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

A Look Back at Great Decisions and Changes

For more than 165 years, this College has remained committed to intellectual rigor in the service of the social good; to preparing students for leadership by equipping them with critical thinking, analytical writing, and effective speaking skills combined with humility, integrity, and confidence; and to maintaining lifelong connections between alumni, parents, and friends of the College and current students, faculty, and staff. It is a pleasure to begin our new 2030 strategic planning process with you by celebrating the accomplishments of our last process, one which has served us exceptionally well for much longer than anyone hoped.

That process recognized the changing demographics of the United States: the American population shifting toward its current status of minorities collectively being in the majority and an increase in peoples of blended heritages not only with respect to ethnicities but also religions and cultures. It understood the implications of the intense globalization that was occurring, facilitated by technologies that dramatically increased real mobility and introduced new ways of virtual interaction. The process acknowledged the importance of institutions like Swarthmore to champion the liberal arts as a critical mode of inquiry and understanding in this changing landscape, one that pushed creativity, interdisciplinarity,
and collaboration. As our understanding of cognition and learning has deepened and changes in the ways that students assimilate and produce knowledge evolve ever more quickly, we have brought new tools and techniques to bear in our teaching. And even as we continue to struggle today, as a species, with the way we use the earth’s resources and care for the environment, Swarthmore has stood as a model to the world for how to embed sustainable practices into our daily lives and into our curriculum. We have done these things with concrete, often challenging decisions and changes that have had real costs and tradeoffs but ones that also brought enormous gains for the institution in the long term. I highlight five of those decisions and changes below in the hopes that they will inspire us to be as courageous in our next strategic plan.

Perhaps the decision with the greatest impact for Swarthmore over the last decade and a half has been the decision to establish the Lucretia Mott Collaboratory for Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship. Working together with the Eugene M. Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility, a perennial leader among such centers; and the Center for Teaching and Learning, which continues to blossom, the Collaboratory has become—both in recognition and scope of work—a premier, international institute of engagement. We have established in it an honors-style, interdisciplinary, and team-based program for students that focuses on innovation and design across fields of knowledge. It offers one of the most outstanding programs in the world for high school students, co-sponsoring—along with the Lang Center—workshops, research, and other opportunities in community activities, most often in conjunction with one or more partners from those communities—be they alumni, current undergraduates, or faculty. The Collaboratory has established the Alice Paul
International Symposium, bringing together alumni, friends, and experts on current policy relevant to the topic for that year. Modeled after the Aspen Symposium (sponsored by the Forum for the Future of Higher Education) and the TED (Technology, Entertainment, and Design) Conferences, this symposium has become one of the most important sources for ideas about social engagement in the higher education context and has provided an excellent new source of revenue for the College. The Collaboratory has also been home to the Eldridge Center for Arts and Community Development, a center which continues to excel at engaging innovators in the arts from around the world. The work of these artists is highlighted every other year during the International Symposium. Biennially, new innovators are identified and invited to participate in conferences and workshops, often teaching students but also working in collaboration with both faculty and students on imaginative new social entrepreneurship and community development projects.

Swarthmore has made important changes in the composition of the student body as well. As always, we continue to attract and bring to campus students who love ideas and learning, possess tremendous capacity to challenge themselves and grow, and aim their collective talents and gifts toward building a better world, whether that be through law, the arts, business, science, medicine, or politics. We continue to fully cover all need for each student who attends. Over the years, we have strengthened the cohorts by increasing the number of foreign students without decreasing the number of domestic students, adding great value to cultural, intellectual, religious, and social diversity. Moreover, we’ve been able to slowly extend domestic policies of aid to specific countries as a way of phasing in the same aid policy for the entire Swarthmore population. A larger number of transfer
students and international visitors (one-semester and yearlong) now come to Swarthmore, some able to take part in our living-learning community housed in the new inn. Finally, we have fully established the Swarthmore for Life Program, offering to all alumni and select friends of the College full access to virtual courses developed and taught here and offering to the wider public a number of carefully chosen courses. This too has brought in new revenue for the College and given us the opportunity to continue to engage and support our alumni, as they navigate through the many career shifts each of us now makes over our work life.

We have always been an institution of support and experience, but our efforts in that arena have been transformative during the last two decades. In that time, study abroad has become a requirement, technology is now integral to knowing and learning in all fields, and the variety of extracurricular and co-curricular interests has grown even more. Against this backdrop, the College took key early steps to create individualized, blended-learning experiences, combining use of the best technology tools with in-person, student-faculty interactions. We transferred some of the best parts of the Honors Program over to each student’s experience at Swarthmore, whether they were honors students or not. We provided students with the technology and guidance to capture and organize important moments into thoughtful collections, which students now call their “digital diary.” Each student’s “digital diary” serves as a valuable resource for that student, but students also often share these representations of their experiences with each other, providing another important (and innovative) support for students. Finally, we invested in supporting students not just academically, but also psychologically, emotionally, and socially as well.
We recognized—and research over the years has certainly confirmed—that psychological, emotional, and social well-being are all crucial factors in ensuring a student’s ability to achieve her or his greatest success and performance. Just one illustration of this comprehensive support is the way we reshaped the sophomore paper experience, asking students to articulate plans and goals in diversity and inclusion, civic engagement, and wellness, to outline co-curricular as well as curricular plans, and to identify and discuss, with both deans and faculty, strategies for carrying out those plans.

Like our decision to establish the Collaboratory and all of its components, we have benefited greatly from a general philosophy regarding the renewing, building, and greening of our facilities. We reinvented the library, the College bookstore, and the field house—thinking of all three simultaneously when we renovated what was once McCabe library—created something anew from both Sharples Dining Hall and Clothier Hall, and completely redid the Lamb Miller Field House, efficiently exploiting those spaces and footprints while incorporating the now 15-year-old inn-development project. We now have four functionally varied and pleasant spaces to help encourage the appropriate balance of intense intellectual discourse, healthy physical activity, and calm relaxation for mind and body. The inn comfortably supports the Collaboratory with space still for a knowledge commons in place of a bookstore that allows for interactions, meetings, and gatherings of many types between the College and the wider community. The library has become a place to eat, gather, hear lectures, do video-conferencing, hold recruiting meetings, study quietly, use technology to collaborate with peers at other institutions, and download texts. The Dining, Health, and Wellness Student Center has become a major hub for campus activity,
stretching from what was once a new third and fourth floor of Sharples to a renovated Clothier. Students have access to both a traditional dining hall and smaller eating rooms, both large and small “inner-light” and multipurpose spaces that students use for meditation, prayer, yoga, small groups discussions, fitness classes, theater and dance productions, social events, and more. Workout equipment, showers, technology, food, and flexibility were priorities throughout the space, and it has been wonderful to see how students have responded.

And finally, we made adjustments in development to reflect the evolution of our alumni body—most critically, we’ve learned to reach out more effectively to a more diverse alumni body and expanded our use of technology to help sustain the alumni community and maintain connection to Swarthmore. We have also more actively responded to parents’ interest in the experiences of their students and have learned how to appropriately incorporate those parents into the Swarthmore family. Perhaps most dramatic, we have migrated to a one-price-over-four-years scheme. Equally important however, the skyrocketing costs of health care, increasing life spans, diminishing estate sizes, and uncertain financial times have significantly altered giving patterns. In response, we have had to be more creative and will need to continue to push new ideas for the foreseeable future.

The success of our students and our programs—the rise in the number of national and international fellowships our students have received; the incredible, innovative, and entrepreneurial work our students have begun; the capturing of the Division III national
title in men’s and women’s soccer twice over the last decade (each playing the finals once at the Philadelphia Union soccer stadium); the award-winning Broadway musical recently developed and performed in part by a handful of our recent alumni working in conjunction with our faculty; and more—is testament to the fact that we have made outstanding decisions and changes.