**Transition and Transformation: Using a Liberal Arts Education to Shape a Life**

**4/04/11**

 “Our goals emerge in particular from our collective sense of a Skidmore education as a transformative experience. We want our students to acquire both knowledge and capacities that enable them to initiate and embrace change and apply their learning lifelong in new context. We believe that this learning takes place throughout our students’ experience, both inside the classroom and out, on campus and off.”

*Skidmore College Student Learning and Development Goals*

**Background**

The idea of linking the education that a student receives at Skidmore to the practical realities of life after college has been an integral part of the College’s approach since its inception more than a century ago. Certainly, Lucy Skidmore Scribner understood in very real terms that what is learned at Skidmore should equip students for lifelong success. This notion informed the development of a curriculum that trained both mind and hand, a concept that has since been reformulated and re-envisioned for today’s students in the phrase “Creative Thought Matters.” By this, we mean that we need to help students develop both a theoretical understanding of how to approach the world *and* practical experience in applying those theories—in essence, learning not only how to think and to analyze, but also how to create and to make material their ideas.

This approach to education, which is a defining characteristic of a Skidmore education, is a foundational concept of the College’s current strategic plan: *Engaged Liberal Learning: The Plan for Skidmore College 2005-2015* (the *Strategic Plan*). During the 2009-10 academic year, at the midpoint of the *Plan*, the College conducted a series of Town Hall Meetings designed to “test our understanding of our challenges, strengths, and opportunities.[[1]](#footnote-1)” The information gathered through these meetings—held on the Skidmore campus and around the country –reaffirmed the basic elements of our mission as a student-centered liberal arts college and helped us to develop a framework to further guide our strategic decision-making over the second half of the *Strategic Plan*.

One theme that was consistent across the span of the Town Hall Meetings was what we have come to call *Transition and Transformation* – meaning, among other things, the need to do more to prepare our students for the transition from college to further studies or to the working world. The importance of enhancing the College’s efforts in this area echoed one of the priority initiatives articulated under Goal I (Student Engagement and Academic Achievement) in the *Strategic Plan*:

**Increase our effectiveness in helping our graduates plan and prepare for their post-Skidmore lives.**

* Expand collaboration among our academic departments, career services office, and alumni affairs to provide students with information, guidance, and support in exploring career options related to various majors. Encourage departments to share best practices related to such activities. (Footnote omitted.)
* Enhance our capacity to mentor students earlier in their careers regarding graduate and professional school options. Improve mentoring related to post-graduate fellowship opportunities.
* Develop ways to engage alumni, parents, trustees, and friends more effectively in career-related mentoring.

The Town Hall Meetings re-affirmed the importance of this initiative and the need to attend to it with greater urgency. Embedded in the theme of *Transition and Transformation* are the many topics that came up during the Town Hall Meeting discussions, including experiential pedagogy, practical experience, mentoring, advising, networking, translating the liberal arts education to the world of work, career exploration, internships, undergraduate research, and civic engagement—to name a few.

We recognize that for students to identify, prepare for, and achieve post-baccalaureate goals, they must be engaged in an undergraduate program that exposes them to a diverse array of post-graduate opportunities and empowers them with the knowledge and competencies necessary to succeed. Although fundamental skills in critical thinking and effective communication complement discipline-based knowledge as essential preparation for any post-baccalaureate plan, these competencies are alone not sufficient. Increasingly, employers, graduate and professional schools, governmental and non-governmental agencies, and the foundations that administer national merit fellowships and scholarships require evidence that students are not merely knowledgeable, but that they can *apply* *their knowledge* (and skills) to real-world situations. Students who leave college with a diverse set of experiences—who have learned, in part, by *doing*—are generally better prepared to identify and achieve life and career goals.

**High-Impact Education Practices**

Recent research done by George D. Kuh and sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities looked at effective educational practices with positive educational outcomes. These practices are designed to address the challenges of helping America’s extraordinarily diverse students reap the full benefits—economic, civic and personal—of their studies in college.[[2]](#footnote-2) Included in the educational activities that would be considered High-Impact Educational Practices are service learning, student-faculty research, capstone courses or projects, writing-intensive courses, internships, learning communities and diversity learning (including study abroad). These High-Impact Educational Practices have been shown to be effective because:[[3]](#footnote-3)

* They demand that students devote considerable time and effort which deepen the students’ investment and commitment.
* They allow students to interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters over an extended period of time and set the stage for developing meaningful relationships with other persons on campus.
* They increase the likelihood of students engaging diversity and challenge students to develop new ways of thinking.
* They provide students with frequent feedback (informal and formal) about their performance.
* They give students an opportunity to see how what they are learning works in different settings. Students integrate, synthesize and apply knowledge which is essential to deep and meaningful learning experiences. This knowledge then provides a springboard to connecting learning to the world beyond the campus.
* They increase students’ ability to see connections that help them to better understand themselves in relation to others and the world.

As an institution that has long valued “the mind and the hand,” Skidmore already has a history of engaging students in experiential learning at all levels of the curriculum—in credit-bearing internships, student-faculty collaborative research, service learning, apprenticeships, and volunteer activities—both on campus and while students are abroad. Indeed, the same high-impact experiences that are so critical for identifying and pursuing post-baccalaureate goals are also used routinely to achieve specific learning outcomes within many of our majors and to instill institutional values relating to responsible citizenship and global/intercultural understanding. For example, during the 2009-10 academic year, faculty sponsored more than 400 credit-bearing internships and exploratory research experiences. During this same academic year, 57% of Skidmore students studied abroad, 55% participated in community service (including service learning), and 55 students were granted funded internships from a pool of 165 applicants. Skidmore’s success in the arena of experiential learning is supported by recent NSSE data showing that, in addition to their Scribner Seminar, 82% of our students self-report as having engaged in one or more of these high-impact experiences prior to graduation, a percentage comparable to students at peer institutions.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of Skidmore students engage in activities that are critical to identifying and achieving post-baccalaureate goals, our students are much *less* likely than their peers to feel that they are prepared for the transition to their post-baccalaureate lives[[4]](#footnote-4), and this sentiment was echoed in the recent Town Hall Meetings attended by parents and alumni. This disconnect may be traced to several causes: a lack of mentoring that explicitly identifies academic engagement and participation in high-impact experiences as vital preparation for post-baccalaureate success; the timing of these experiences, which can occur too late for students to capitalize upon them as they pursue competitive, post-baccalaureate opportunities; and a lack of effective partnering between academic advisors and the offices charged with developing and/or promoting high-impact experiences, other forms of co-curricular engagement, and career development. Simply put, up to this point, our program of providing students with high-impact educational experiences has lacked intentionality.

**Strategic Vision and Institutional Change**

Developing a comprehensive framework to better mentor and support students as they identify and work towards post-baccalaureate goals will require the coordinated action of the Offices of Academic Advising, the First Year Experience, and Off-Campus Study and Exchanges, the Career Development Center, the Office of Campus Life, the Alumni Association, the Office of Advancement, and, most importantly, the faculty. Such a collaborative model would also address the lack of institutional cohesion and unsystematic, “scatter shot” approach that is so common for many colleges attempting to implement active learning practices. “If the essential learning outcomes are goals, then our curricular, co-curricular and pedagogical practices need to be recognized as the means to achieving these larger educational ends. We can help our students improve by making these kinds of practices the norm, rather than the exception.” [[5]](#footnote-5)

To realize our vision that all students will develop the skills and knowledge that will best assist them in translating their liberal arts education into future action, we have initially set the following goals:

* Create and support a cross-divisional infrastructure to assist students in making meaningful transitions.
* Encourage all students to participate in high-impact educational practices to apply (actualize) their learning.
* Educate students about the value of these experiences in the context of post-baccalaureate planning and success.
* Place special attention early in students’ education to engage 100% of all students in one or more high-impact educational practices before their senior year.
* Seek funding to support student participation in high-impact educational practices regardless of their financial need.
* Encourage students to apply their knowledge through responsible citizenship activities at the local, regional, national, or international levels.

**Creating a Collaborative Model**

Creating a cross-divisional, highly collaborative infrastructure means establishing **dynamic and intentional interactions** throughout our students' college education that will allow them to own their educational experiences in ways that support them in achieving their practical and aspirational goals.

It is with this vision in mind that the *Transition and Transformation Working Group* proposes the creation of new positions and the restructuring of Career Services. Thisnew structure will, we believe, provide the administrative capacity necessary to coordinate the function of multiple offices in support of faculty and students as they work to identify (and pursue) high-impact experiences; as students plan for graduate school and professional programs in health and law; and as they make career transitions as alumnae. The remainder of this document outlines a model for accomplishing our objectives.

(1) The Coordinator of Experiential Learning (CEL)

We recognize that identifying high-impact experiences, supervising them, and advising students into them takes *time*, and we seek to lessen the burden on faculty and departments by leveraging resources across the full breadth of Skidmore’s curricular and co-curricular program. We envision a model where the responsibility for informed advising may be shared across multiple constituents (faculty, offices in student and academic affairs); where growth in the number and diversity of high-impact experiences is guided by a best-practices dialog among disciplines, faculty development opportunities, and curricular innovation; and where new programmatic resources are identified to alleviate enrollment pressure for credit-bearing experiences (experiences that require sustained faculty oversight). We propose to increase the number of paid summer experiences that students pursue *outside* Skidmore—whether in the field, laboratory, studio, conservatory, or industry—and to explicitly link these experiences to institutional and programmatic goals for student learning. On campus, we seek to expand the Summer Faculty/Student Research program and increase academic-year and summer Student Opportunity Funds and Travel-to-Present Awards.

Appointed from the Skidmore teaching faculty for an initial three-year term, the CEL will lead this effort. The CEL will coordinate the activity of multiple offices in support of advising and program development and work with individual departments and faculty to identify and promote high-impact experiences where appropriate. The work of the CEL will be evaluated in the third year to determine whether the position should be sustained, reconfigured, or eliminated.

*Relationship between the Coordinator of Experiential Learning and the Faculty*

Faculty are not expected to be guidance counselors, nor are departments expected to assume internship and career development functions typically ascribed to Career Services. However, faculty are expected to be mentors. That is, faculty should consider the arc of their advisees’ curricular planning in the broader context of their entire Skidmore experience and beyond. Faculty mentors encourage their advisees to reflect on how their coursework meets institutional goals for their learning; actively explore the connection between mind and hand, thinking and doing, theory and practice as they build a set of experiences that meet curricular (major/minor) and co-curricular (responsible citizenship) goals; and plan for life after Skidmore. For effective mentoring, faculty and students need easy and clear connections to electronic resources that describe credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing experiences that promote engagement, and allow students to explore different disciplines and careers. When possible, these opportunities should be firmly embedded in the curricular and co-curricular program. Faculty themselves should be conversant in these opportunities in order to help their students identify strategies for engagement and exploration.

The Coordinator of Experiential Learning will:

* Enhance and coordinate existing academic and pre-professional internship clusters and identify faculty and resources to create others;
* Cultivate and maintain best-practices dialog among faculty leaders, particularly those involved in coordinating academic (curriculum-based) internships;
* Implement, in cooperation with the Office of Communications, an initiative that broadly informs students about the benefits of participating in high-impact experiences. This initiative would include the development of a comprehensive web resource organized by academic interest or pre-professional program including: internships, collaborative research, and cross-cutting initiatives related to civic engagement (responsible citizenship) and intercultural understanding (study abroad, inter-group relations);
* Develop advising resources for faculty who mentor first- and second-year students and contribute to workshops for Scribner Seminar instructors;
* Work with faculty sponsors and steering committees for Special Interest Advising Clusters: (Health Professions Advisory Committee, Arts Administration, Pre-Law, and Engineering) and consider development of additional clusters (e.g., Communications);
* Administer the Summer Faculty/Student Research Program;
* Work with members of Career Development Center to organize and promote external (off-campus) opportunities that complement and expand on-campus initiatives, especially as they relate to the students’ first and second year.

*Relationship between the Coordinator of Experiential Learning and the Offices of the First Year Experience, Off-Campus Study and Exchanges, and Campus Life*

Although effective mentoring by faculty in the student’s first and second year is critical, advising into high-impact experiences and making more explicit the importance of these experiences for post-baccalaureate planning and success are responsibilities of the broader community. The CEL will leverage existing curricular and co-curricular structures to develop a comprehensive mentoring program that could include:

* FYE programming that provides an introduction to high-impact experiences and points of contact for support (for identifying and securing an experience);
* A role for Peer Mentors beyond the first semester (for example, a subset of Peer Mentors could be formally trained by the Career Development Center to provide advice on indentifying and securing high-impact experiences and utilizing services more explicitly targeted to career development);
* A role for the Student Government Association and Academic Council in supporting and promoting early engagement, (for example, the CEL could work with the SGA to enhance the “majors fair” already targeted at sophomores to promote high-impact experiences and career exploration opportunities);
* A role for OCSE (for example, the CEL could work with study abroad program mangers to identify and promote high-impact experiences already embedded in host-program curricula and offerings);
* A role for Residential Life (for example, the CEL could leverage Residence Hall programming across a range of initiatives, from the Survivor Series--small group meetings in the residence halls--to formal civic engagement/high-impact programming that could inform the development of the new housing).

(2) Associate Director for Pre-professional and Graduate Study

The Associate Director will support pre-professional programming and the application process for students interested in health-related fields, law school, and graduate school.

Specific duties will include:

* Designing and delivering workshops, career exploration programs and other sessions to expose students and alumni considering pre-professional careers or graduate school;
* Partnering with the Writing Center to offer students writing workshops to develop competitive applications;
* Partnering with departments and the CEL to further develop volunteer and research opportunities, internships, and job shadowing opportunities in the health professions and law;
* Coordinating and assisting the relevant faculty committees in the development of composite letters of recommendation and interviewing candidates;
* Representing the College in communications with professional schools, graduate programs, and professional associations, as well as acting as a liaison between the relevant admission offices and the College;
* Initiating and expanding programs to educate students about law and health professions and graduate/professional programs;
* Conducting outreach to identify students interested in law and health professions and maintain pre-law and health professions email lists, send out monthly or bi-monthly announcements;
* Supplementing the efforts of the pre-law and health professions advisor by advising these students at times when the pre-law and health professions advisor is not accessible;
* Maintaining information regarding law school and health professions applications and admission for Skidmore candidates;
* Expanding and updating web based resources about graduate school application and admissions;
* Overseeing graduate school week programming and events;
* Partnering with Skidmore’s Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) program to ensure that students are aware of and understand the unique opportunities afforded by our own graduate program.

Given the disciplinary specificity of graduate work in the liberal arts, faculty across the disciplines will continue to be the primary source of information for students applying in many fields. Some fields, particularly pre-professional programs like health professions and law, will benefit from the comprehensive, career-oriented programming offered by the Associate Director.

With respect to the health professions, the Health Professions Advisory Committee (HPAC) has seen a significant increase in student interest over the last five years. From 2000-2005, the number of first-year students expressing an interest in the health professions was 25-45, and the number actually pursing applications to doctoral level programs was approximately 10 per year. In 2005, the number of first-year students expressing interest in the health professions jumped to 85, and that number continues to increase. As many as 118 students in the class of 2014 have declared an interest in the health professions (more than 15% of the class), and 30 students are currently applying through Skidmore’s premed committee to doctoral level medical schools. Another 20 students are currently applying to masters level programs in Nursing, Physician Assistant, Physical Therapy, Genetic Counseling and other health-related programs.

Skidmore’s HPAC has a faculty chair and part-time administrative support position as the primary infrastructure to support students interested in completing applications to medical school. The HPAC provides little career-oriented programming (events, speakers, workshops), and internships, civic engagement projects, and job shadowing opportunities targeted at the health professions are limited. Many of our peer institutions have allocated considerably more resources to support students interested in health professions:

 PREMEDS $ $ PER

 PER APPLICANTS SUPPORT[[6]](#footnote-6) PREMED

INSITUTION ENROLLMENT FIRST YEAR PER YEAR FOR HPAC CLASS

COLGATE 2,900 120 50-60 $47K $47K/120=$391

HAMILTON 1,800 100 25-30 $40K $40K/100=$400

UNION 2,100 120 30-50 $99K $99K/120=$825

**SKIDMORE (08) 2,400 70 20+ $25K $25K/70=$312
SKIDMORE (10) 118 30+ $31K $31K/118=$263**

Interest in law is also growing. The number of first-year student who self-identify as “pre-law” increased from 32 in Fall 2009 to 59 in Fall 2010. The number of students who ultimately pursue post-baccalaureate training in law has increased as well, from 43 students in 2006 to 58 students in 2009. Currently, a faculty member volunteers as the pre-law advisor without any additional support.

To alleviate some of these existing pressures, the Associate Director’s workload will include advising students and alums about job-shadowing, research experiences, internships, full-time jobs, and gap year opportunities. In this capacity, the Associate Director will collaborate with the Coordinator of Experiential Learning to support students across their entire Skidmore career.

The qualification for this position will include a master’s degree and relevant undergraduate pre-professional advising experience. Familiarity with admission requirements for professional and graduate schools required as well as knowledge of trends in health professions, law, and graduate education. Excellent written and oral communication skills as well as project management and organizational capability expected. The position will report to the Career Services Director with a dotted line report to the Associate Dean for Academic Advising given the substantive link to faculty advising.

 (3) The Associate Director of Outreach and Alumni Services

*Relationship between the Director of Career Services and the Director of Alumni Affairs and College Events*

For quite some time, the Offices of Alumni Affairs/College Events and Career Services have effectively partnered to provide career programming for undergraduates and have offered limited assistance to alumni in transition. While these efforts have been effective, it is clear that our graduates, most notably those who graduated within the last ten years, could benefit greatly from additional support provided through the addition of a position that would report to both offices. The creation of this position would send a clear message to alumni that Skidmore is ready, willing, and able to serve graduates who are in transition between jobs and/or careers. The linkage provided by this position is a natural progression in our efforts to more effectively serve our graduates and will help to foster a greater sense among alumni that Skidmore is committed to their success even after they graduate from the Institution.

The Associate Director for Outreach and Alumni Services will:

* Collaborate with the Alumni Association, alumni clubs, the Skidmore Business Network, and Parents Council and other groups to design and implement career development programming on campus and in the various regions;
* Develop/present workshops/presentations and written pieces about career and job search topics( including the Careers That Make a Difference 101 Alumni Panel);
* Counsel and advise alumni regarding career transition and job search issues;
* Cultivate jobs, internships and recruiting opportunities, as well as alumni back to campus visits through outreach to alumni and parents;
* Expand networking groups including the Career Network and Skidmore College Connections Group on LinkedIn.

*In addition to the creation of the Associate Director for Outreach and Alumni Services, the Advancement Related Initiatives to support the work of the Transition and Transformation Working Group will include:*

* Introducing members of the class of 2011 to Skidmore Connect, the College’s new on-line community;
* Working to establish more sources of funding for summer internship stipends and other High-impact Experiences;
* Expanding the College’s existing “Creative Thought at Work” web site to include profiles that focus on faculty work/student initiatives.

The required qualifications for this position will include a master's degree in counseling, student personnel, human resources, or a related discipline, and three to five years of relevant experience in an academic environment, as well as demonstrated knowledge of the private sector. Must have proven ability to make sound decisions while taking initiative; work flexibly in a team environment; and manage several projects simultaneously with careful attention to detail. Preference will be given to Skidmore alumni that meet the position requirements.

The ideal candidate will be able to collaborate with various constituents to design and implement career development programming both on- and off-campus; effectively counsel and advise alumni regarding career transition and job search issues; have strong written and oral communication skills, including the ability to deliver engaging presentations; and cultivate job, internship, recruiting, and networking opportunities for alumni. This candidate will also have working familiarity with relevant social media, such as LinkedIn and Facebook, and posses a good sense of humor.

In addition, the College seeks candidates who will understand and embrace the essence of creativity and the Skidmore brand, “Creative Thought Matters.”

The Career Development Center Restructuring

In a 2010 Liberal Arts Career Networking (LACN) benchmarking survey of 27 small liberal arts colleges (see appendix for full comparison chart/Skidmore is Q), Skidmore continues to be well below the mean in both staffing and in operating budget dollars. With a current staff of 4.75 FTE (the mean of the group is 7.50 FTE), Skidmore’s Career Services ranks 24th. The current programming budget of $31,730 makes Skidmore College 25th in the same comparison group (the mean of the group is $67,960). The number of students per FTE at Skidmore exceeds the next highest by approximately 40 students.

The proposed additions to staffing and operational budgets would bring the FTE total to 8 (included in this number is the CEL which is intended to be a current faculty member) and the operational budget to $75,730 (approximately $7,770 above the mean of the LACN group).

Transition and Transformation Working Group

Mary Lou Bates, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid

W. Rochelle Calhoun, Dean of Student Affairs & Coordinator for the Working Group

Michael Casey, Vice President of Advancement

Corey Freeman-Gallant, Associate Dean of the Faculty for Academic Advising

Dan Forbush, Executive Director of Communications

David Howson, Visiting Associate Professor and Arthur Zankel Director of Arts Administration

David Karp, Associate Dean of Student Affairs, Director of Campus Life

Barbara Krause, Executive Director, President’s Office & Coordinator of Strategic Initiatives

Penny Loretto, Interim Director, Career Services

Marla Melito, Student Academic Development Coordinator & Lecturer in English

Tillman Nechtman, Assistant Professor of History

Muriel Poston, Acting Vice President of Academic Affairs & Dean of the Faculty

Patricia Rubio, Acting Dean of the Faculty & Associate Dean of the Faculty

Michael Sposili, Director, Alumni Affairs & College Events

Faculty Working Group on Experiential Learning

Corey Freeman-Gallant, Associate Dean of the Faculty for Academic Advising

David Howson, Visiting Associate Professor and Arthur Zankel Director of Arts Administration

Kim Marsella, Program Coordinator and Lecturer, Environmental Studies

Michael Marx, Associate Professor of English, Director of Expository Writing, Director of Environmental Studies

Crystal Moore, Associate Professor & Director of Social Work

Tillman Nechtman, Assistant Professor of History

Robert Turner, Associate Professor of Government

1. “Strategic Renewal: Reframing our Priorities at the Midpoint of the Strategic Plan" (17 May 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kuh, George D. AAC&U, 2008. *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kuh, pp. 14-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Only 54% of Skidmore seniors report that their experiences have contributed to their ability to solve complex, real-world problems; similarly, only 48% of seniors believe that undergraduate experience has improved their ability to acquire job or work-related skills. In contrast, 65-70% of seniors at peer institutions respond in the affirmative. NSSE Survey Results, Skidmore College 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kuh, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)