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**

*In Celebration of the Center for Liberal Arts in the Public*

In 2030, at this 15th anniversary of the *Elias Hicks Center for Liberal Arts in the Public* we celebrate its outstanding leadership as a champion of the power and value of the liberal arts in today’s society. During the last 15 years, the center and its directors have identified and publicly wrestled with some of the most challenging issues of our time. The center has been a shining example of the power in bringing together combinations of ideas from such disparate disciplines as history, religion, chemistry, economics, and dance and in engaging diverse groups of young adults, academics, policy makers, business people, and world leaders in a collaborative research and learning environment—all in the service of encouraging and modeling broader discourse and exploring and initiating new solutions.

The center has been a cornerstone—along with the Eugene M. Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility—in the educational experience that we provide Swarthmore students. At the heart of the entire college experience, shaped by Swarthmore’s faculty, staff, and students, is an intellectual rigor coupled with a drive to strengthen in students their critical thinking skills, curiosity, creativity, ability to see and analyze complexity. We
also aspire to create a willingness and adeptness at communicating their ideas across the multitude of media delivery pathways we now use—from traditional writing and speaking to video and avatar presentations. These are nurtured across the curriculum, but it is through these centers that students have the unique opportunity to employ their skills in collaboration with community activists, alumni, and scholars in intense, exciting, and relevant ways. The success of the center—and the institution more broadly—has been and continues to be supported by five important factors.

First, although our location itself brings an abundance of visitors to the center from the corridor ranging from North Carolina to Massachusetts (with Washington, D.C., and New York City heavily represented in particular), we are dedicated to bringing the greatest thinkers to us, both in residence and virtually, from across the nation and from around the world. We have leveraged both our physical location (and the development of what was once called the Inn Project) and our investments in remote presence technologies to give us the tremendous flexibility necessary to bring together diverse teams of scholars to work with our faculty, teach and stretch our students, and demonstrate the value of a liberal arts education to the rest of the world.

A second facet instrumental to our success was our choice to completely rethink the organization of our faculty—to think more broadly about how we measured and rewarded effectiveness and to recognize critical areas in need of our intellectual focus. We eliminated some departments altogether in favor of areas of study, giving us the curricular flexibility we required. We were bold enough to challenge customary cultural and social Swarthmore
(and in some cases higher education) practices, even tweaking how we do tenure and establishing new norms for the acknowledgment of outstanding teaching. We produced stellar joint faculty/student work, exemplary curricular development and unusually productive scholarly contributions and publications, and standardized and used technology to develop efficient practices that previously cost faculty and staff time, including how we evaluate and assign credit for work done elsewhere (most notably abroad). These bold steps have moved us away from a particular kind of egalitarianism, but we have moved toward a better one—one that sets aside old inequities of workload among faculty and allows us to celebrate a wider variety of achievements.

Third, our students have always been among the best in the world, but we have expanded the idea of the Swarthmore student body, both in number and in kind. We are proud of having recently reached a critical mass of seven or more students from each of the more-than-50 nations represented by the student body. As we have increased this population, we have maintained the strength and diversity of our domestic students. Equally exciting, we have recognized that today’s world requires constant learning, and we have kept our alumni deep in the fold of the Swarthmore learning experience, providing multiple opportunities and mechanisms for them to continue to engage the ideas and intellectual challenge that abound here. This has brought the added bonus of growing the opportunities and possibilities for undergraduates to take advantage of the connections that our alumni have developed. This growth in the number and kinds of students we serve has allowed us to maintain the breadth and flexibility we need.
Fourth, it would have been impossible for us to ignore the erosion of national boundaries in the creation and exchange of ideas, goods, and, unfortunately, also challenges. We have invested deeply in ensuring that we are global participants in the formulation, critique, and exploration of the important questions of our time. We bring leading thinkers to us, require that students go abroad, use technology to sponsor symposia given by international scholars, and have diversified our faculty to include both permanent and visiting academics from all over the world, most notably Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Our students, we hope, leave here with a truly global perspective and an ability to collaborate with anyone.

And finally, we have always been committed to finding faculty dedicated to both their fields and to excellence in teaching. We have continued that commitment, finding important ways to balance the demands more evenly across all faculty in all disciplines, diversifying both the permanent faculty and visiting faculty to more closely reflect our mission to be a global institution. We also offer time for faculty to engage more deeply in new and important questions with external scholars and thinkers of the highest caliber and with outstanding students in intensely more collaborative ways at centers like the one we celebrate today.