

Shaping the Future of Smith
December 6, 2005
Alumnae in their 30s

President Christ began the conversation with introductory remarks noting the success of the *This is about Smith* campaign and key findings of the recent curricular review. She noted how pleased she was to meet with a large group of alumnae in their 30s, as she was eager to add their perspectives to the mix with alumnae from other decades. She also thanked people for making time in their schedules during the holiday season for Smith and acknowledged the hostess, Laura Begley, for her hospitality and the beautiful view afforded from atop the TimeLife Building.

The first comment came from someone who had studied the Web site prior to coming to the event and was impressed by what she had read from previous *Shaping the Future of Smith* conversations. She was especially pleased to see the focus on the arts at Smith and the continued emphasis on study abroad. President Christ noted that close to 50 percent of Smith students study abroad compared to 2 percent of college students nationally.

The next alumna wanted to know whether there were "decisions that the Board is considering on which we should weigh in." President Christ assured the group that Smith was just beginning the strategic planning process coming out of the curricular review, and that she was there to listen to ideas, concerns, and opportunities—not to advocate a fixed agenda. The President noted her desire to identify six to eight critical issues that would arise from the curricular review, the alumnae conversations, and other campus discussions, and then to take these same issues back out to the constituency for further elaboration and development of a new plan. The group seemed relieved to hear that information, and the conversation continued in a lively fashion.

Several people in the room had recently responded to the survey from the Career Development Office (CDO). They were pleased that Smith was reaching out to alumnae in this way and expressed a willingness to help bring their employers to Smith for recruiting purposes. They also stated a hope for more online CDO resources for alumnae, especially those that could facilitate networking among alumnae and between alumnae and students. Many claimed that they would be delighted to mentor students in whatever ways they could. Most agreed that internships were critical for today's students, and praised the Praxis program.

The group was generally supportive of changes in dining as long as the college made sure it was not losing its sense of community. Several noted that while the house system is terrific for many Smith students, it can be severely isolating for others. They were pleased to learn about plans to complete a thorough study on the residential experience at Smith rather than relying on anecdotal information about campus life. They also encouraged Smith to develop "points of pride" that could be more easily shared with alumnae who often feel they need to defend the College against one-dimensional stereotypes. Many expressed hope for improved national and international visibility and volunteered to help with public relations and message development as appropriate.

There was extended conversation about the sciences at Smith, the important role the college can play in increasing the number of women in science, and science education in the nation. One woman who majored in astrophysics noted that “Smith was a place where it was OK to fail,” and that this lesson alone enabled her to move quickly through the echelons of science since “the scientific process is all about trial and error.”

The conversation also focused on how to make the case for the continued relevance of women’s colleges with women as the majority of college students across the country. President Christ talked about a recent study at Duke that showed many female students there are plagued by the need to appear “effortlessly perfect.” As a result, many of these students don’t take classes that might challenge them or engage in activities where they might not perform at the highest level. All agreed that Smith was a place where one could try (and fail at) many new things, and that we should find a way to articulate this message to prospective students. They also thought this would help to counter the perceived expectation of “becoming the first or the best in whatever you do.”

President Christ spoke about plans to establish a program for both students and alumnae on *Women’s Narratives of Success* and the wide variety of work/life models that women and their families are creating. Everyone agreed that the time was ripe for this type of national discussion, and Smith was the place for this to happen.

One alumna noted that she cherished the message that she was educated at Smith to become “a global citizen” and hoped that this commitment was still a vital part of the curriculum and institutional focus. Several others agreed that international emphasis at Smith is critical for future generations. One commented that she graduated with “a feeling of responsibility to make a difference in the world.” Others noted the importance of keeping the current study-abroad programs as rigorous as possible, including having to take one’s courses in the language of the host country.

At this point the conversation shifted to the question of requirements. One alumna noted “requirements are not such a bad thing.” Many alumnae present nodded in agreement, and one said, “In retrospect, I wish I was forced to take a greater variety of courses.” Several mentioned the importance of enhanced faculty advising as a way to encourage students to think more broadly about their education.

One alumna wished she had the chance to learn more financial planning skills and praised the new *Women and Financial Independence* program.

The group also understood the tension inherent in adding any type of requirements, since most admitted that part of Smith’s appeal to prospective students was the lack of requirements. President Christ noted that the increased involvement of parents in college choice also affects the question of requirements, since there is a sense of decreased value in an education without requirements. One alumna noted that, “Smith might be better served by looking more closely at individual majors and increasing the requirements for each major rather than debating the benefits of general requirements.”

A high school teacher noted that Smith is rarely on her students' lists of potential colleges and wondered how she might change this, especially for women of color. Another alumna, a graphic artist, wondered where Smith was with regard to technology, and whether we are keeping up in this area. President Christ provided some information about campus technology initiatives, including the new Art and Technology major.

Finally, an alumna noted that perhaps the best way for alumnae to understand the Smith of today is to see current students on a more regular basis; they should be highlighted in college publications and showcased at as many events as possible. All agreed that this was paramount and also thanked President Christ for her eagerness to seek feedback from alumnae. President Christ thanked everyone for their active participation and Laura Begley for hosting the gathering.