown to the new campus and developing a first-rate academic program combined with students' interest in and demand for self-determination were closely aligned and, until very recently, the system was satisfactory. However, Skidmore's improved academic profile, the interests of our finest students, and our ambitions suggest a need for more investment in residential, social, and dining facilities and program.