

Questions Posed – Some Thoughtful Answers

Dear Smith Fund Volunteers –

As part of your fundraising work, your classmates will look to you as a key source of information about Smith today. Updates in your volunteer mailings, Insider News emails, and on the Smith web site will keep you abreast of college news. Occasionally, however, a classmate may ask something besides the general “What’s new at Smith?”

Attached are some examples of questions posed, and thoughtful answers which we hope will guide you in conversation. Trust that such questions are indicative of your classmate’s passion for the college, and are an opportunity for a thoughtful discussion about Smith’s mission, values, and impact.

Engage in conversation, and have confidence in Smith. If you speak with someone for whom you feel a staff contact would be helpful, please don’t hesitate to reach out to your staff liaison. We are happy to help at any time.

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Topic 1: The Relevance of Women's Colleges

Questions/concerns/perceptions

Smith is not the real world. Will my daughter fit in and feel comfortable in a single-sex environment?

Talking Points

- Smith is the real world -- where women serve as role models. "My world has women achieving at a high level; it has a woman president of the college and women as corporate executives," said one student. Mentors abound.
- Smith is not isolated. The college is located in the heart of a thriving New England city near three other colleges and a major university. Student interchange is active, and many non-Smith students are part of classroom life at Smith.
- Smith is an excellent college that is also a college for women. Applicants often apply to other small liberal arts colleges, including Vassar and Wesleyan.
- Students want to come to Smith. This past year, Smith received a record-setting number of applications – 3,427! This fall, we enrolled the most selective and diverse entering class in the college's history. Nine percent of the Class of 2010 have a sister, mother or grandmother who is a Smith alumna.
- Graduates of women's colleges are more than twice as likely as graduates of coeducational colleges to receive doctorates or enter medical school.
- Twenty percent of women members of Congress attended women's colleges. In a *Business Week* listing of 50 women "rising stars" in corporate America, 30 percent had received their bachelor's degree from a women's college. (For perspective, note that women's college graduates account for less than 4 percent of college-educated women.)
- A 2006 Indiana University study found that far more students at women's colleges reported having regular interaction with faculty members than those at coed institutions. Women's college students also reported with greater frequency that their colleges helped them learn more about themselves, hone their quantitative analysis skills and develop a desire to help their communities.
- Smith students and alumnae are winning prestigious academic fellowships at a rate unprecedented at the college. This year, we had a record-breaking crop of 55 fellowship recipients.
- Smith students and alumnae also set a separate college record by winning 17 Fulbrights, surpassing last year's record of 14. Smith's Fulbright scholarships are among the highest rate per capita in the nation.
- The top five majors in which entering students indicated interest this year are English language and literature, biological sciences, psychology, government and engineering.

Topic 2: Lesbian and transgender students

Questions/concerns/perceptions

Will my daughter feel comfortable here?

Smith is a lesbian college.

Smith is no longer a women's college.

Talking points

- Smith admits women and supports and celebrates all of its students.
- The Smith community looks very much like the rest of society. Smith is not unusual. Students coming to college today (whether at Yale, Brown, Smith or elsewhere) feel comfortable publicly exploring a range of identities and behaviors. Whereas the exploration of sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity was once a very private matter, it is a much more visible and public part of campus cultures today.
- No issue is changing more quickly than attitudes about sexual identity. Yet questions surrounding sexual identity are not new or limited to college campuses. Consider Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, the movie *Boys Don't Cry*, or the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Middlesex*. These creative pieces reflect society's explorations of sexual identity from a philosophical, political and sociological point of view.
- Smith is a diverse, tolerant and accepting community. Difference is a part of college life. Smith is a campus where debate is encouraged and individuality is celebrated.
- Several years ago, Smith students voted by a very slim margin to remove pronouns from the language in the Student Government Association constitution, as a well-meaning gesture of support toward a handful of transgender students who didn't identify with "she" and "her." This change in no way affected any official documents or practices of the college.
- Smith is, absolutely, still a women's college. As such, it has always been a place where women are able to explore who they are in an environment that is supportive, creative, safe and accepting.

Topic 3: Liberal Bias

Questions/concerns/perceptions

Will a student who does not identify as liberal feel comfortable here?

Is the faculty overwhelmingly liberal?

Talking points

- Much like society at large, there are many complicated issues in the national discussion on which faculty members hold a range of opinions.
- It is important to develop the capacity for civil discourse. Smith believes in bringing together people who may disagree on issues but agree to listen to each other.
- Actively ensuring – and honoring -- a diversity of viewpoints on the Smith campus is one of President Christ's priorities and passions. A frequent theme in her speeches and editorials is the need for places like Smith to embrace diversity *across the political spectrum*, and to ensure that students understand, appreciate -- and engage in – principled, civil, responsible debate on important issues.
- As students, Smithies engage with issues that our society continues to grapple with every day: civil discourse and debate; freedom of speech and expression; work/life balance; academic and (or vs.) activist pursuits; and much more.
- There are more than 25 social and political action clubs for students. These are part of some 125 student organizations involving students whose interests range from ethnic dance to debate to investing.

Topic 4: College Rankings

Questions/concerns/perceptions

Smith is an excellent school. Why isn't it rated more highly in national rankings?

Talking points

- Smith takes the issue of educational quality very seriously, quite aside from the college's position in the U.S. News rankings.
- When we measure the quality of a Smith education we look first to other external and internal benchmarks. Smith students and graduates are setting records for national and international graduate fellowships, with 55 awarded this year, including 17 Fulbright fellowships. In addition, Smith continues to rank among the top colleges producing Ph.D's in the sciences and engineering.
- Rankings tell a small part of a much larger and richer picture: that of a college filled with smart, engaged, creative, ambitious young women. It is unfortunate that the perspective and acumen of college *graduates* isn't measured. In many ways this is the true test of a great education.
- Students considering Smith do so for a range of reasons, and relatively few cite rankings as a factor. The top considerations include the majors we offer, the strength of our liberal arts curriculum, the beauty of the campus, its university-like resources, the house system, our powerful, worldwide alumnae network and the fact that women's colleges focus all opportunities on women. By and large, these benefits aren't reflected in rankings and prospective students realize that.
- Students also see diversity as an asset—indeed, an expectation—and this includes socioeconomic diversity. It's notable that, as the Ivies and other institutions are just beginning to turn their attention to less affluent populations, Smith ranked at the top of the U.S. News list for economic diversity and is cited among the top 20 liberal arts colleges designated a “great school at a great price.” Smith has historically been a leader in seeking out first-generation college students, as well as women of nontraditional age who enroll in the college's Ada Comstock Scholars program.
- This year, Smith's Picker Engineering Program was named to U.S. News' ranking of “Best Undergraduate Engineering Programs.”
- This year, Black Enterprise magazine ranked Smith 15 among the “50 Top Colleges for African Americans.”
- How can alumnae help raise Smith's profile? Encourage promising, capable young women to apply to Smith; spread the word about the exciting opportunities that Smith is creating for women around the world; check the college's Web site often for news; mention your connection to Smith when you speak or write for public audiences, large and small; mentor young graduates, keeping the power of the alumnae network alive; dispel rumors that might be harmful; make regular gifts, increasing the fundraising participation rate; and feel free to keep asking for answers from staff at the college.
- The comprehensive fee for attending Smith in 2006-07 is \$43,438. The true cost of educating a Smith student is over \$53,000.

Topic 5: Corporate Support

Questions/concerns/perceptions

Accepting corporate support means Smith is “selling out.”

Smith is influenced by corporate demands.

Talking points

- Smith welcomes donations from donors, foundations and corporations when they enable us to offer excellent opportunities for our students.
- Smith’s relationships with corporations take many forms: student internships, research support, project sponsorship, matching gift programs, etc. Corporations, like other donors, connect with Smith because they recognize the college as an important resource and are committed to its future.
- Like all colleges and universities, Smith has been developing relationships with funders for a long time and recognizes that they all have programs or ideas they seek to advance. We give a great deal of thought and consideration to the kinds of corporate partnerships in which we engage. Each request for funding and acceptance of a gift is vetted by senior college officials and screened for both financial and ethical implications.
- Relationships with industry are critical to providing our students in many disciplines, but particularly in science and engineering, with “real life” opportunities and experiences that will prepare them for their future careers. These include Praxis internships, on-campus recruiting and career advice, the opportunity to work on research and design projects that are relevant to industry today, and interactions with corporate leaders.
- Corporate support has been a longstanding feature of the college’s development efforts. GE was the first company to institute a matching gift program, which it did in 1954. Matching gifts programs not only bring millions of corporate dollars to more than 5,000 educational and cultural institutions each year, but they also serve to motivate increased philanthropy by individuals to their communities and schools. At Smith, matching gifts are almost always unrestricted and represent a significant piece of our financial aid budget, for example, each year.

Topic 6: Dining

Questions/concerns/perceptions

Smith students no longer know all the women in their houses.

Dining changes have affected the sense of community.

Talking points

- In reviewing its dining system several years ago, the college did so with an acute awareness that it was a cherished aspect of the campus experience of many alumnae. However, for some, the lack of flexibility had been overly rigid and had inhibited the ability to foster friendships with students in other houses or other interest groups.
- Part of the college's decision-making involved the difficulty of supporting an expensive dining system within the realities of an overall budget straining to meet students' need for financial aid.
- Smith's aim was to expand student options while retaining distributed dining rooms, a feature many of our peers have abandoned because of their high cost. The new dining system offers many choices that weren't previously offered and that many students had been requesting for a long time. We offer 11 kitchens and 15 dining rooms on campus, equal to roughly three times the number at our peer colleges.
- Today, there is an unprecedented variety of food and flexibility of hours: houses offer "healthy trends," grab-n-go lunches, as well as vegan, Mediterranean, Asian or "comfort food" dinners. Smith has also just opened a traditional, halal and Kosher kitchen for interested students. Students involved in theatre rehearsals, athletics practices and contests, science labs, etc., have expressed great support for dining rooms that stay open later to accommodate their schedules.
- Tea is still served in all houses every Friday, and cherished traditions such as senior dinners and family weekend brunches are still very much alive. A great deal of thought has been given to maintaining a family/community feeling among the residents of each house. Coming together at mealtimes remains an important and transformative dimension of the Smith student's experience.

Topic 7: Smith today

Questions/ concerns/perceptions

I don't recognize the Smith of today.

Talking points

- All campuses have evolved to meet the changing needs of today's students.
- Visit the campus! When you speak from direct experience, when you meet and talk to current students, you are able to represent Smith with genuine understanding and enthusiasm.
- Smith continues to be an incredible institution of higher learning, one where women of all backgrounds and ambitions are encouraged to find their voices, learn without boundaries, and commit to a rigorous academic program.
- The fundamentals of a Smith education, such as an open curriculum, courses taught by outstanding faculty, a house system organized to encourage leadership and community, opportunities for travel, athletics and student organizations, and a campus designed to enrich the mind and the spirit, are still very much present and appreciated by the women who study at Smith, and by the alumnae who graduate from Smith.