

26 April 2006

Ms. Jean Avnet Morse  
Executive Director  
Middle States Commission on Higher Education  
3624 Market Street  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104

Dear Ms. Morse:

On behalf of Skidmore College, I am submitting to the Commission on Higher Education our formal response to the Middle States Commission visiting team's report, prepared by Dr. Joanne Creighton and dated April 11, 2006. Because the report is largely positive, and because the earlier recommendation regarding our compliance with the standards was positive as well, this response will be brief.

We are pleased that our efforts to demonstrate compliance, our self-study report, and the team visit have resulted in such clear approbation of our work at Skidmore. The report provides evidence that the team read our self-study report carefully, considered our documentation in some detail, and listened attentively during the many meetings they had on campus. They recognize that Skidmore's planning at present is full of aspirations for the College; like our predecessors, we do not believe that Skidmore has fully realized its mature identity, and we are ourselves engaged in changing and refining it. The report recognizes and applauds our aspirations.

It also expresses several doubts, and we would like to attend to those expeditiously. First, the team noted some tension between our collective belief that "creative thought matters" – our identity as a nimble and creative institution – and our concerns about whether our students are sufficiently engaged in their work. We would like to counter the idea that this could be a tension: the report shows, we believe, that engagement and creativity are very closely linked, perhaps inseparable.

A more earnest concern is the team's reiterated sense that we may underestimate the resources we will need to accomplish all that we have set out to do. Certainly we take seriously the caution that we will need strong leadership and support from the faculty as we move ahead, and, further, that the initiatives we have outlined will likely cost much more than we have earmarked for them at present. We agree whole-heartedly that we must continue to build support for these initiatives within the community, and that we also must plan realistically to stage our progress and determine where the funds will come from to meet our goals. We do want to reassure the Commission that the funds earmarked in the current Comprehensive Campaign will support just the initial stages of projects that we know will require some years to implement in full, and that in some

important respects will not be in full flower until the next Campaign. The team's cautionary note here reminds us that we have some challenges ahead in determining our priorities as we take steps to meet our goals. We will need to make deliberate progress without straining the patience of the constituencies that are most invested in seeing us move more rapidly. And we will need, in particular, to enlist the faculty in establishing priorities and cultivating both the energy to keep pressing forward and the patience to wait when resources are strained. We hope and trust that our newly revised shared governance system will provide the structures and processes necessary to facilitate this collaborative work.

The body of the report includes a number of specific suggestions regarding the three initiatives we address in our self-study: the First-Year Experience, strengthening the sciences, and creating a more diverse community along multiple lines. These suggestions in some cases represent practical, helpful advice, some of which is already being heeded to good effect. The leadership in the FYE program is in the process of clarifying the role of the peer mentors, the nature of faculty mentoring itself, the role of writing in the seminars, potential opportunities for teaching information literacy, the goals for the living-learning communities next fall, and the nature of the spring semester experience. It is an ambitious agenda, and it will not all be resolved this year. But the FYE leadership and the faculty continue to bring considerable energy to these deliberations.

The report also raises two questions about more vexing and complex matters: the future of the HEOP/AOP program within the new FYE; and the need for effective collaborations between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs within the new administrative structures. The Dean of the Faculty anticipates working with HEOP to resolve the first question. The lessons learned during the inaugural year of the FYE program will be built upon during the second year. It is clear that as faculty members have the opportunity to teach in the Scribner Seminars and mentor students, many of the practices developed to support HEOP students will be useful in mentoring first-year students. The second challenge noted in the report, our need to establish stronger bridges between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, is one that we know we must meet, both formally and informally.

The team's expressed concerns about fiscal resources relate most specifically to the initiative in the sciences, and that section of the report reinforces this point. It also concurs with our self-study's recommendation that we revisit our current science general education requirement. We plan to do so in the context of defining more clearly what we want all our students to have learned about science before they graduate. We are confident that the Science Planning Group, and others in leadership positions in the sciences, will continue to provide needed time and creative energy to keep this initiative moving forward, to disseminate information, manage expectations, refine our plans, and work through the relevant committees and administrators.

Finally, we concur with the report's helpful caution that if we are to realize our goals for diversity, we cannot expect our two new administrators, once hired, to do this work for the rest of us. We know that we need continued courageous administrative leadership,

that we must cultivate an even broader base of support in the faculty, and that we must make changes not only in the composition of the student body, faculty, and staff but also in the curriculum and in study-abroad. The work of the Task Force on Intercultural and Global Understanding is well underway and has already advanced both the hiring processes and the public discussions we need to continue building momentum.

We would like to add one observation about the role of Special Programs in these initiatives. The team's report voices some doubt about whether the resources provided by Special Programs can really have much of an effect on Skidmore's traditional undergraduate population. We can understand that doubt if the team members are thinking of Special Programs as providing primarily the two external degree programs it has long housed. But we would suggest that this is one area where Skidmore is indeed more creative, perhaps now more than ever, and that Special Programs can make remarkable contributions to the residential college students' learning and engagement. One example would be our recent weeklong McCormack residency with jazz singer Nnenna Freelon. She left a powerful mark on the groups with which she worked while she was here. We are exploring how to make use of such residencies to bring a different quality, a new energy and depth, to complement the students' experience in the regular curriculum. We do believe that both Special Programs and the Tang Museum offer rich and flexible resources that we have only begun to exploit.

Let me emphasize once again how pleased we are with the team's report and their findings. Their observations are astute, helpful, and generous, and we look forward to sharing them further with the community. We are deeply grateful for the time and effort that the team gave to visiting the campus, reviewing the materials, and writing the report. They could not have been more gracious during their time with us, or more tactful in their observations.

In sum, I am delighted to advise you, herewith, that we formally accept their report. And let me extend our thanks, once again, for the consideration shown to Skidmore College by the Middle States Commission and the members of the visiting team throughout this process.

Sincerely yours,

Philip A. Glotzbach  
President