As the Swarthmore community begins its strategic planning exercise, community members are encouraged to think creatively about what the future might hold for the College. This essay combines concepts that arose from individual faculty, alumni, and staff contributing their own “histories of the future.” The essays are intended to be free form and imaginative, not prescriptive.

History of the Future: An Imaginative Essay on Swarthmore’s Future

Failure to Convince: A Second Strategic Plan

It has been 20 years since 2010 when we last engaged in an exhaustive strategic planning effort, and it is now long overdue. Unfortunately, our last effort failed to convince alumni, faculty, and our friends more widely that we needed to make a bold departure from our usual path -- that the incremental changes we were used to making would be insufficient to respond to the dramatic changes in both the financial and higher education landscapes.

Resistance to our recommendations in 2010 meant that we continued to rely on old budgetary models, underestimated technology’s ability to completely transform the delivery of high-quality, educational experiences to students with reduced cost, and failed to (re)think deeply our organizational structure, locking us into long-term decisions that left us unable to respond to shifts of focus regarding particular areas of study. As other institutions also failed to make changes, the last 20 years has seen a steady decline in an understanding of the concept of the “liberal arts” and the idea has become almost incoherent, losing all cultural capital, reputation, and relevance.

Our students have remained fairly strong, but economic pressures affecting most of the middle class and a failure to adjust our admissions and financial aid policies in the context
of the wider financial climate has meant the almost complete loss of the middle class here at Swarthmore. Recruiting and retaining the best faculty has been a challenge over the years, as we have failed to move to a four course per year load or, to acknowledge in some other way the growing time constraints on faculty, as they try to maintain strong research programs, engage students in joint projects, and teach at the highest level.

And yet, there is cause for some optimism. First, we did evolve to incorporate into the Swarthmore education more experiential learning, community engagement, practical and applied approaches to academic subjects, and some levels of pre-professional training with a distinctive liberal-arts twist. We invested in state-of-the-art biology, engineering, psychology, and art buildings and did extensive work on both new and old construction to ensure that our spaces held to the highest green standards possible. Perhaps most important, we have never waivered from the values we have held dear and those ideals we hold central to our mission—a deep commitment to intellectual rigor combined with the teaching and learning of social responsibility, the tremendous importance of sustainability as part of that social responsibility, and the necessity to have this value reflected in the daily operation and life of the College, in the curriculum and to the technology we employ and in our policies that demonstrate a commitment to attracting and supporting a diverse student body, ethnically, financially, globally, and in all other ways. We have strengthened our emphasis on collaboration rather than competition among our students and been more explicit in our discussions and development of student responsibilities and expectations. And finally, we ought to be proud of the integrated community we have formed with our Tri-College partners, of our support of English language learners among our students, and
of how our faculty and staff has evolved to reflect more closely the diversity represented among our students.

Our challenge looking forward will be to address ways to more adeptly incorporate current critical areas like Asian Studies, particularly of areas such as China and India; Islamic and Middle East Studies; African Studies; and Art and the Aesthetic. We will need to recommit ourselves to developing in students the skill of close reading—now expanded beyond written texts to include all manner of what are now equally important forms of media like video—as a way of strengthening focus and deep inquiry, healthy criticism, the ability to work with ambiguity and build multiple interpretations, the ability to be slow to judge, and instill empathy and understanding for the lives and perspectives of others.

We know that all of this is vital to the education of young adults in this dynamic world of thoroughly blended cultures and peoples. We will need to further invest in technologies that facilitate communication, social connection (that has had profound effects on the way students learn and the possibilities for collaboration), and content delivery. And finally, we must adjust to the new ways in which we have seen our students go through college in the last 10 years and, also, capture the market of adults—perhaps restricting opportunities to our own alumni—clamoring for ongoing opportunities to learn as the world has become an information society with the ability to continually learn as the most important factor to long-term success.