

April 11, 2006

Report to the
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students
of
Skidmore College
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866
by
An Evaluation Team representing the
Middle States Commission on Higher Education

Prepared after study of the institution's self-study report
and a visit to the campus on March 19-22, 2006

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October 9-11, 2005

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This report represents the views of the evaluation team as interpreted by the Chair; it goes directly to the institution before being considered by the Commission. It is a confidential document prepared as an educational service for the benefit of the institution. All comments in the report are made in good faith, in an effort to assist Skidmore College. This report is based solely on an educational evaluation of the institution and of the manner in which it appears to be carrying out its educational mission.

AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

President

Dr. Philip A Glotzbach

Chief Academic Officer

Dr. Charles M. Joseph

Chair of the Board of Trustees

Ms. Suzanne C. Thomas

I. Context and Nature of the Visit

Skidmore College is a private, coeducational liberal arts college in Saratoga Springs, NY, which in 2005-06 enrolls approximately 2400 students in 65 undergraduate academic majors. It is licensed to operate in New York. It was initially accredited in 1925. Its last accreditation was 2001.

The College offers predominantly bachelor's degrees and one master's degree. It also offers non-credit continuing education courses. It has no branch campuses.

Skidmore College chose to do a focused Self-Study centered on the theme of student engagement. The Self-Study has three chapters: The First-Year Experience Re-examined; The Natural Sciences: Current Strategic Planning and the Role of Student Engagement; and Student Engagement with Domestic Diversity, Global Awareness, and Intercultural Understanding.

Led by a large and broadly based committee comprised of administrators, faculty, students, and trustees, the self-study process reached out in multiple ways to the larger Skidmore community.

II. Affirmation of Continued Compliance with Eligibility Requirements

Based on review of the Self-Study, other institutional documents, meetings, and interviews, the team affirms that the institution continues to meet eligibility requirements 1-7.

III. Compliance with Federal Requirements; Issues Relative to State Regulatory or Other Accrediting Agency Requirements

Based on review of the Self-Study, other institutional documents, and interviews, the team affirms that the institution's Title IV cohort default rate is within federal limits.

IV. Compliance with Accreditation Standards

The Standards. The institution's compliance with all fourteen standards was vouched for by the three generalist evaluators who conducted a document review on their visit to the Skidmore campus October 9-11, 2005. One of the generalists, Neil Weissman, also joined the team which visited the campus on March 19-22, 2006 and served as an invaluable liaison to the earlier work. We have ascertained from the judgment of the generalists as well as from our reading and observations and from many conversations and meetings with constituents of the institution that Skidmore comfortably, and in many cases impressively, meets Middle States standards.

The team's response follows the structure of the institution's Self-Study. We appreciate the excellent materials and the hospitality and openness of the Skidmore community.

While the focused Self-Study allows for an in-depth look at three areas of special emphasis, there is at the same time a de-emphasis on other areas of institutional functioning, and therefore a less-than-complete assessment of the multiple dimensions and priorities of a multifaceted institution and of how all the competing goals, aspirations, demands and needs are adjudicated. Our comments should be read with this understanding.

Before discussing the three chapters of the Self-Study, we would like to single out for comment five of the Standards which were particularly salient to the Self-Study.

Standard 1: Mission, Goals, and Objectives

The College has, it appears, a strongly held, commonly shared sense of mission, although there is an evolving sense of self-definition and, indeed, the current planning and Self-Study may be pushing the institution towards a somewhat different or at least more expansive sense of mission. There is much institutional pride in both what Skidmore has been and what it has become, and especially in its movement through challenging times in its history to its current position, which is one of growing strength, confidence, and aspiration.

We did sense some tension between the celebration of Skidmore as a place where “creative thought matters,” and the concern that students were insufficiently engaged in their academic work. We understand the nature of this tension: that the institution both champions its uniqueness and also aspires to model the best liberal arts colleges in the country. We applaud the attention paid to each of the three areas identified in the Self-Study: the directions proposed are consequential. If each were carried out and implemented fully, together they would move the institution towards greater student engagement, stronger sciences, greater diversity along multiple lines, and a considerably expanded and enriched curriculum: in short, a higher level of institutional excellence as a leading liberal arts college.

Most people with whom we talked welcomed this more capacious institution at the same time that they hoped and expected to continue to claim the strengths of the current Skidmore. Of course, while admirable, there is a certain risk in building up weaker areas rather than building on strengths.

Altogether, there is a very high degree of aspiration in this Self-Study. There is a less articulated sense of how to go about accomplishing these goals and how to pay for them while still sustaining current strengths.

Standard 2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal

Skidmore characterizes itself with the phrase “creative thought matters.” The College might as well adopt the phrase “aspiration matters.” Few institutions can match Skidmore’s record of aspiration and achievement over the last several decades: entirely relocating its campus, significantly altering its programmatic mix, and transforming itself

from a college in serious straits to a leading liberal arts college. Skidmore's current Self-Study clearly reflects this history of aspiration. It articulates important goals for the institution in three areas—first year programming, science, and intercultural study through enhancing diversity and global education – and, to a greater or lesser degree, charts strategies for moving forward on each area.

Skidmore is an institution that is self-evidently “planful”; we note the connections between the three selected topics and the four emphases of the recently completed strategic plan: *Engaged Liberal Learning: The Plan for Skidmore College: 2005-2015*. Determined efforts were made to involve broad segments of the institution in the Self-Study. While, to be sure, we talked to people involved in the process rather than those who were not, we found genuine engagement with the topics of the Self-Study. We also had access to innumerable other planning documents that showed considerable thoughtfulness about institutional direction and aspects of functioning over the past several years.

Our impression is that Skidmore has many assets: a distinguished history, a lovely campus with some exciting new construction, a great location, a thriving admissions program, an engaged and supportive Board of Trustees, an articulate and energetic President, a well functioning administration, a committed, hard-working faculty and staff, and wonderful students and alums who care deeply about the institution. To be sure, all is not rosy; we applaud the honest self-critique that was evident both in the assessment materials and in our conversations with constituents of the College.

The concern about student engagement was sparked, it seems, by concerns regarding student retention and a NSSE study that documented less-than-optimal student engagement, particularly in the first two years. The Self-Study premise – that the three initiatives in first-year programming, the sciences and intercultural learning – can best be joined under the concept of engagement is argued imaginatively through the Self-Study. These are not all the “usual suspects” when one thinks about student engagement. There are moments when the connections across initiatives and the rest of the educational program under the rubric of engagement are less compelling than others. The anticipated interactions between first-year seminars and science will depend heavily upon science faculty commitment to the seminars, which will be pressed as the science initiative ramps up. The connection of science literacy to engagement may be difficult to enliven. Increased diversity will not automatically enhance engagement (or its initial driver, retention) without the provision of curricular and support structures to meet the needs of a more broadly recruited student body. Nonetheless, there is no question that Skidmore has identified three areas where movement forward will enhance the institution's already rich educational experience.

Standard 3: Institutional Resources

While we applaud the energy and commitment of the institution to high aspiration, we are not certain that the resources --both financial and human --needed to meet the goals of the Self-Study have been completely considered and the consequences of this redirection

of institutional energy completely understood. We understand that planning is an ongoing process and that the College is taking an incremental approach and counting on as-yet-unrealized opportunities created by gift funding. The College is in the beginning stages of what promises to be a successful fund-raising campaign, yet there is not a perfect match between the projected goals of the campaign and the aspirations articulated in the Self-Study. We believe that the costs of implementing the goals of the Self-Study – and sustaining them -- will be considerably higher than the amounts that have been designated so far, and we would point out that Skidmore, while on a solid financial base, is not particularly well-endowed compared to its aspirant peers.

Having said that, we like the way that a strategic action agenda—with price tags—is developed and monitored annually and even semi-annually, we admire the scrappiness of the institution in meeting financial challenges in its past, and we expect it to continue in that tradition.

Standard 4: Leadership and Governance

Skidmore’s success will depend on its leadership and its ability to harness the energies of the institution—particularly that of the faculty—in partnership with the administration.

The generalist evaluators found sound structures and practices in place in the area of leadership and governance. The College’s ability to consult broadly and make decisions has been very evident in the process of producing the Self-Study final report itself. The initiatives being implemented, planned and still imagined in the three areas of engagement identified in the report will all tax this governance capacity further.

First-year seminars, for example, will need administrative skill to staff and maintain, and they will require effective decision-making on questions such as connection to the rest of the curriculum and the role of mentoring. A major science initiative will need curricular and pedagogical innovation across the science departments, coordination with the work of other divisions and interdisciplinary entities including the Tang Museum, close collaboration with Admissions and College Relations, and “big ticket” decision-making in regard to funding and faculty time at the level of the institution as a whole. Finally, the goal of a more diverse Skidmore and one in which diversity is placed in global as well as domestic contexts will require an open, yet decisive dialogue in which contending perspectives are heard but also directions are defined and specific programs implemented. These latter will reach across all the boundaries of Skidmore governance structure and constituency as much as they do across cultures and geographic boundaries. Much is expected of new administrators, including especially the yet-to-be-hired Director of Intercultural Studies (described in one session as the “yeast” of the initiative), yet clearly little will be accomplished here or in the other two areas of engagement without broad community buy-in and active participation.

Skidmore has undergone much change in leadership recently: The President is in his third year; the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Associate Dean are stepping down this year; the Dean of Faculty and Dean of Special Programs are both in their first

year; the Vice President for Finance is in his second year. Several positions projected in the Self-Study are yet to be filled.

All of this leadership change could be destabilizing, yet our impression is that the President has taken charge and is strongly backed by the Board, the administration is working well in most areas, and the strong culture of planning has helped enormously to give a sense of direction and momentum.

We met many deeply engaged faculty members who are playing large roles in moving along the institutional agenda. What we do not know is how committed the faculty as a whole is to this collective enterprise and how willing they are to invest the considerable time and energy necessary to make this collective endeavor a success. It would be a challenge for any institution to take on ambitions of the scope outlined in the *Strategic Plan* and Self-Study. For Skidmore to be successful in its aspirations, there certainly must be a productive partnership of the faculty and the administration.

In sum, Skidmore will need continuing, sustained, and collaborative leadership from its administration and faculty to move forward on the Self-Study agenda. Not unexpectedly given the institution's history, the representatives of the faculty, administration and student body with whom we met were well aware of the imperatives in this regard, and they have already initiated important steps to insure consultation and shepherding of the initiatives.

Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning

As a consequence of a foundation grant which was then institutionalized in a college Task Force, Skidmore has a strong infrastructure for assessment of student learning. Efforts at the departmental level, for example, strongly impressed the generalist evaluators who have determined that the institution meets accreditation standards in this area. All three of the engagement initiatives identified in the Self-Study carry with them important assessment dimensions. Some elements, such as increase in science majors or expansion of minority and international student enrollment, lend themselves to ready quantitative measure. Other critically important dimensions, such as intercultural awareness and science literacy (once defined in Skidmore's terms), will require more complex and nuanced approaches. In terms of technique, Skidmore's entering student "Reflection and Projection" has prompted discussion of electronic portfolios, though there is no consensus on the advisability of moving forward in this direction. Most broadly, the institution will need to build on the work done for the Self-Study on definitions of engagement, and on its relationship to learning.

The Task Force on Assessment is aware of these challenges and has initiated discussion of the multiple issues involved. Moreover, assessment of engagement in the three identified areas can draw on the substantial work already underway at the departmental level and on the evaluation initiatives underway on the new first-year seminar program.

Response to the Self-Study

Chapter One: The First-Year Experience Re-Examined

In addressing concerns with student engagement and retention, the first-year experience is identified in the Self-Study as a source of great potential impact and rightly so. With approval of the CEPP proposal in 2004 and implementation of the Scribner Seminars in Fall 2005, Skidmore now has some experience to draw upon in evaluating the strengths of this new structure, identifying areas that need further attention, and making plans for the implementation of the residential component in Fall 2006. Because this section of the Self-Study is the most concrete of the three initiatives, the response is more detailed and addresses specific directions outlined in the Self-Study.

It is clear from the Self-Study and supporting documents that a new model for a first-year seminar was needed. It's also evident that faculty and staff involved in the FYE proposal researched different program structures before creating a comprehensive first-year experience that will span the classroom and the residential hall. This is a major initiative. The College is to be commended not only for its crafting of a new program in a relatively short span of time but also for its willingness to take risk, to branch out in a new direction in order to address its concerns with engagement in the first-year.

Conversations with faculty and students suggest that this first round of seminars was a success. The combining of teaching and advising allowed for a deeper connection between students and faculty advisors. Faculty reported they knew their students better than they had before; in some cases they knew more about their advisees' lives than they wanted to. There was good representation of faculty from different disciplines and an engaging collection of topics taught. For a first run, this program has done very well.

But with the implementation of any new program, however necessary, there follows a bit of disruption, as faculty, students, and staff adjust to new structures and expectations. Two significant issues that have emerged through this implementation that are important to note. First is the impact of the new seminar structure on the HEOP/AOP program, as noted in the Self-Study, an issue that needs satisfactory resolution well before Fall 2007. This is an important program for Skidmore. Not only does it enrich the college community through the addition of students from diverse ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds, but it positions the college as a leader in programs of this kind.

The second issue, related in part to the first, is that of effective partnership between Academic and Student Affairs. With recent restructuring of the Dean of Studies office and the creation of a separate First-Year Experience office, the College has lost some of the bridges that had existed between these two areas. With the comprehensive embrace of teaching, advising and residential living in this new program it is all the more important that these different offices determine appropriate areas of responsibility in the collective endeavor and collaborate well, so that the efforts of faculty, program directors, deans, and student affairs professionals are coordinated and complementary. This is a common challenge at colleges, and its resolution is one where creative thought really does matter.

There is much to be proud of in this initial year of the First-Year Experience program. With an inspired program director, a faculty willing to embrace the challenge and the occasional messiness of mixing teaching and mentoring in the same class hour, and a general willingness to learn from experience, the program has great potential to engage first-year students more strongly in the life of the college. Adjustments to the program may well be made in these early years of the program; as in all things, this must be developed in a way that it becomes uniquely Skidmore.

A response to some of the specific recommendations included in the Self-Study follows.

1. Orientation, Summer Reading and Academic Year Programming

The events associated with the common reading and the thematically organized program of lectures, films and performances in the spring were, in a word, impressive. Student attendance at these events was good, but not all it could be. Conversations with students suggest a general interest in these kinds of programs, but without relevance to a course or encouragement by a faculty member, students were less likely to attend. Finding opportunities for classroom and residential connections to various programs would help increase attendance and engagement with events.

2. Scribner Seminar curriculum, Mentoring, Assessment

The Scribner seminar is a marked change from the Liberal Studies curriculum, but it does offer a sufficiently flexible structure to accommodate the work of teaching and mentoring, the interdisciplinarity of the previous program (though not necessarily in the same manner), and faculty exploration of topics they might not otherwise teach.

This flexibility also allows the course to take on different roles within the curriculum. It could support initiatives in diversity and science education. It could also become a site where writing and information literacy skills are introduced. As faculty become more comfortable with the seminar and the program more established, it is a good idea to consider what common objectives are appropriate for this course.

The new combination of teaching and mentoring was in general well-received. Faculty liked the ability to get to know their students better through the regular contact of the seminar, and in many cases, described a cohesive group of advisees. Not all faculty were comfortable with that dual role; others reported difficulty in transitioning from the intense mentoring experience of the fall to a more distant role in the spring. Feedback from this years' cohort of instructors will be helpful in training future advisors these dual roles.

The role of the peer mentor in this relationship is also one that would benefit from greater clarity. In some cases, the peer mentor was an effective agent in facilitating student transition in the first semester and continued to be a valued contact after the conclusion of the seminar experience. In other instances, the effectiveness of the peer mentors was less clear. With the implementation of a residential component, it is even more important for

the expectations of the peer mentor to be well-articulated and distinct from student residential hall staff.

Assessment is an area of real strength. In addition to evaluations from faculty instructors and peer mentors, the director of the program is engaged in direct assessment of student writing and critical inquiry skills in an effort to gauge both the starting point for entering students and what the first-year seminar can and should do to advance these skills.

The effect of the new seminars on departmental staffing of courses in interdisciplinary programs is an issue to watch. There is a real rationale to maintaining first-year seminars as a distinct entity, with its own pedagogical purpose. If the demands of staffing exert an adverse effect on the staffing of courses in interdisciplinary programs, however, it may be worth considering the cross-listing of some courses, as noted in the Self-Study.

3. Deliver robust cocurricular program, in coordination with Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, to bridge the gap between engagement in the classroom and life in the residence halls

The plan to house students by seminar in the residence halls needs further discussion and definition. This residential clustering can provide another mechanism for fostering a strong sense of community among a group of first-years. It can also allow for a more organic introduction of intellectual discussion in residential spaces. But the Self-Study does not articulate the goals for the residential component in meaningful detail and based on conversations during this visit, discussion is still needed on how these two essential pieces of the student's experience will relate to one another. Encouraging peer mentors to live in the residence halls is a good first step, but how will they be used? Will they create programming within the residential spaces? How will this be integrated with residential life programming? Will faculty be part of these efforts? For this housing structure to become a real living/learning environment, there needs to be an intentionality about the residential experience and good collaborative efforts between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs.

Suggestions

To summarize, the following suggestions are included for strengthening the commendable work that has already gotten underway.

1. It is essential that FYE and HEOP/AOP Programs find a satisfactory way of integrating the HEOP/AOP program needs in the new seminar structure. Options might include the creation of course clusters.
2. Effective partnerships should be created between the FYE program, advisors, and student affairs professionals. This will optimize the success of the residential component to be launched in Fall 2006 and improve overall support for the first-year student experience.
3. The role of mentor should be clarified for faculty advisors and reviewed and valued appropriated in the College's system of faculty evaluation.

4. The role of the peer mentor should be clarified. The peer mentor can be a bridge to the advisor, services within the college community and a general resource for first-year students, but there is currently ambiguity surrounding the mentor's role.
5. As faculty become comfortable with the new seminar model, the place of writing and information literacy skills should be explored.
6. Evaluate the relationship between first-year seminar residential clustering, theme based floors and honors floors in the residence halls. Can lifestyle issues (e.g. quiet floor, substance free living) be adequately accommodated within the seminar groupings? Can students structure communities that respect these choices without designated floors? Does a separate honors floor still make sense for first-year students if similar programs are occurring through the residential portion of the FYE?
7. Consider role the FYE program in the spring semester. How should advisors and peer mentors continue to work with this cohort of students without the structure of the seminar?

Chapter Two: The Natural Sciences: Current Strategic Planning and the Role of Student Engagement

(Note: The Self-Study refers to the *Strategic Plan* extensively. Thus the *Strategic Plan* will be treated as an integral part of the Self-Study. Rather than addressing each recommendation of the Science section of the Self-Study in turn, we wish to make some general comments which we will connect to the recommendations.)

The goals expressed in the Science initiative of strengthening the sciences at Skidmore and having a more balanced core curriculum are important ones for the College. These goals have come out of long-term planning, and the College is to be applauded for proposing such ambitious changes. However, some notes of realism may be needed. Our comments are not meant to discourage the College from pursuing this initiative. Rather, we hope that they will add to the College's deliberations as it proceeds.

The science faculty at Skidmore is clearly dedicated: students praised faculty members for being willing to offer independent studies when students needed them and for being accessible. Faculty members are committed to collaborative research, student engagement and learning, and assessment. Program offerings are commendable. That two thirds of the Biology faculty and two thirds of the Geoscience faculty have grants to support their research speaks highly of the quality of the faculty. The goal to increase research funding in the other science departments is an admirable one.

The decision to highlight interdisciplinary science makes sense as it reflects the direction of science today. The specific programs that Skidmore has chosen have been quite successful at a number of other liberal arts colleges.

We do have several concerns. First, we attempted to assess the level of community buy-in on the science initiative. We were told in a number of fora that the faculty as a whole could see that strengthening the sciences would be good for the College. Such broad

support is impressive. However, we also heard some serious concerns about the actual implementation of the plan. Some faculty members were concerned that the idea of trying to double the number of science majors may not be realistic. For example, there was a concern that the College has not yet clearly articulated, and might not be able to articulate, why a student interested in science should enroll at Skidmore rather than a college that is already known for its strength in the sciences. The belief that the natural sciences can be significantly strengthened without impacting other areas of the College may not be entirely realistic.

Our second general comment is that the funds projected in the *Strategic Plan*, which we realize are only a first step, are not sufficient to implement the proposed initiatives and that the community may not be fully aware that these funds are only the beginning of the process of strengthening the sciences. One focus of the Science section of the Self-Study and the *Strategic Plan* is an increase in staffing for the natural sciences -- both faculty and support staff. The funds proposed to support new faculty positions may not be sufficient to cover the true costs of these positions, such as the start-up funds that will be needed to attract high quality faculty members and on-going expenses. Also the four faculty appointments recommended in the documents, two in Neuroscience, one in Environmental Studies, and one in Biological Chemistry are reasonable, but they may not be enough. The documents discuss the need to strengthen all the sciences specifically and the basic sciences, such as biology, chemistry, and physics, but the *Strategic Plan* contains only one additional faculty position (for chemistry) for these areas. It is highly likely that additional faculty members will be needed beyond those proposed.

On this, and other initiatives, we note the increasing demands on faculty time and energy. The faculty members of the Science Planning Group and others expressed concern about the demands already being made on the science faculty. The Committee was told that in Chemistry, Physics, and Computer Science faculty members have to teach Independent Studies, which are essentially tutorials, in order for students to be able to get the courses that are needed to complete the major. In Psychology at least one faculty member regularly teaches more than 20 contact hours. The demands that may be put on the faculty as a whole as a result of the new First Year Experience could be especially problematic for the science faculty. The recommendation to increase the amount of collaborative research that members of the science faculty do, both in the summer and during the academic year, will require even more faculty time. Recommendations to develop cooperation between Admissions and the natural sciences, to develop programs to encourage students from underrepresented groups to study natural science at Skidmore, and to seek additional external funding for research and pedagogical innovation, all tend to stretch a faculty already stretched very thin.

With regard to teaching loads, one aspect of Skidmore that is unusual but seems to work well is the use of Teaching Associates. These professionals constitute a real asset for the College, and concern was expressed by a number of member of the science faculty that they are underpaid and perhaps undervalued by the College as a whole. If the College wants to continue to attract qualified people to fill these positions, increasing their compensation may be another necessary expense. In addition to the proposed increase in

the faculty, the *Strategic Plan* calls for adding to two additional support staff positions. Although these positions are a good idea, as the size of the faculty and the number of majors increase and more sophisticated equipment comes into use, even more staff positions may be needed. The discussion about infrastructure, specifically “spaces that foster cooperation among the disciplines,” leads directly to the question of the possible need for a new or expanded science building. As was discussed in one session, a new building could cost tens of millions of dollars and may not be very far in the future. Although it is reasonable for the College to proceed incrementally, we believe that it is important for the College to have a broader view of the costs of the initiative to increase the number of students who major in the sciences and that frank and open discussions with the entire community about these costs occur.

In addition to trying to increase the percentage of Skidmore students who major in the natural sciences, another facet of the sciences at Skidmore that is part of the Self-Study but not well developed is “science literacy” for all Skidmore students. The Committee believes that this is a very important aspect of providing a “more balanced core curriculum” that will need to be broadly and carefully discussed. The past decision to reduce the Natural Science Breadth requirement to one course may make meeting this goal challenging. As proposed in the Self-Study the Breadth requirement should be reviewed and careful attention should be paid to the goals of the natural science requirement. Examples of the types of the questions that might be asked include: Is exposure to science enough? Do our students need to undertake a critical examination of the process of science and the roles it plays in today’s society? We heard a number of thoughtful and insightful comments about what an “informed, responsible citizen” needs to know about science. Faculty members, both in the natural sciences and outside of them, have good ideas about courses that could provide the types of experiences that would help Skidmore to gain the understanding and appreciation of science that a liberally educated person should have. For example, one faculty member proposed that, “Students must be able to use science to guide intelligent choices including policy choices.” One approach to bringing the natural sciences to all students that is already being explored by a number of faculty members is the SENCER (Science Education for New Civic Engagement and Responsibility) approach. These faculty members are discussing ways to incorporate this into the First Year Experience and specifically tying it to the First Year Experience of HEOP students who are interested in the natural sciences. This and other initiatives should be explored. Although exposure to science and to science and society issues in co-curricular programming may enhance students’ understanding of science, it is not enough. There needs to be a curricular component. Of course, an enhanced or reconfigured natural science requirement may place additional demands on the science faculty and other faculty members.

In sum, the initiatives proposed are reasonable starting points and offer exciting opportunities for the College. A good deal of broad-based discussion needs to take place around the long term goals and costs of enhancing the natural sciences and science literacy.

Chapter Three: Student Engagement with Domestic Diversity, Global Awareness, and Intercultural Understanding

In preparation for its spring 2006 Middle States review, the Skidmore College community initiated and engaged in an exciting, robust and fruitful community-wide discussion of institutional diversity. The Skidmore Self-Study, which reported on the discussion, chronicled and described the voices of a wide variety of community members who offered a multitude of competing and clashing suggestions and concerns. Some in the community have become concerned that the resulting tensions will not allow the college to make progress in this important area. Some of this concern is focused on the perception that emphasizing racial and ethnic diversity will prevent other forms of human diversity from coming to the forefront.

It is important that the Skidmore community understand that their conflict is not unusual or extraordinary. It is also important to understand that diversity in higher education is not a “zero sum game”; and because it is not an either-or-proposition, it is possible to make progress on several diversity initiatives at once. The following quote from a Cornell University diversity report describes the benefits resulting from increased diversity in higher education:

First, we learn from those whose experiences, beliefs and perspectives are different from our own, and these lessons can be taught best in a richly diverse intellectual and social environment. Secondly, diversity challenges stereotyped preconceptions; it encourages critical thinking; and it helps students learn to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. Thirdly, education within a diverse setting prepares students to become good citizens in an increasingly complex, pluralistic society; it fosters mutual respect and teamwork; and it helps build communities whose members are judged by the quality of their character and their contributions. Lastly, sustaining the nation’s prosperity into the future will require us to make effective use of diverse backgrounds and cultures.

Skidmore’s diversity discussion resulted in the identification of a very useful set of human attributes: namely race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, ability, nation of origin, age, political persuasion, and experience. The College should be encouraged to develop specific plans and strategies which will enable it to increase representation in each of these categories.

Having said that, any college or university in the 21st century that does not represent, or at least does not attempt to represent, the racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population disadvantages itself as well as the individuals it has overlooked. There are many compelling rationales for higher education to pursue policies of racial and ethnic diversity. Among them are intellectual/pedagogical goals, social justice and institutional self-interest.

The following are reactions to the specific recommendations offered at the conclusion of the College's diversity chapter:

1. Curricular and pedagogical initiatives

Regarding the stated recommendations covering the assessment of students learning about cultural differences, home-stays, internships, fieldwork, and service learning, the College should pursue each of these strategies. However, the information outlined here seems to be vague and incomplete. It is understood that this information was produced for the purpose of the Self-Study and, as a result, the deadline may have forced productive discussions and meetings to end in mid-thought. The Skidmore community should continue to pursue each of their suggested curricular/pedagogical strategies with the goal of producing more specific and complete recommendations.

Regarding the recommendations which seek to derive diversity dividends from study abroad, it is clear Skidmore is appropriately proud of its abroad program and rightfully touts it as a plus in the area of diversity. The College has a high participation rate, which it reasonably plans to increase. The study abroad administration has regularized finances for the program and introduced departmentally-based lists of approved sites. Both of these are substantial achievements which will facilitate the move forward and, in the latter case, help ensure educational standards. There are some difficult pieces to put into place in regard to higher study abroad rates, including most notably close work with the sciences. But Skidmore has the foundation, expertise and leadership to succeed.

The Self-Study's proposed re-centering of study abroad to focus on issues of global diversity offers rich possibilities for the future as well. The emergence of diaspora studies as an area of strong academic interest, for one salient example, signals some possibilities. Achievement of this goal will, however, require significant work. As noted in the Self-Study, a shift away from the quite typical Eurocentrism in study abroad locations will need to be accomplished. So, too, will a reorientation of the content of the programming in Europe itself. In both cases, there are on- and off-campus dimensions. Broader geographic and cultural coverage on the home campus will be needed to increase numbers (not to mention the value of the experience) in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. And there will need to be rethinking of how students are prepared to study in Europe. By way of a simple example, students can't be expected to focus on the diversity issue in Paris without some knowledge of the Francophone world and Islam. Off campus Skidmore will need to find ways to extend its reach, guaranteeing that the overseas programs chosen by its students offer the kinds of coursework, internships and other opportunities that make the diversity initiative real. Administration can take the lead in organizing, but significant faculty participation in what can be a very stimulating venture with rich opportunities for creative teaching and research will be a must.

2. The recruitment and retention of a student population that, by 2015, is composed of at least 20 % students of color and a simultaneous and concomitant increase in the number of international students.

These are very positive, realistic, and attainable goals, and they should be pursued. The College, however, should pay careful attention to the specific needs of the students who will represent this domestic and international diversity so as to ensure their retention. Given the honest discussion of diversity-related tensions on campus both within the self-study and during our visit, it is clear that the campus climate is not entirely supportive of this diversity. In addition, the FYE- HEOP/AOP conflict stands as a further example of the tension between diversity and support. A successful resolution of this problem in a way that does not threaten the success of a signature program is crucial if the college is to meet with success in its student recruitment and retention goals.

3. Continued and reinforced recruitment, retention and development of faculty and staff of color.

The several initiatives outlined here seem also to be positive, realistic and attainable goals.

4. Diversity gains achieved through collaboration with and synchronicity with the College's Special Programs division.

Although collaborating with Special Programs is a positive idea, the actual diversity benefits gained can at best only marginally affect the levels of diversity attained by Skidmore's more traditional undergraduate population.

5. Develop institutional structures to deliver a strong, coherent program in diversity and international education that engages students across the curriculum and the co-curriculum (2 FTE positions).

Although these positions can easily become important and indispensable components of the College's diversity initiatives, there is a danger that the two positions and the individuals who hold them will be identified as the professionals responsible for the entire scope of the improvement of and success of diversity at Skidmore College. This will not be and should not be the case. More specifically, the experiences of a variety of colleges and universities indicate that as with any kind of meaningful, comprehensive change efforts, nothing replaces strong and courageous senior leadership. Most of the early institution-wide diversity plans were initiated by individuals who took risks, articulated powerful visions, followed through with very specific and prescriptive initiatives, conducted periodic assessments and held the appropriate individuals and committees responsible. If Skidmore's plans are to be as successful, it will be as a result of serious and sustained senior administrative and faculty leadership.

V. Summary of Team Recommendations and Requirements

We are not forwarding to the Middle States Commission any specific recommendations or requirements regarding Skidmore College's accreditation status. Rather, without qualification, we recommend reaccreditation. Throughout our report we offer comments

and suggestions that we hope will be of use to Skidmore College as it moves forward on the goals articulated in its Self-Study.