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*

*Swarthmore Recognized*

*We are most proud and honored to welcome back to campus a fellow Swarthmorean, a member of the Class of 2006.*

It is with great delight that I return to campus, and even more wonderful that I return to share in this celebration of Swarthmore receiving the International Community Award for Leadership and Excellence in Education.

Swarthmore College’s mission has always been centered around the concept of the liberal arts—humanities, social sciences, mathematics, creative arts, natural sciences, etc.—as preparation for world citizenship, grounded by a commitment to the common good and elevated by a drive to provide students rigorous intellectual training at the frontiers of knowledge. Now, by virtue of this award, the College is recognized worldwide for educating students with the capacity to contribute innovative and sustainable solutions to complex problems in an increasingly global society. The College has focused on student agency and facilitated student engagement in transformative change and, in doing so, has prepared its students to be critically thinking, caring, imaginative, and entrepreneurial world leaders. It
stands as an exemplary model for how to build and disseminate knowledge collaboratively, working with domestic and international partners in creative new ways.

The challenges that we and these students face in the world are many. Financial uncertainty continues to affect large sectors of our global economy, in part due to the sociopolitical instability and conflict between and among various groups. Over the years, we have seen widening gaps in income distribution and access to resources; increasing tension in communities with different ideas on religion and culture occupying the same space (both real and virtual); the continuing trend for the cost of post-secondary education to rise more sharply than inflation; and the egregious failures of countries, most unfortunately including our own, to provide an adequate primary and secondary educational experience for all its citizens. We continue to struggle with the lasting effects of phenomena such as global warming that didn't reach its peak until five years ago and the profound changes in community, resulting from our constant use of technologies now enabled with processors that have a fundamentally different level of computational power than even 10 years ago.

On the other hand, we have also witnessed moments that indicate a deepening understanding of the value of exploring and becoming fluent in the history, religion, culture, and language of others—an understanding that the attainment of such fluency nurtures different ways of seeing, doing, experiencing, interacting, communicating, feeling, and knowing.
Swarthmore has led the way in helping others understand the unique value of a liberal arts education. It has radically reorganized its departments into knowledge clusters centered around fundamental questions or research methodologies, in some cases eroding disciplinary allegiances, in other cases strengthening them, but always increasing collaboration. This has created the curricular fluidity necessary for faculty and students to engage not just the valued fundamental and traditional questions, but also the important, new and pressing problems of our time. Traditional disciplines such as mathematics, economics, sociology, and philosophy continue to be represented as do newer interdisciplinary fields such as world literature, environmental studies, and Asian studies, but Swarthmore has also been able to devote years to the study of places such as India, Chester, or the Middle East; topics such as conflict resolution, world public policy, and sustainable food production; and relationships like neuroscience, artificial intelligence, and ethics; technology, the creative arts, and humanity; and biology, engineering, and entrepreneurship.

You have provided each student with the opportunity to have one summer of financial backing for research or advanced study that supports a student’s major, facilitating experiences here, at domestic institutions such as CalTech, MIT, Johns Hopkins, the University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard University; and, internationally, at places like Cambridge University, the University of Hong Kong, and the Indian Institute of Technology. Students have the option to take summer and winter mini-courses throughout their Swarthmore years and are required to study abroad for at least a 10-week summer (with many now opting to go abroad for two full semesters). Importantly, these experiences are
not simply whimsical choices of young adults but are carefully planned experiences with well thought-out goals, aided by conversations with faculty and staff advisers and supported by projects that promote deep reflection and strengthen the development of skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and effective communication of ideas across disciplines, to a variety of audiences, in multiple ways.

Swarthmore understood the shift some time ago to a problem-based interdisciplinary, collaboratively created information age and has made difficult choices to be in a position to prepare students for this new era. The College has expanded its reach, now educating more undergraduates, but also, importantly, mid-life (career-changing) adults through innovative uses of technology and senior adults by transforming a local retirement community into an active community of engagement. Swarthmore has maintained breadth while increasing its flexibility by establishing and growing its partnerships with other places, using clever combinations of technology and state-of-the-art spaces built in the previous decade to support these connections.

Swarthmore’s innovation and dedication to providing a first-rate experience has fueled a tremendous craving for the stellar liberal arts education it provides. We have seen a willingness among the wealthy to pay very handsomely for their students to be nurtured in Swarthmore’s residential environment with its commitment to building close student-faculty connections and to supplementing that mode of learning with virtual experiences that greatly expand the opportunities and possibilities for students here. Throughout, Swarthmore has maintained success in attracting, accepting, supporting, and educating
student populations from across all socio-economic classes. Swarthmore is indeed a national treasure. Congratulations on your winning the International Community Award for Leadership and Excellence in Education.