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Intercultural Literacy

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by **PRESIDENT PHILIP A. GLOTZBACH**

It is beyond dispute that today's college graduates will have to deal effectively with difference within the human community in both their public and private lives, especially within an increasingly diverse and global workplace. Indeed, in the words of Skidmore's Strategic Plan,

Everyone who lives in the increasingly interconnected world of the twenty-first century—from the young person just attaining adulthood to those with a bit more life experience—needs to become an adept traveler in a complex multinational, multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural milieu that scarcely could have been imagined just decades ago.²

Achieving this end requires commitment across the span of an adult life, far longer than the relatively brief undergraduate student career. Even so, the question of how colleges and universities can best provide our students a foundation for this task of lifelong learning is certainly one of the most crucial and, at times, vexing issues facing American higher education today. The Skidmore community has wrestled with this question for some time, and it is the focus of the Strategic Plan's second goal with its call for intercultural understanding and global awareness. Nevertheless, it is arguable that we have yet to explore it in the depth it merits. Indeed, the emotional charge attaching to this topic and our best-intentioned efforts to approach it with sensitivity have often combined to place boundaries on our conversation that we ultimately must transcend if

we are to fulfill this obligation to our students. So how can we engage this conversation effectively as a faculty, and how can we involve students in this discussion as well?

This essay proposes a conceptual framework, centering on the defined concept of intercultural literacy, within which these conversations might fruitfully occur. Its initial prompt was the (now completed) search for a new faculty position created last year: the Director of Intercultural Studies. But even before then, discussions surrounding the third section of the 2005–06 Middle States Reaccreditation Self-Study, “Student Engagement with Domestic Diversity, Global Awareness, and Intercultural Understanding,” revealed considerable ambivalence around these issues within the Skidmore community—most notably, within the faculty—an ambivalence that was noted in the report of the Middle States’ Evaluation Team. Last spring’s intense campus discussions following upon the resignation of our recently hired Director of Student Diversity Programs highlighted the immediacy of this conversation for our students. It is my hope that the framing remarks relating to the topic of intercultural understanding and global awareness offered below can assist us in broadening and advancing this important discussion.

Intercultural and Global Understanding, Diversity, and Core Educational Values

The second goal of our Strategic Plan states that

We will challenge every Skidmore student to develop the intercultural understanding and global awareness necessary to thrive in the complex and increasingly interconnected world of the 21st Century.

Arguably, this commitment is the most challenging of the Plan’s four strategic goals. That is to say, the other three goals—each of which carries its own complexities—make fewer demands upon us for fundamental change, either in what we are doing or in the ways we think of ourselves. By contrast, the second goal is itself predicated upon the recognition of change: change in our global context and the need for change in ourselves. In the language of the Plan, events in the post-9/11 world provide daily reminders that

multiple sources of economic influence, political power, and cultural energy compete for attention on the world stage and affect every aspect of our students’ lives, from the price they will pay for gasoline, cement, and steel to the types of jobs available to them in our economy to the quality of the global environment to the governmental policies that will be necessary to maintain not just their accustomed standard of living and personal freedom but the

very possibility of a stable world order. If we want them to emerge as leaders and not just as observers, our students must understand this world and their place in it. Our job is to immerse them in that world.³

Even more, it is our responsibility to prepare our students to live in and understand that world—not just to survive but to thrive, to lead, and to create change. The question thus becomes: What does it mean to do so, and how would we know if we were to succeed? This essay addresses only the first half of this complex question. Before doing so, however, I want to emphasize the centrality of this issue within our core educational values as described in Part B of the Plan, “Skidmore’s Distinctive Identity: the Values of Engaged Liberal Learning.”

The project of liberal education presupposes the interplay of the broadest possible spectrum of ideas, viewpoints, and perspectives. It requires that students become accustomed to the discomfort of having their most cherished beliefs subjected to vigorous challenge. To provide such an education, we must enable our students to understand—and interrogate—both the overt and covert historical, social, and conceptual influences that have shaped their own worldviews. We also must expose them, across the curriculum, to alternative frameworks, most especially to ideas they are least likely to encounter or understand within the contemporary American cultural and political milieu. In this process, we must help them acquire the intellectual flexibility needed to entertain and to interrogate unfamiliar ideas.

In addition, we must help our students embrace what we might term the *principle of intellectual complementarity*—the idea that on various occasions one needs to deploy two (or more!) seemingly incompatible conceptual frameworks to understand some aspect of a complex reality—especially a reality pertaining to the social world. For example, political leaders need to understand how to create social and legal contingencies of reinforcement—a concept so well articulated within behaviorist psychology—that promote the greatest good for the greatest number within a society (the classical utilitarian test). At the same time, they need to reinforce the conceptual framework of individual moral responsibility that is the foundation of our judicial system (a deontological framework that some would argue is incompatible with both behaviorism, strictly construed,⁴ and utilitarianism). It is possible—indeed, I am arguing that it is necessary—for educated persons to appeal to both of these frameworks, without contradiction, in different contexts, especially those differing in levels of complexity and analysis. In fact, I would maintain that the ability to invoke such complementarity represents one of the hallmarks of a liberally educated person. Finally we must

help our students develop both the character and the intellectual capacity needed to rationally defend the beliefs they ultimately embrace. We already do this work in many places within our existing curriculum. But our understanding of the values and objectives of liberal education, along with their expression in our courses, must continually evolve—both to respond more effectively to the needs of today's students and to demonstrate anew the enduring power of these values themselves. There is a rich conversation about such issues still to be had within departments and programs and Collegewide. This ongoing process of rethinking our fundamental educational commitments should always leave them stronger and better understood than they were before.

As various studies have demonstrated,⁵ to be most effective in accomplishing these goals an academic community needs to bring together persons from differing backgrounds—especially those associated with distinct personal lived experiences. Such efforts to enhance the diversity of college populations enrich opportunities for liberal learning for all students. For example, despite the undeniable progress in affirming civil rights of all United States citizens that has been realized over the past five decades, it remains empirically true that race continues to play a powerful role in differentiating the experience of individuals within this country, and not only for persons of color but for members of the white “majority” as well. Other such factors that shape our experiences are gender, economic class, sexual orientation, cultural background, and increasingly religious background or beliefs (especially as these are intertwined with cultural heritage). Thus a student who has spent her entire life in the Middle East will most likely be able to contribute a perspective to a discussion of, say, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that would not be available to students (or even professors) who have lived entirely within the borders of the U.S. Likewise, students who differ in sexual orientation can together expand the parameters of numerous classroom discussions, provided all participants feel empowered to express their perspectives openly. In sum, increasing the representation within our community of persons likely to bring differing life experiences to the table—again, provided we enable them to share and reflect critically upon those experiences in honest and open dialog—increases the intellectual and cultural vitality of our entire academic community to the benefit of all its members. Diversity, likewise, links directly with creativity. Interactions among disparate perspectives frequently strike the intellectual sparks that herald the emergence of a new idea. Attention to difference in background, perspective, life experience, and worldview is thus an essential element within the larger framework of Skidmore's most fundamental and longstanding institutional commitments. In sum,

though not an end in itself, increasing the diversity of our community represents an essential means to achieving the educational excellence we seek.

In light of these considerations, each new search and admissions cycle marks a moment of opportunity and possible transformation for the campus community. So as we look to each pool of potential students, faculty members, or other employees, we must reaffirm our commitment to increasing representation from specific targeted populations—including but certainly not limited to persons of color and those who bring international perspectives. We have begun these efforts and to-date have achieved a measure of success (especially within our student population), but we are not yet where we need to be. Moreover, the effort required to expand access is just the first step. Even more work is required to retain the members of an increasingly diverse academic community, supporting all of them so that they can achieve excellence in their academic work and fulfill their potential for personal development. Accordingly, we must raise our expectations and strive to increase not just our efforts but also our achievements in continuing to diversify the Skidmore community. To do so, we must aggressively employ both our creativity and the full range of best practices in recruiting new students, faculty members, and other employees.

As we continue to make progress in diversifying our community, we also must expect new challenges that themselves will require further growth, particularly in our ability to serve the needs of a more complex student population in both our academic and cocurricular life. We know from listening to the voices of our own graduating students of color and from national conversations as well that, again despite our best efforts, we still have a distance to travel in this area. Those of us who teach especially need to redouble our efforts to master the pedagogical skills required within an increasingly multicultural classroom. Above all, we must continue to develop our curricula to enhance our students' intercultural understanding and global awareness. We have not yet achieved consensus with the College about how to accomplish such objectives or, indeed, even about their meaning. Important conversations regarding these issues have occurred in the past, and we need to build upon this good work to engage our entire community—students, faculty, staff, alumni, and trustees—to clarify our understanding of what our students need to know today and how we can best assist them in coming to know it. Moreover, this is not simply a theoretical discussion. In short order, these conversations need to result in action, with departments and programs taking the lead in enhancing courses and curricula to advance the indicated educational objectives. These concerns also

must continue to be reflected in shared conversations prompted by visiting speakers, symposia, performances, and other such public events that are integral to the life of any academic community.

Intercultural Literacy as Conceptual Frame

The underlying concern of the *Strategic Plan's* second goal is *difference*. Every one of our students needs to understand—not just in *theory* but also as a matter of *practical life skills*—how to live and work effectively with persons whose lived experience may have given them a radically different perspective on the world. Specifically, our graduates need to have learned how understanding and appreciating such different perspectives can broaden and deepen their own thinking. They need to be conversant with political and social issues relating to diversity. They must know how to interact successfully with others in multicultural environments. And they must be able to formulate and rationally defend their own beliefs within a pluralistic intellectual and cultural context. As noted above, the bases of cultural and intellectual difference are as varied as the multiple components of any person's identity. Before we can know how best to equip our students with both the theoretical and practical knowledge required to deal with this complexity, we need to articulate this educational project in greater detail. As a way of doing so, let me employ an analogy with a concept with which the higher education community is already quite familiar: the notion of *scientific literacy*.

Even though the concept of *scientific literacy* can itself be contested ground, few would deny that today's responsible citizens need to possess, at the very least, an understanding of how science has developed historically as a human enterprise, how scientists construct and empirically test hypotheses (the "scientific method"), how encompassing conceptual frameworks shape scientific experimentation and the collection of data, what properties scientific theories attribute to the world at different levels of complexity and organization, and how those frameworks themselves evolve or are replaced over time. Our graduates require a familiarity with the results of contemporary science sufficient to function as informed participants in science-related public policy debates that engage all of us as voters (e.g., the teaching of evolution in public schools⁶)—not to mention dealing with a life interwoven with science and technology at every turn. The latter includes a basic understanding of the risks associated with new technologies (e.g., why new drugs must be subjected to extensive clinical trials before being released to the market, whether the presence of a potentially hazardous substance in the water or air (as measured in parts per million or parts per billion) provides cause for concern, the possible long-term consequences of introducing genetically modified plants

into the biosphere, and so on), and the public health threats posed by naturally occurring pathogens (e.g., the bacteria that cause cholera) to the enhanced biochemical agents sought by terrorists. Moreover, there are both conceptual and pragmatic dimensions to this kind of “literacy.” That is, most scientists would agree that in order to become scientifically literate students need to do more than just *read about* science; they need *to engage in the kind of activities that scientists routinely undertake*, in laboratory or field settings, and then have the opportunity to reflect upon those experiences.

Although it is quite clear that we need to do much more to raise the level of scientific literacy at Skidmore, we must set aside that subject for another occasion. Here I want to use the concept of *scientific literacy* as background to propose an analogous notion that pertains to intercultural understanding and global awareness: call it “*intercultural literacy*.” *Intercultural literacy*, as envisioned here, encompasses three distinct components: the first is conceptual; the second is practical; and the third is the capacity to make rationally defensible value judgments in a complicated pluralistic world.

Intercultural Literacy as Intellectual Competence

Just as scientific literacy requires a basic structural and historical understanding of contemporary science, *intercultural literacy* requires a similar understanding of the pervasive dialectic of (a) cultural difference and (b) our capacity to bridge such differences as they play out across the spatial and temporal panoply of human affairs. As envisioned here, the notion of *intercultural literacy* is grounded in an affirmation of our shared humanity⁷—that is, a commitment to the existence of significant underlying, discoverable similarities among all persons regardless of their background and, significantly, regardless of their actions. This notion of *shared humanity* includes the idea that all human beings have the right to be treated justly, to be allowed to develop their particular talents, to pursue happiness, and so on. Saying even this much, however, reveals that the proposed notion of *intercultural literacy* incorporates a set of specific beliefs about what it means to be a human being—beliefs rooted in (though certainly not restricted to) Western intellectual and cultural traditions. Though its scope of application is universal across all of humanity, the legitimacy of this concept is not conditioned upon its universal acceptability within different social, cultural, or intellectual frameworks. Some traditions that are committed to alternative interpretations of humanity would advance differing visions of human community, justice, happiness, and the like—leading to alternative theoretical perspectives that themselves need to be investigated and interrogated.⁸ Part of the reason for identifying intercultural literacy as an educational goal is

the realization, first, that the understanding of any cultural or intellectual framework can be enhanced when it is viewed from alternative perspectives and, second, that any such framework can potentially benefit from the inclusion of ideas that originate elsewhere. Above all, however, the notion of intercultural *literacy* needs to work for us, within the family of value commitments that define the approach to liberal education at Skidmore College and, more broadly, across American colleges and universities.⁹

Mastering the intellectual component of intercultural literacy requires that one attain a breadth of anthropological, historical, linguistic, philosophical, religious, sociological, and other such knowledge sufficient to understand and appreciate the ideas and perspectives of other cultures or human contexts that diverge significantly from one's own. Of course, this cannot mean that one must master, e.g., all of history. But it does mean that one must know how to read history, anthropology, etc. – that one must become conversant with the ways historians, anthropologists, et al., ask and answer questions about the world, how they create knowledge and meaning. It also requires that one learn enough history, etc., to realize that there are alternatives to the beliefs dominant in any particular place and time and that it is unlikely that any one cultural or conceptual system encompasses all true propositions pertaining to the complexities of human existence.¹⁰ More specifically, one needs to achieve intellectual fluency in the conceptual frameworks required to interrogate and understand the key sources of difference in human affairs and their social consequences, both private and public, for the world of the 21st Century.

The indicated disciplines, long considered central to liberal education, have been transformed, especially in the latter decades of the twentieth century, through increased attention to factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, economic class, religious beliefs, and culture that are invoked in the concept of intercultural literacy. But despite these changes, proponents of liberal education would continue to argue that its primary purpose of preparing young people to lead lives of human flourishing remains central to the enterprise. So too for its secondary purpose of preparing graduates for their professional lives—a utility that is enhanced through intercultural literacy. Moreover, our graduates will require such intellectual competency to discuss public policy of issues relating to diversity and difference, both in this country (for example, immigration policy, the legal justification and status of affirmative action, the legal status that should be afforded same-sex marriage, the relation between church and state) and abroad (e.g., traditional Islam's critique of western culture and the role of that critique in conflicts throughout the world, ethnic and political strife

in Africa, the emergence of India and China as global economic powers). Periodically, they will be called upon to select political leaders who hold positions regarding them. In short, achieving an intellectual grounding in intercultural literacy is necessary for our graduates to function as informed responsible citizens in their world.

In attaining the intellectual dimension of intercultural literacy our students depend, first of all, on our curriculum—and not just on courses satisfying a designated general education requirement but upon what they encounter across the broad range of courses they will complete along the way to graduation. Individual courses focused on topics directly related to intercultural literacy are, of course, important, and the more of these we are able to offer, the more successful will we be in meeting this goal. But ideas pertaining to *intercultural literacy* need to permeate our curriculum to an even greater extent than they do so already. Cocurricular activities—lectures, films, theater productions, musical performances (e.g., the “Hated Music” events), and so on—play an important supporting role as well. The choice of *Life on the Color Line*¹¹ as the common text for first-year students entering in fall 2006 and the programming built around it represent another example of these efforts. If we are to be serious about intercultural literacy, we must continue to make such conversations prominent in our ongoing intellectual and cultural life.

There is a personal dimension to intercultural literacy that needs to be acknowledged as well. As many authors have maintained, in learning to extend one’s own “narrative imagination”¹² to encompass “the other,” one ultimately learns important truths about oneself that might otherwise be unavailable. This why such ancient texts as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *the Old and New Testaments*, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the writings of Confucius and Lao Tzu, the *Koran*, the ancient Greek tragedies, and so many other great works of world literature still speak to us. While they immerse us in the particulars of the times and places in which they were written—reminding us that differences among peoples, cultures, eras and so on are very real—such texts also transcend their points of origin. Indeed, Milan Kundera argues that the spatial and temporal distances that apparently separate writer and audience may not represent so much an obstacle to understanding as an advantage:

Rabelais, ever undervalued by his compatriots, was never better understood than by a Russian, Bakhtin; Dostoyevsky than by a Frenchman, Gide; Ibsen than by an Irishman, Shaw; Joyce than by an Austrian, Broch. The universal importance of the generation of great North Americans—Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos—was first brought to light by the French. (“In France I’m the father of a literary movement,” Faulkner wrote in 1946, complaining of the deaf ear he

encountered in his own country.) These few examples are not bizarre exceptions to the rule; no, they are the rule. Geographic distance sets the observer back from the local context and allows him to embrace *the large context of world literature*—the only approach that can bring out a novel's *aesthetic value*—that is to say, the previously unseen aspects of existence that this particular novel has managed to make clear, the novelty of form it has found.¹³

From the standpoint of intercultural literacy, a primary goal of such reading is to become “multilingual” across differing conceptual frameworks—able to learn their various “languages” and move with facility from one to another. Philosopher Paul Feyerabend has argued that this human linguistic capacity gives us the ability to make non-arbitrary judgments or preference decisions even between so-called “incommensurable” frameworks—an ability that is necessary to overcoming moral relativism (see pp. 9–10, below).¹⁴

Doing so expands one's personal capacity for establishing empathy with the other persons—not just other individuals within one's own social and cultural context but also those “others” who may be furthest from it. This skill is not only relevant to one's development as a person but it also provides important pragmatic advantages. To consider just one historical example, Doris Kearns Goodwin identifies this capacity as one of Abraham Lincoln's most salient personality traits, writing that he “possessed extraordinary empathy—the gift or curse of putting himself in the place of another, to experience what they were feeling, to understand their motives and desires.”¹⁵ Goodwin argues that this ability was central to Lincoln's effectiveness as a political leader, enabling him not only to work effectively with difficult colleagues (most especially, his Cabinet: the “team of rivals”) but also to anticipate with great foresight the moves of his political adversaries. It is a fundamental tenet of liberal education that such empathy can be learned—or at least developed—by investigating the “previously unseen aspects of existence” revealed through literature and the other arts.

This learning, however, carries a precondition. One must approach such experiences with an attitude of openness, abandoning the sense of self-important superiority that says in effect, “I have it all figured out in advance, and therefore there is nothing I can possibly learn from you.” Commenting on his stage production of *Angels in America*, a work centered in the American gay community, theatrical director George C. Wolfe eloquently captures this realization:

“I'm here to tell you that my story is ultimately your story, that the specifics of my story may require that you surrender your arrogance to go on the journey, but once you surrender your arrogance and go

on this journey, you will find yourself in my story."¹⁶

Writing in a quite different context, Bertrand Russell describes in similar terms what he takes to be the intellectual function of philosophy:

"Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they might be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never traveled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect."¹⁷

Russell's comment can easily be taken as a gloss on the educational goal of intercultural literacy as intellectual competency. It is our responsibility to guide our students into this realm of "liberating doubt," having first equipped them to be genuine learners and not just intellectual tourists. In order to do so, we must be intentional about overcoming the arrogance of our students when we encounter it. Achieving this pedagogical goal can be among the most daunting tasks faced by a professor, and unfortunately there is no easy formula for success. In order to succeed, however, one thing is certain: To neutralize arrogance in our students, we teachers must be able to model for them an openness to new ideas and experiences, which requires that we struggle sincerely to overcome arrogance in ourselves.

Intercultural Literacy as Practical Wisdom

Achieving such intellectual competence, though necessary, is not itself sufficient because, just as with scientific literacy, *intercultural literacy* also encompasses a crucial experiential dimension. One's affirmation of the humanity of all persons and theoretical understanding of difference must ultimately be manifested not only in attitude but also in comportment. In the words of Lucy Skidmore Scribner, the educational goal of intercultural literacy essentially must engage both "mind and hand." All of us today, and most especially young people poised at the threshold of their adult lives, need the interpersonal and social skills required to interact respectfully and, in the long run, comfortably with persons whose background and identity formation may differ substantially from their own. Thus Janet Casey has spoken of the practical advantages of becoming culturally bilingual (or multilingual) even within one's own country—gaining the ability to speak easily with those at home in different social or cultural contexts. Our graduates will require

such robust practical abilities to establish effective collaborative relationships with colleagues within the workforce who may be separated by social, cultural, national, or religious chasms.¹⁸

In exploring this second dimension of intercultural literacy, we encounter a fundamental paradox underlying human interaction. Despite what we know about the very real social power of the markers of difference, it is simply impossible to read the story of any human being from, say, the color of his or her face—or, indeed, from any set of such general characteristics. Each of us is a product of our lived experience, much of which will inevitably be shaped by shared factors of race, gender, class and the like. At the same time, each of us is a unique individual whose attitudes, intellectual life, and life story together comprise a sum of particulars that cannot be captured by any description couched exclusively in terms of group membership. So while one needs to be sensitive to markers of social difference—understanding the powerful ways they shape the experiences and perspectives of both others and oneself—one ultimately must be able to look beyond and beneath them to appreciate and affirm the other as a distinct person with his or her own authentic individuality. No one can function effectively in today's world without coming to terms with this paradox intellectually—employing the notion of *conceptual complementarity* referenced above—and, even more importantly, dealing with it in one's concrete interactions with others. One marker of having achieved such competence is the ability to establish genuine, lasting friendships with those whom one might initially perceive to be irredeemably “other.”

As Aristotle pointed out long ago in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, achieving any kind of practical wisdom requires practice—in this case, the kind of practice students acquire in living with a roommate, participating in group exercises in classes, playing on athletic teams, or working together in student clubs. Skidmore must be a rich source of such experiences. In effect, the College must become a place where one simply does not have the option of spending all of one's time with others whose life experience essentially mirrors one's own, who reside inside one's cultural, intellectual, and personal comfort zone. It must be a place where all of us learn on a daily basis how to expand our individual comfort zones by including those who once upon a time were not admitted to them. Once again, to become this kind of community, we must continue our efforts to increase the diversity of our various populations and multiply opportunities for interaction across social boundaries both within and outside of our borders. But merely diversifying our populations is not enough. We also need to become a community more capable of talking about—and talking through—our differences than we are at present. The division of Student

Affairs will play an increasingly important role in creating new programming and otherwise helping to foster the conditions in residence life that are necessary for our students to achieve these educational objectives. Once we have fulfilled our responsibility to create the contexts for such learning, it falls to our students (student leaders, especially, have many opportunities to contribute here) to take responsibility for attaining these social competencies.

Intercultural Literacy as the Rejection of Relativism

The third dimension of intercultural literacy is the capacity to make and defend value judgments within pluralistic social, conceptual, and political contexts. For even as we affirm the humanity of all persons and the legitimacy of multiple cultural perspectives, we must avoid—and help our students avoid—the easy slide into ethical or cultural relativism. As a first approximation, relativism is the belief that one cannot legitimately criticize the ethical principles held by another individual or by the members of another group. Just as affirming the humanity of another person is not in any way to justify his or her actions or to insulate them from criticism in any way, embracing the concept of intercultural literacy does not at all entail the acceptance of relativism. Indeed, the affirmation of humanity itself is a necessary precondition to ethical critique; for we do not make non-humans (e.g., large primates) the subject of moral judgments, no matter how closely they may resemble us genetically or even behaviorally.

Furthermore, the concept of justice, which I invoked some pages above and linked to the concept of *shared humanity*, is fraught with specific content that is inconsistent with numerous cultural (and individual) norms. In other words, to bring into play the notion of *justice* used here requires one to reject ethical or cultural relativism. This understanding of justice draws upon western conceptual frameworks, but of course this concept, or analogues of this concept, occur in different cultures *mutatis mutandis*. Traditional Confucian Chinese thought, for example, would construe concepts such as *justice* and *happiness* as goals or attainments that make sense only within a set of overarching social and familial relationships, values, and duties. Liberal education should make us aware of such conceptual and cultural differences—and affinities—and enable us, as well, to employ such differences and affinities both critically and constructively: to appreciate the strengths and limitations of various frameworks and to master, ultimately, a richer array of conceptual tools for understanding our world and ourselves.

To emphasize the point once again, none of this entails relativism. The political right of individuals within a liberal democracy to choose their own political beliefs by no means implies that all such beliefs

are equally well founded or worthy of assent. Likewise, the in-principle right of cultures or nations to affirm their own values does not mean that whatever any group does must thereby be accepted in practice by persons either within or outside of its boundaries. Indeed, history is replete with examples of practices accepted by entire nations or cultures that are or were unjust and so merit(ed) critique if not active opposition. Responsible citizens frequently confront ethical and political dilemmas that originate within their own countries or external to them. Liberal education should provide students, first, with the capacity to recognize such problems when they arise and, second, with the intellectual wherewithal to resolve them and provide cogent justification for their decisions. Above all, our students need to understand that such judgments matter, and they must develop in themselves the moral courage to make them. Working out this dialectic of cultural acceptance and social critique across different ways of practicing humanity is one of the most difficult tasks on the human agenda, one that students should wrestle with across the entire liberal arts curriculum. How well—and how systematically—are we helping them to do so? This is a difficult conversation that needs to occur not just at Skidmore but throughout American higher education. But the point I want to emphasize here is that, far from inhibiting this conversation, the concept of *intercultural literacy* actually provides a rich framework within which it can occur.

Structural Support for Intercultural Literacy at Skidmore

Recently, the College has created three new leadership positions to help us promote intercultural literacy. The first position is located in Human Resources. Assistant Director for Equal Employment Opportunity and Workforce Diversity Herb Crossman has been with us for more than a year now, and I hope that everyone within our community has had the opportunity to meet him. He is responsible for overseeing our compliance with applicable laws and regulations and will be taking the lead in providing ongoing training that is necessary for all of us who are employed by the College. The second position is in Student Affairs: the Director of Student Diversity Services. Mariel Martin currently holds this position on an interim basis, and she is actively involved in working with students, Student Affairs staff, and members of the faculty to create the kind of opportunities for students described above. I hope that everyone has met her as well.

The third position is the Director of Intercultural Studies, a tenure-track faculty position that will be held by Winston Grady-Willis, who will join the College in January 2008. Holding a B.A. in history from Columbia, an M.P.S. in Africana Studies from Cornell, and a Ph.D. in history from Emory University, Grady-Willis has taught in the New

York City public schools, Morehouse College, Emory, and Connecticut College. Since 1998 he has taught (most recently, as a tenured Associate Professor) in the Department of African American Studies at Syracuse University. Most recently, he has served as Director of Graduate Studies in that department. He will be affiliated with the Department of American Studies at Skidmore. We created this position to provide curricular leadership in relation to the Second Goal of the *Strategic Plan* and to help us think more effectively about our Culture-Centered Inquiry general education requirement. This position carries both regular faculty duties and administrative responsibilities, and we chose from the widest possible fields in making this hire. It represented an unusual opportunity for a department to gain a colleague who can contribute to departmental offerings and who will represent a new resource for helping both that department and the College think about intercultural literacy. These positions augment other positions and programs that already actively contribute to this objective, notably the International Affairs Program and the Office of Off-Campus Study and Exchange, to name just two.

We expect the holders of these three newest positions to work with these other offices and, especially, to work closely together, even though they each have their defined areas of responsibility. Specifically, we expect these three individuals to provide leadership in helping us engage in conversations about curriculum, pedagogy, and ways of working together, as well as in dealing with substantive questions relating to intercultural and global understanding. But let me quickly observe that leadership essentially involves helping people work together to accomplish goals they could not achieve on their own. This is precisely what we are asking Herb and Mariel and Winston to do: to lead us in engaging and addressing a constellation of issues that are crucial both to our students and to those of us who are employed at Skidmore. We will fail to achieve our objectives, however, if we make mistakenly think that these three individuals are now going to perform all the necessary labor themselves. We need to work with them, and work collectively, to address the challenges inherent in the second goal of the *Strategic Plan*. As I have maintained throughout, there are many unresolved questions that we need to answer. There are new competencies we need to develop. And there are new inquiries we need to undertake, especially as our community itself changes to reflect better the world in which all of us live. We all must become actively engaged in this process if we are to succeed in meeting the needs of our students in this crucial area of learning.

The Liberal Arts College as Idealizing Community

One of the least acknowledged but perhaps most significant functions of a liberal arts college is to instantiate a kind of ideal or, perhaps better, an *idealizing* community: a community that is constructed around a set of values that even it struggles to realize consistently. It is, above all, a community of conversation, a community of learning, a community that promotes and celebrates the many dimensions of human existence that contribute to human flourishing. In both literature and history, utopias have often been understood as static—and frequently authoritarian—communities structured around unchanging norms and rules that either exist “nowhere” or for relatively brief periods of time in the actual world. In his monograph “The University as Utopia,” historian Sheldon Rothbatt notes that

“the utopian world is always a reaction to the actual world, an alternative to it, but reflecting its contradictions. Utopias are locations where conflicts are addressed. Their structure, organization and values are the result of a rejection of actual circumstances as understood by the authors, so the utopias tell us as much about the societies from which they take flight as paint pictures of an ideal society.”¹⁹

The notion of an idealizing society intended here does involve some of these concepts. A liberal arts college certainly sets itself apart from the world that it studies. It has its own form of governance, and it establishes its own priorities. We also reflect and reflect upon the concerns of the larger world, just as we sometimes internalize its conflicts. And we surely cannot embrace a model of ourselves as unchanging and remain faithful to our central principles. For above all, we are organized around the dual project of searching for truth (in all its varieties) through our research and artistic work and equipping successive generations of undergraduates to carry on that search themselves within the context of a rapidly evolving social world. This complex undertaking carries with it commitments to values notable, frequently, for their absence in the world beyond our boundaries.

Our central commitment to inquiry should motivate us to interrogate our own notion of the community that is Skidmore College. Who should live *here*? What should we look like in terms of

race, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, national origin, and so on? How should we treat one another? How adept should we be at dealing with difference in its many manifestations? What conversations should engage *our* imagination? How involved are we with the crucial issues of our time? How comfortable are we with the discomfort related to the clash of ideas and viewpoints? And as we have been asking in this essay, what ideas and experiences must Skidmore students encounter and interrogate in order to achieve intercultural literacy? Overall, how well do we live up to the ideals we work so hard to instill in our students? Even when we fail to meet our own standards, we must never abandon the quest to do so.

Those of us who work at Skidmore are both fortunate and privileged to spend our lives in such a place, privileged in the sense that no one, whether faculty member, member of the staff, or administrator, has a right to be here. Our students, likewise, are both fortunate and privileged to dwell in such a community, even for a short time. We hope that when they depart they will take with them an enduring image of this ideal that will serve to guide them for the rest of their lives, one that they will attempt to replicate in their own families, workplaces, communities, and ultimately in the world at large. This essay has been intended to invite us all—students, members of the faculty, and members of the staff—to recognize the questions surrounding the concept of *intercultural literacy* as important and to take them up with renewed vigor. We owe this to those who have come before us and who have bequeathed this wonderful College to our keeping, to those whose faith in our efforts motivates them to offer their support today, to our own best selves, and most of all to our students. Our intellectual and creative resources are certainly up to task of facing these questions head-on, and the rewards of doing so will be significant.

¹ This essay represents a more developed version of remarks first delivered to a Skidmore College Faculty Meeting on 2 February 2007 and reprised, in a more abbreviated form, at the Mellon Consortium symposium on diversifying the faculty held at Skidmore one month later.

² *Engaged Liberal Learning: The Plan for Skidmore College 2005-2015*, p. 7.

³ *The Plan For Skidmore College*, p. 19.

⁴ For the classic exposition of this position, see B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Bantam/Vintage Books, 1972).

⁵For a helpful summary, see “Brief of the Harvard Black Law Students Association, Stanford Black Law Students Association and Yale Black Law Students Association as *Amici Curiae* Supporting Respondents,” to the U. S. Supreme Court in *Grutter v. Bollinger et al.* See also “U. of Michigan Turns to Scholars to Bolster its Defense of Affirmative Action,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2 April 1999), and John Przypyszny and Kate Tromble, “Impact of *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education* on Affirmative Action in Higher Education, published by the American Council on Education.

⁶The United States is the only industrialized nation in which substantial segments of the population still regard the theory of evolution as scientifically questionable and within which viable candidates for the country's highest political office could be asked, seriously, whether they believe in evolution—with some emphatically answering in the negative.

⁷See Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁸Consider the following abstract for a paper in the sociology of religion:

The sociology of religion claims to possess a cross-culturally valid objectivity that is belied by its paradigm shifts in both classical and recent times. Its sequential emphasis on such issues as the changing bases of religious authority, secularization and rational choice depends in large part on Western models of religion, of the relationship between individual and society, and on key Western values. These are not shared by other traditions. Classical Confucianism provides sociological models, core concepts and values that are distinctly different from those of the West. It has the potential to generate a sociology of religion altogether unlike the one to which we are accustomed.

James V. Spickard, “Ethnocentrism, Social Theory and Non-Western Sociologies of Religion: Toward a Confucian Alternative,” *International Sociology*, V. 13(2) (June 1998), pp. 193-94.

⁹The “approach to liberal education” just referenced is neither monolithic nor static; it comprises, instead, a rich array of institutional types, missions, and methods that are related by history and complex “family relationships”—as opposed to being defined by a single set of necessary and sufficient conditions. This diversity is a major strength of contemporary American higher education and is to be found nowhere else in the world today.

¹⁰John Stuart Mill eloquently advocated for this position in “On Liberty.”

¹¹Gregory Howard Williams, *Life on the Color Line* (New York: Plume Books, 1996).

¹²See Nussbaum, Ch. 3.

¹³Milan Kundera, “Die Weltliteratur,” trans. by Linda Asher, the *New Yorker*, January 8, 2007, pp. 28-35, p.30.

¹⁴Paul K. Feyerabend, contribution to “Discussion at the Conference on Correspondence Rules,” in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science IV*, H. Feigl and Grover Maxwell, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), pp. 220-59, especially p. 247. See also Thomas Kuhn, “Reflections on My Critics,” in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge: Proceedings of the International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science, London, 1965* (V. 4), I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 231-78, especially pp. 237-8.

¹⁵Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), p. 104.

¹⁶Interview with George C. Wolfe, emphasis mine. Mason Stokes brought this quotation to my attention.

¹⁷Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 157.

¹⁸In a recent national survey of employers (both in large and small organizations) conducted by Peter D. Hart Associated Inc., for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), 82% of respondents stated that colleges and universities need to place more emphasis than they do on “teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings.” 72% said that more emphasis should be placed on “global issues and developments and their implications for the future.” 60% wanted more emphasis on “the role of the United States in the world,” and “53% called for more emphasis on “cultural values and traditions in America and other countries.” 46% wanted proficiency in a foreign language. More anecdotally, a Skidmore graduate from the late 1990s who works in the banking industry in Florida recently commented on her company’s multinational workforce by saying, “I don’t manage people; I manage cultures.”

¹⁹Sheldon Rothblatt, “The University as Utopia,” the 2002 Hans Rausing Lecture at the University of Uppsala, *Salvia Småskrifter*, no. 2 (Uppsala: 2003), p. 18.