

Thursday, November 10, 2005
Riverside, CT

Thirty-two alumnae gathered at the Riverside Yacht Club in Riverside, CT to discuss their education and Smith's future with President Carol Christ.

Susan Cohen introduced President Christ, who noted that on her last visit to Greenwich, three years ago, she had been given a pair of peonies for the President's House, plants that now graced the front door of the residence.

President Christ continued by noting that a student who had been her pre-major advisee had recently come to open office hours. She was pleased to see a young woman who has matured, is not self-assured, and has taken courses in art and joined choral groups—the type of personal and intellectual expansion we hope for at a liberal arts college.

President Christ stated that these conversations with alumnae are the beginning of a strategic plan that will evolve over the next 18 months. She listed the accomplishments of the recently completed campaign: renovation and expansion of the Brown Fine Arts Center; the Lyman Plant House and glass houses of the Botanic Garden, with its new Church Exhibition Gallery; the new fitness center; the Campus Center; the Women and Financial Independence program; the Poetry Center; the Kahn Institute; the Praxis Internship Program; and the Picker Engineering Program.

All these achievements prompt the question of what is next for the college, which is approaching another accreditation process, a time when ideas and experiences from many sectors need to be heard and priorities set.

President Christ said that she had posed two questions to the faculty: what are the distinctive excellences of Smith, and what capacities must we develop in all students to equip them for the future?

She noted the critical importance of science and engineering as we move into this century, particularly in light of the fact that women are 46 percent of the workforce but only 11 percent of engineers. She pointed to Thomas Friedman's recent book, *The World is Flat*, which highlights the inability of this country to produce enough scientists and engineers to keep us at the forefront of innovation. If women, as a majority of the population, are not in these careers, we lose their talents and our economic edge. Women's colleges have a record of motivating students to major in the sciences and go on for their doctorates, and Smith produces a large number of students in that group.

She outlined the plans for the new science and engineering facilities on Green Street and explained the 25-year plan under which the college would develop a "science quad," noting that when it was founded, it was unusual for a college to teach fine arts, yet trustees founded art and music schools and incorporated them into the college. Had this work not been done, Smith could never afford to establish such facilities today; the cost

would be too great. In like manner, what Smith does now in the sciences will have profound effects on the college's future.

President Christ then discussed study abroad, noting the 80th anniversary of the program in Paris and that 80 percent of Smith students study in another country during their four years.

She pointed out the work done by faculty in reviewing the curriculum and their summary of what Smith students should have. While not opting for specific core requirements, the faculty agree that:

- Increased writing across the curriculum is needed
- More quantitative reasoning skills must be part of every student's learning
- These skills involve not only math but policy analysis, health care issues, and other areas that now confront citizens
- Students should learn to argue on behalf of a position in civil terms
- Students be prepared for the multiple and demanding roles women now play in society

On the last point, President Christ announced that, beginning with a course entitled "Life narratives," a signature Smith program will be developed to explore and provide research data about the experiences of different generations in balancing their life choices.

The president then opened the floor to questions. Because of the room's acoustics and surrounding activities, class identification for many alumnae was not possible.

The first alumna who spoke chose to address both Smith's strengths and what she experienced as deficits for her times. She said:

I enjoyed the way in which a women's college motivates students, how refreshing it was after coming from a public high school where murmurs of "Oh, it's the brain" greeted me. I felt liberated at Smith to be what I wanted to be. The difficulty was that I felt unprepared to decide exactly what that was. Twenty years later, following law school, I still faced some of the same issues. It's important to link what I know to the larger world. Why did it take so long to get to law school? What do I do with my life and learning? I found the answers to these questions through a series of experiences. I think it's critical to analyze by functions and your own passions, not by field or discipline. You don't get to the answer by simply asking what do you want to do; you may not know what there is to do.

President Christ replied that she has seen these issues as a preoccupation of women in their twenties, women on Wall Street and in the younger classes. She noted that the new director of the Career Development Office has plans to make that service more expansive and effective.

Another alumna, an education editor, also referred to a sense of drifting.

How many of my friends suffered from an embarrassment of riches on leaving college? The second career is not easily reached; I needed career counseling, and I

think it should be mandated, perhaps as a January course. When my friends and I approached life crises, my Smith experience helped me deal with them, but the idea of some life balance courses is needed. In finding one's own voice, things such as the Women and Financial Independence course are really good tools. We need more means to integrate experiences. I changed so much between college and now. College can't teach you enough about direction by the time you leave Smith. It CAN teach you to take risks and to be aware of opportunities in all fields; I'm a history major who took an architecture course and loved it. You can teach the self-confidence to try things.

(Several alumnae voiced their agreement with this perspective.)

Another alumna said that one of Smith's great strengths is the house system, which is becoming blurred by mergers of the dining halls.

Older alums are sad to see this movement, which I hope will not go too far. The environment in the houses is part of what makes Smith what it is. I'm concerned about so many changes to the Olmsted plan for the campus itself things like and the removal of Lawrence House for a parking lot. I wonder what the impact of the science buildings will be on the rest of the campus. As to the future of the college, when I graduated, John Kennedy spoke about service to country in the public sector. I entered politics in my fifties and have found it very rewarding. Like it or not, we are all affected by decisions that politicians make, and I hope students will continue to look at political science and government majors and enter those fields earlier than I did.

President Christ responded that she shares the concern that more women run for public office. She noted that the college has speakers come to talk with students, and that the Grécourt gates themselves are a symbol of Smith's tradition of service to community. She reiterated that the necessary changes in the dining services have been achieved, and that the quality of residential life is the number one priority for student government officials this year.

An alumna from the class of '73, an industrial engineer, commented on personal career and life crises that prompted a need to return to Smith. She said that she had not found the career development office and its director helpful at a time when she really needed the sense of community, having no career and no home at the time. She would have liked a place to come back to for a year to regroup, restore herself, and contribute her skills. She asked about any effort to build a retirement community around Smith.

The alumna also noted that the GIS program Smith has holds potential as a multi-disciplinary program related to the visual display of quantitative information, and that such programs would be useful to students and in lieu of the summer programs the college used to offer.

President Christ replied that while there were no specific or immediate plans, the college has explored the possibility of some relationship with a retirement community in the area; colleges recognize the attraction to a dynamic academic environment. She also noted that the college recognizes the potential to leverage the connection between art and technology, which would involve the departments of art and computer science.

The theme of life choices continued with the next observation from an alumna, who wondered how you end up where you end up. When you are a student, even if you think you know what you want to do, the realities when you get there are difficult and different. She asked whether Praxis internships were successful in addressing this issue and whether alumnae could provide more help in guiding students through the realities of work and life choices.

President Christ said that she had heard similar observations at the morning session from an alumna who was one of the top 200 executives at Deutsche Bank—of whom only six are women. She said that the Praxis program does teach students that there are perhaps more choices to be made than they can envision in the classroom.

An alumna from the Class of '54 shared that even as she is about to turn 70, there are leadership opportunities for her, and that Smith gave her the skills and poise to use those opportunities. She met a wealth of people at Smith who helped her to grow, but the confidence she had at graduation is nothing compared to her growth over time "I am who I am," she stated, "because of the tools Smith gave me."

Another alumna commented that she came to Smith from an observant Jewish home at a time when the college still had quotas. Now she sees the kosher kitchen and other recognition of Jewish culture and is pleased but was very dismayed that two of the Future events were scheduled on Rosh Hashanah and had discussed her displeasure with the president and staff.

An alumna of the Class of '89 said that this was the first Smith event she had attended in years. She had a complicated Smith experience and felt she was not prepared for life "beyond the gates," or even within the gates, at times. The housing system at Smith was very important but often inaccessible to her because of her disability. She is sensitive to the discussion of race and culture issues but wonders how disabilities are accommodated at Smith today. She explained that Mary Maples Dunn had changed the Commencement procedure in her senior year so she could receive her degree with everyone else. She likes the idea of a "life balance" course, provided it includes the voices of those who need accessibility.

President Christ observed that Smith now has a specific Office of Disability Services so students have a qualified support and advocacy system available to them. New construction meets all ADA requirements, and renovations are incorporating those requirements into older buildings. She pointed to Naomi Miller's Common Ground

studies and focus groups to get a better grasp of which aspects of diversity need better attention on the campus.

President Christ went on to say that she hoped to discuss issues of diversity in a much broader sense and use that discussion to develop strategic initiatives. She noted that California has the broadest definition of diversity and that it is inherently one of the most diverse areas of the country. She observed that we are all diverse by nature, and that to create a tolerant community, we must learn to prize all types of diversity, including and beyond race, politics, and religion.

The alumna asked that she be included in the focus groups.

A member of the Class of '87 noted that she was one of three students in her class from either Pakistan or India. For her, the greatest part of her education was meeting women from other countries, such as Greece. In hindsight, she noted, it was exciting for her friends to meet and know a Muslim woman. She asked the current status of international students at Smith.

President Christ replied that international students are a valued part of the current campus community; about eight percent of all students are international. Admission deliberately tries to achieve a wide distribution of countries with generous financial aid and reaching out to areas such as Afghanistan where women have so often been denied education.

The alumna asked if there was an effort to go to other countries, to which President Christ responded that she and Admission senior staff travel abroad. Last fall, for example, the president traveled throughout Asia to meet alumnae and develop potential sources of future students. Several months ago, Smith and Mt. Holyoke hosted a conference of presidents from colleges around the world. That group will meet again in January in Dubai. A number of newer women's colleges in the Middle East are involved.

Another alumna reported that she had just come back from Morocco and that her daughter wants to come to the United States for college. The alumna works as an education consultant in placement, including special needs students. However, she frequently hears the phrase, "I don't want to go to a women's college." She noted that keeping the integrity of the house system preserves one of the attractions of a women's college. Doing more advising within the house system would help with some of the issues such as mental illness that she hears about from Smith grads.

Another alumna reflected that efforts toward diversity could lead to a form of self-segregation. While she was at Smith, a group of black students wanted their own house, but Ruth Simmons said no and had the standing to make that statement. She commented that diversity is fine, as long as it is truly diverse.

Returning to the previous point, another alumna said that she sees a disconnect between the resources of the college, fine faculty, student excellence and the "hard sell to our own daughters."

The president replied that women's colleges faced sudden challenges when male colleges finally went coed. Not every woman has to go to Smith for the college to be successful. The trustees are looking at the size of our classes to see what the best size is for our goals. Admission is doing outreach through the Web and publications. Beyond those points, we need to keep applications in perspective. Our applicant pool this year was very good, our current students are high achievers, and Smith topped all colleges in its class with 14 Fulbright fellowships awarded this year.

An alumna asked whether, in addition to promoting the beauty of the campus and the dining system we dealt with the food itself and sustainable agriculture?

President Christ responded that Smith has a sustainability committee and an "action" arm called the Green Team, which has a Smith website with resource links. Faculty, students, and staff are engaged in several projects related to sustainability; many of the projects are part of their coursework.

A member of the Class of 2005 recalled that, in regard to the sustainability issue, she had to go to UMass to find related courses. In regard to Admission work, she came to Smith as a transfer student and found it very different academically from her previous school. She needed more counseling and suggested that the college needs to reach out more to transfers, especially those coming from a larger, coed environment.

President Christ noted that Smith and the other area colleges are part of the Million Monitor Drive to reduce energy use and plan more collaborative projects.

An alumna asked why Smith grads wouldn't receive a B.S. in engineering, to which the president replied that they do receive that degree, and it is the only "b.s." you'll get at Smith.

The session closed with laughter.