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

The Central Themes

Twenty years ago, in 2010, still in the dawn of the information age, the College identified early on that sustainability, globalization and diversity, technology, and changes in how students learned were critical areas on which to focus. The College is stronger today for having wrestled with and planned for the potential impacts of these themes on students, on higher education, and on society.

In identifying sustainability, we understood this concept to be broadly defined, including not only environmental and financial matters, but also social and, in some ways, intellectual issues. Quite prophetically, even 20 years ago, we saw that humanity needed to fundamentally shift its attitude toward resources—from being egotistical actors and users to being more altruistic sharers and stewards. We believed that this shift would permeate our behaviors and our thinking and required greater attention than just managing our carbon footprint or revenues and expenditures. Those latter considerations would be important, but the extent to which we needed to think more sustainably would fundamentally affect our perspectives and the ways in which we assimilated knowledge.

From this vantage point, 20 years later, we can see that our dedication to educating students, helping them develop models of sustainability, and incorporating this mindset
into our own practices and curriculum has prepared the College and our students well for this new era.

At this stage in history, it is hard to recall a time when the extraordinary level of free flowing information and exchange of ideas among people and within cultures did not exist. Globalization of knowledge and communication has profoundly changed the way that we relate to each other and to the world, both in real time and in the many virtual worlds we occupy. We have a qualitatively different sense of interacting with others in virtual spaces, internalizing a now deep expectation of communicating with and about people, cultures, and ideas that are different from our own. We were on the leading edge of moving students into that globally diverse environment, having nurtured and grown a multi-faceted inclusive environment here at Swarthmore, in our students, faculty, and staff.

Technology has been both a challenge and an effective and efficient tool. On the one hand, technology has, at times, interfered with and undermined the development of real-time community, as young adults have spent more and more time on their virtual avatars, and mobile devices have become practically integrated into people’s physical being. On the other hand, we have been able to use those same technologies to broaden our community, sometimes necessitated in our modeling of sustainable practices. Our challenge over the years and into the future has been and will be to balance and tend to the costs incurred by technology and the opportunities it provides for the building of community.
In addition to deeply affecting community, technology has had equally strong effects on the way we learn, teach, and communicate. What we have seen over time, dating back even further than the last 20 years during which this phenomenon began to explode, is that the younger generation is more nimble with newer technologies. As an institution, we had to wrestle with how to continue to allow students’ fluid and easy acquisition of new technology skills to inform and educate us, while educating and empowering faculty to become leaders in the use of newer technologies so we could ensure that students were developing the set of skills required in the 21st century.

Finally, in recognizing the variety of paths through the college experience and the many ways that students learn, we rethought how students navigate through the academic year. Currently, we offer both traditional semester classes and yearlong course experiences (with some intermediate options as well). Swarthmore has transformed its education into a diverse and technologically facile experience, and we have seen our students flourish even more as a result.