

## ***HISTORY of the ADA COMSTOCK SCHOLARS PROGRAM***

In 1968, several members of the Smith College faculty and administration realized that a number of women beyond the traditional age of college students had come to Smith to complete an education that had been abandoned previously, usually in favor of early marriage. Those women who wished to attend Smith part-time had been told that they could not do so. However, those who came in spite of the full-time requirement proved to be excellent students, and usually were more successful academically than they had been during their previous years in college. (All but two of the original 18 had formerly been enrolled at Smith.) “The Mature Women’s Program,” which resulted from discussions at that time about the experiences of those 18 women, enabled women beyond the traditional college age to spend twice the usual number of semesters plus one to complete their degrees. That is, they were required to be at least half-time students. The Program was not widely publicized, but, between 1968 and 1975, 35 women entered Smith under its auspices. In 1975, because of general dissatisfaction with the original name, it was changed to “The Continuing Education Degree Program”—not much of an improvement.

One can speculate about what precipitated the increased number of inquiries about this Program from women over the age of 22: the women’s movement, the growth of community colleges, and the advancing age of “baby boom” children. However, whatever the reasons for this interest, the Smith community reacted very creatively, and in April 1975 established the Ada Comstock Scholars Program, which intentionally set neither age limits on enrollment nor time limits on completion of a degree. It was designed for women whose education had been interrupted and allowed them as much time as they needed to complete it.

Motivation was different for every woman who enrolled, but each one had decided to make a change in her life, and the majority made some sacrifices in order to do so. The overwhelming commonality was the desire to persevere in the completion of an education, and to do so in a formal, structured program at a demanding institution. The Program was named for Ada Comstock, class of 1897, who had returned to Smith from Minnesota as a member of the English Department in 1911. Ada Comstock became Dean in 1916, and left Smith in 1923 to become the first full-time president of Radcliffe College, where she remained until her retirement in 1943. She died in New Haven less than two years before the Program, named in her honor, was established at Smith.

*--Written by founding director, Ellie Rothman*

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