

Shaping the Future of Smith
November 13, 2005
Smith College
Alumnae Association Board of Directors

President Christ explained to board members that she has been traveling and holding talks with alumnae around the country to help her plan for the future for Smith College. With the completion of the campaign and several initiatives in December 2004 and with the upcoming re-accreditation review in the fall of 2007, this is an excellent time to consider our opportunities.

She posed two questions to the AASC Board: What distinguishes Smith from other schools, and what capacities should Smith develop in its students?

President Christ gave examples of areas in which faculty members feel Smith already excels:

- Science: the last frontier for women
Science is not a women's issue but a national concern. Smith provides not only female faculty as role models, but an environment where there is no peer hostility; Smith also offers the unique Picker Engineering program.
- Art, as well as the music and the landscape studies program
- International Programs
Smith boasts the second oldest international program in the country.

Faculty members also recommended that the college further develop the following skills:

- Writing: an overwhelming number voted to improve students' writing skill.
- Quantitative reasoning: faculty recognize a need to provide more opportunity for quantitative literacy, not just math.
- Civil discourse: students must develop the ability to carry on a debate without "collapsing," becoming angry, or resorting to clichés.
- Public speaking: students must be able to present and explain their ideas in public.
- Career development: the CDO should create a stronger link between studies and the realities of work life.

Members of the Alumnae Association Board of Directors addressed the following topics.

- Writing
Should be included in non-major courses. President Christ: There is also discussion of whether writing should be emphasized in upper-level courses as well as in intro/beginning courses.
- Quantitative Reasoning
One director stated that she regretted her lack of math skills. President Christ: Smith is considering quantitative reasoning intensive course (similar to writing intensive course) as well as a quantitative reasoning center (similar to the Jacobson Writing Center).
- Communication and Civil Discourse
Smith should train students to formulate responses before verbalizing and present their thoughts in a cogent and articulate manner. President Christ: Don Andrews (coordinator for

fellowships/grants) is training students to do this (resulting in an unprecedented crop of Fulbrights and other national fellowships). A young director ('97) noted that her best debate training came from the discussions her house held after a racial incident in her residence.

- Learning accountability
Students must be taught to be responsible for their learning. Faculty should serve as facilitators to support that learning, which is a time-consuming but necessary process.
- Curriculum
One director feared that distribution requirements would harm the open curriculum and that discussion about curriculum was a euphemism to hinder that independence. President Christ: Faculty members are content-oriented and alumnae are skill-oriented.
- Linking Learning to Work Life
Smith should provide a management training course, teaching transition from school to work, how to communicate with savvy- pitch, argue, and maneuver.

Consider linking student life/social affairs to the academic side to offer opportunities to improve debating and other skills. President Christ: Smith's size makes it easier for this to happen – the CDO helps to link what happens in classroom to work life.

One director wanted to know how alumnae could support/mentor students to ease them into work life. President Christ: Smith is considering developing a project called life narratives, creating a sense of multiple goals and balance. The media tends to portray women's lives in a simplistic way. Women go through careers where options change and transitions occur. We haven't yet reached a point where we can teach or help students think about this.

Our culture bombards kids with the "super" image. Even when they know it's unrealistic, it is still pervasive. Talking to alumnae may give students the benefit of alumnae's wisdom. President Christ: the life narratives project is a longitudinal study to start a research base to identify issues.

- Leadership Training
One director described the difficulty of encouraging girls to become leaders in a co-ed high school environment in Athens, Greece. How is President Christ positioning Smith to be a strong global presence? President Christ: traveling, forging collaborative relationship with other universities, renewing bonds with alumnae abroad, especially in Asia. There are also good networks in the JYA countries, but these are largely programmatic relations.
- Faculty
What is the potential for turnover at Smith and what are Smith's strategic plans? President Christ: We anticipate a 50% turnover in 10 years, which is one of the reasons we are thinking strategically in that area. We are also assessing what the community of retired faculty can do for Smith, how to keep them engaged with Smith.

- Public Relations

How can we boost Smith's PR program, highlighting such success as the Fulbright fellowships? President Christ: Higher education is a very competitive field. Public relations is an area under continuous discussion. External consultants are consulted regularly. The most precious commodity we have is our alumnae. We need to energize alumnae to resist sensational portrayals of Smith and inspire them to defend Smith as a place for women's learning.

Another director noted a lack of response when she called to try to locate an appropriate faculty expert for a magazine interview; President Christ said she would follow up on why that occurred; it is not common.

One director noted that women think and process information in a different way than men do. We should promote women's strength to reach our goals. She recommended creating a Web site where false headlines and biases are identified along with Smith's clarifications or explanations. We should also ponder whether (or when) we defend public misperception or ignore it.