“Why does the world need Skidmore?”

A CONVERSATION WITH
PHILIP A. GLOTZBACH, PRESIDENT

In a series of conversations during the first two years of his presidency, Philip A. Glotzbach reflects on Skidmore's strengths and uniqueness, the role of creative thinking in higher education, and his vision for the College.

“What this College does so well—I really believe better than any other school—is teach students to solve problems holistically, to see the interrelatedness and complexity of issues and bring their powers of creativity and rigorous analysis to bear in crafting solutions. It’s what the phrase *Creative Thought Matters* is all about. It’s unique and at the core of what makes this place extraordinary. That, in a nutshell, is why the world needs Skidmore.”

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WHY DOES THE WORLD NEED SKIDMORE?

"Failure of imagination is the phrase I use to help explain why we can't seem to find solutions for the most intractable problems facing us. But I use that phrase very precisely. Failure of imagination is not synonymous with failure of intellect or intent, or even of knowledge. Rather, it's a failure of perspective, a failure to think beyond disciplinary boundaries, a failure to look at systems while focusing instead on isolated events. So if it's at all fair to try and summarize Skidmore in a phrase, I'd say that what we do best is free the imagination.

There's a long religious and philosophical tradition that the world is in some way imperfect—one might even say broken—and that it needs to be fixed. That's precisely what our students learn to do by using their own intellect, creativity, and compassion. Where the world needs that most is in dealing with those complex multidimensional problems that don't fit into neatly defined categories—the environment, epidemics from AIDS to avian flu, hunger, poverty, global economic imbalance, and scores of others. These issues can't be addressed from within a single disciplinary perspective; they need people who can reach across disciplines and approaches, people who can think creatively and analytically. To say that Skidmore educates students to be independent and creative problem-solvers, students who aren't restricted to looking at things in traditional ways, isn't an aspirational promise; it's demonstrably what we do. And it's why the world needs Skidmore."

ON SKIDMORE STUDENTS

"Our students are certainly bright, but, perhaps more importantly, they're not one-dimensional. They frequently take on double majors or unusual combinations of major and minor—neuroscience and studio art, for instance. A surprising number come here to major in management and business in a liberal arts context, and that's virtually unique to us. They achieve mastery in core disciplines—physics or economics, for example—but know that they also need the perspectives of multiple disciplines to find answers. They believe that the arts are central to a fulfilling existence. They relish being part of a close and caring community, one that's supportive rather than abrasively competitive. They want to—and do—excel, but not at the expense of others. They

care about the larger world and act on that concern. And they know how to work with others, to collaborate as part of a team—not just because that's part of our institutional heritage but because that's how Skidmore and the world function today."

ON THE SKIDMORE FACULTY

"What's remarkable is that members of our faculty not only encourage interdisciplinarity and creativity but model it themselves, which explains why our students learn it so well. You can see it in the topics of our new Scribner Seminars for first-year students, in our faculty's research and artistic work, and perhaps most dramatically when faculty colleagues collaborate on their own exhibitions and performances. Nothing better captures that for me as when a physicist and artist jointly conceived and produced the extraordinary exhibition *A Very Liquid Heaven* at the Tang.

Even when we have heated debates in faculty meetings, the issues we debate are almost invariably about how best to educate our students: whether academic rigor and excellence can go hand-in-hand with support and nurturing, how to ensure that our students are graduating with what they need to know to succeed, where the line should be drawn between the breadth of the liberal arts and increasing demands for depth and specificity in individual disciplines. The point I'm trying to make is that our faculty members care deeply about our students and about this College. They're committed to their profession in a way that goes well beyond the traditional model of 'teaching-scholarship-service,' and well beyond what I've seen at other colleges. If Skidmore's graduates succeed in representing what this place is all about—and they do—it's because of our faculty."

ON THE CREATIVE IMPULSE

"*Creative Thought Matters* can be traced all the way back to our founder, Lucy Skidmore Scribner. Its real power, however, is that it both describes how we're distinctive today and points our course into the future. How else would you characterize the motivation of a wealthy young widow who, instead of indulging in the local social whirl, threw her energy, her passion, her personal resources, and her considerable intellect into advancing the cause of women's education?

How else would you describe a college willing to assume the risks inherent in simultaneously moving to and building a new campus and going coed? How else could you explain our incredibly strong heritage in the arts and our reputation for interdisciplinary programs?

People sometimes wrongly assume that if you're strong in one area you must be weak in others. That if you're creative, you're not scientific. Look, we have a number of wonderful science students. Many go on to the best graduate programs in the nation, or the world for that matter. These kids aren't just competitive, many are exceptional…but the stereotype persists. What needs to be acknowledged is that the level of creative thinking required to complete a painting or compose a sonata isn't radically different from that involved in developing a mathematical proof or figuring out the structure of DNA. If creative thought really matters—and there's nothing I believe more wholeheartedly—then it matters in every discipline, in every endeavor, in every life.

My goal is to see us own this concept—this niche, if you will—within the universe of higher education. For example, I'd love to see us fund a program that would bring the finest and most creative minds in the world here to work with our faculty and students. Think of the outcomes!

To argue that *Creative Thought Matters*, that it should have a tangible effect upon the real world, is really incredibly audacious, because creativity has long been thought of as something 'soft' and lacking rigor. That's just not true. Genuine creativity does not come easily; it requires a rigor of thought and practice that connects knowledge and imagination with discipline. The more we can develop our students' capacity to make that connection, the more they will be able to respond to the world with creative thought in ways that truly make it matter."

ON THE TANG TEACHING MUSEUM AS OBJECT AND SYMBOL

"Anyone who's been to campus and spent time talking to students and professors knows this, but I'll ask the rhetorical questions anyway: Why is there no other school in the country with a resource like the Tang? Why is it that no other institution has developed this kind of enterprise to create and disseminate knowledge? Why is no other college or university encouraging faculty members to utilize such a space and such holdings in their own classes and in their own scholarship and creative work, regardless of discipline? The answer, I suspect, lies in how willing we are to think outside of disciplinary and curricular boundaries, how focused we are on not just mounting exhibitions but presenting ideas, how much we believe that art doesn't live in self-reflexive isolation but should be part of an ongoing intellectual dialogue.

Simply put, the Tang is a gem—in its dedication to making the concept of a teaching museum meaningful, in the outstanding quality of its sometimes controversial exhibitions, and in its symbolism as a physical manifestation of what Skidmore is all about."

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ON CARING ABOUT THE WORLD

"Before I ever set foot on campus, my expectation was that Skidmore students would care about the broader world—the world beyond themselves and the College—and that expectation has been far surpassed. We have growing service-learning and volunteerism efforts. We encourage students to think about problems of global scope. So do hundreds of other colleges. But we also ask students to focus first on problems of immediate need right in our campus community, right in our own neighborhood. By making a difference locally and seeing the impact, Skidmore students subsequently build on this and begin tackling projects of more global significance.

Sometimes the local issues our students take on have an importance that transcends their apparent scope. Our restorative justice project is an excellent case in point. Under the guidance of a faculty member, Skidmore's student judicial board works not simply to punish those who break the rules but to have them make amends in ways that help restore community spirit and trust—for example, by working alongside a repair crew rather than just paying a fine. This kind of reintegration underscores the notion of community, which is every bit as powerful among current students as it is among our alumni.

Perhaps the most obvious instance of caring about the world is the number of our students interested in study abroad. Nearly 50 percent do so right now, but we know that almost two-thirds want to. There's no question that if we want to graduate students who are responsible citizens, we need to help them gain a global perspective. That's critical. And there's no better way to do that than through study abroad. As in many areas, our reach exceeds our grasp, but I have no doubt we'll get there."

WHAT DRIVES THIS COLLEGE?

"If I had to pick one single factor, I'd say passion. That's what drove Lucy and other visionaries who kept us going during the tough times. That's what I see in our professors who, regardless of age or experience, never tire of making each class fresh and

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engaging, never tire of advising and mentoring, and constantly do everything humanly possible to engender that same kind of passion in their students. But in a sense it's the students themselves who fire our passion. When they begin to make the transition from residence in a learning community to membership in a learned community, when they start to make connections beyond their own disciplines, when they pursue their own scholarly and artistic projects, often with results equal to the best of their peers—and in some cases, professionals—one can only come away inspired.

Our alumni and friends often ask me how I can be so passionate about the College. The better question is, How could one hear what I hear and see what I see and not be passionate about Skidmore?

I know it's a cliché that college presidents are always asking for support, and there's certainly some truth in that. But asking for support doesn't bother me in the least because it leads right to the heart of two key questions: What can we offer our students? And ultimately, what can our students offer the world? If I'm successful in describing why *Creative Thought Matters* in a Skidmore education, and how it helps students learn to make a difference and ultimately go out and fix the world, well, that's tremendously exciting. I'm confident that people will share in this excitement and want to invest in it.

Many of our alumni know that we compete with a very selective group of schools—Vassar, Colgate, Trinity, Hamilton, Kenyon, Franklin & Marshall, and so on. Most have endowments that are two, three, or four times larger than ours. What that's meant is that we've had to do more with less. That can work for a while, but Skidmore has reached a point where the lack of resources has become a serious constraint. So why not pull back from our objective of expressing *Creative Thought Matters* in everything we do? Or refrain from educating graduates capable of countering failures of the imagination or striving to achieve at the highest levels of excellence? Because by doing so we'd dishonor everything Lucy stood for, everything we mean when we say, Make no small plans.

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What do we need? We need to make it financially possible for more qualified students to attend Skidmore regardless of their families' ability to pay. Period. Whether they're from across the country or across the globe. We need to ensure that overseas study is better supported so we can deliver on our promises of global perspective and responsible citizenship. We need to build a new music facility so we can better highlight our arts programs and bring world-class artists and speakers to an appropriate venue. We need to structure campus life so that it runs on students' rhythms rather than ours. We need to fund a program to take our *Creative Thought Matters* message to the world. On my personal wish list, I'd even add that we need to make it possible for every senior to do a capstone project demonstrating his or her own capability to make creative thought material. If we want our students to succeed, to be able to tackle the really important problems of our time, we must give them the intellectual and perceptual tools to do so. That's where the investment has to go."

WORKS IN PROGRESS

"There's no question that increased financial resources are critical to our future, but there are other kinds of commitments that need to be honored: the commitment to live up to our loftiest rhetoric, including the expectation of excellence in everything we do; the commitment to providing the kind of transformative education for all students, not just our most gifted; the commitment to make certain the world knows that Skidmore is the college where *Creative Thought Matters*, and even more, why creative thought is so vitally important.

Even though Skidmore is now over 100 years old, in many ways we're still a work in progress. In fact, that could well be precisely what makes us successful. We're constantly redefining and reimagining ourselves, without losing our core identity. What I sense, though, is that Skidmore is truly on the rise. We have outstanding students—the best in our history—a talented and caring faculty, a committed and energetic staff, and the most robust, enthusiastic alumni support in anyone's memory. What we have, too, is a vision for the College that's like no other, along with a plan to take us there. I can't help but feel that this is our time."

Philip A. Glotzbach was named Skidmore's seventh president in July 2003, coming to the College from the University of Redlands where he served as Vice President for Academic Affairs and, earlier, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. From 1977 to 1992 he was at Denison University as Associate Professor of Philosophy, Chair of the Philosophy Department, and Chair of the Faculty Senate. A member of Phi Beta Kappa, he holds a B.A. from the University of Notre Dame (summa cum laude) and a Ph.D. from Yale University.

Over the past few years, he has collaborated with the College community to develop a road map for Skidmore's future. This work has been captured in *Engaged Liberal Learning: The Plan for Skidmore College 2005-2015*—a strategic plan that has been endorsed by the faculty and approved by the Board of Trustees. It is accompanied by a seventy-four-point "strategic action agenda," the first series of annual documents that will guide the plan's execution. To help realize this agenda, the College has launched the most ambitious campaign in its history, *Creative Thought. Bold Promise*. The Campaign has an established goal of $200 million.

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