

Shaping the Future of Smith

Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide

November 9, 2005

Twenty alumnae came together for a morning gathering at the headquarters of Ogilvy & Mather in Manhattan for a conversation with President Christ. Hannah Davis '01 and Sabra Goffin '00 welcomed the group on behalf of Ogilvy and its CEO Rochelle “Shelly” Lazarus '68.

President Christ opened the session by inviting alumnae to share their views about the ways in which Smith should be considering its future. She asked their input on two key questions, ones that the faculty, trustees and others are also taking up at this time: what are Smith’s distinctive strengths and intellectual traditions? What capacities do we want to develop in all of our students?

As examples of strengths, she cited Smith’s well-documented success in placing women in the sciences. The need is real; while women are 46 percent of the workforce, they hold just 11 percent of the jobs in engineering, she pointed out.

The arts are also an area of longstanding achievement and distinction for Smith, having been part of the college’s curriculum since its inception. “It would be impossible for a college today to create from scratch the richness of Smith’s arts offerings,” President Christ noted.

International study is also an area of distinction and strength, with nearly 50 percent of students going abroad before graduation.

Many applicants come to Smith because of its open curriculum, but President Christ cautioned that the lack of requirements should not be interpreted as “anything goes.” The faculty has already begun vigorous conversations on the capacities Smith students should have when they graduate. These include effective writing and speaking; quantitative literacy (the ability to understand and analyze information presented in quantitative terms); and the ability to engage, inside and outside the classroom, in civil discourse and argumentation – the ability to “carry on civil discussion about issues on which people of seriousness and integrity disagree.”

President Christ’s comments about civil discourse struck a chord with an alumna from the Class of 2004. “Smith is a very liberal college,” she remarked. “Sometimes moderate and conservative voices are muted. People need to be able to discuss sensitive issues openly.” The president noted that a number of members of the current SGA leadership are also members of the Smith Republican Club. She also told the group about two popular campus programs—“At Odds” and “The Hot Seat”—that model civil discourse and ethical reflection through panel discussions involving faculty, staff and students.

An alumna from the Class of 1970 noted that among the capacities Smith should be developing in students is self-understanding and reflection, the ability to understand one's abilities and goals. President Christ agreed strongly, noting that recent media portrayals of women's life choices have been simplistic and damaging. "How to shape a life is a real question, and women's colleges can take a leadership role." She explained that the college is considering creating an intensive January Term course that would help undergraduates identify goals and values. The program would have an alumnae component as well, to help women envision the different decades of their lives.

A 1993 graduate recalled her first years out of Smith as a time of indecision. "Getting to graduation was our goal. Then we had no idea what we wanted." If she had had a greater sense of options, or how things might have played out, she might have made different choices, she said.

An alumna from the Class of 1978 wondered whether the college was considering more business training or communications coursework, citing those fields as ones of great opportunity for women. President Christ explained that Smith has "dipped its toe" in the area of business via its very popular "Women & Financial Independence" program, but is not likely to make the investments required to establish a business school. It could be possible to offer some business or communications opportunities in January Term or in the summer.

An alumna from the Class of 1961 picked up on the president's remarks about effective writing. She hires numerous interns for television production, she said, and she "cannot overestimate the importance of writing." One of the biggest advantages of her Smith education, she said, was "the ability to learn, to move fluidly among fields. It's important to have focus, she said, but also breadth." She wondered whether a loose form of requirements would be possible.

A Smith education also "strengthens the core of the person," noted an alumna from the Class of 1974. "You understand yourself upon leaving." She credited the breadth of the Smith curriculum with making it possible for her to have several different careers. She commended the focus on quantitative literacy and on civil discourse.

A 2001 graduate acknowledged that she came to Smith "fearful of math" and delighted not to have to take it. Later, in her work life, she recalled feeling unprepared to handle the finances of a major account. "There was no one pushing me [to take math], and I regret that."

A self-described "hard-core math major" from the class of 1995 described her Smith experience as "amazing," but expressed concern about the college's recent ranking in U.S. News & World Report. Noting that Smith's academic quality ranking remains high and unchanged, President Christ explained the four factors that led to this year's decline: a higher acceptance rate in the year surveyed; it has since dropped below 50 percent; 2) a slight decrease in the graduation rate; 3) percentage of alumnae giving (43%); and 4) a slight increase in the number of classes between the size of 19 and 30, a factor that

weighs heavily. The president explained that while she is critical of the rankings themselves, she (and the college) are mindful of the contributing factors and are analyzing them to see which are important and legitimate campus concerns.

An alumna who graduated in 1963 affirmed the importance of women's colleges, even as women's education often creates an admission challenge. She cited a "huge dearth" of leadership, in politics, business and other fields, and contended that women's colleges had a mission to fill that gap. "Our society isn't raising good leaders today. No one questions what's said. No one challenges blatant lies." She urged the college to emphasize leadership development in its marketing.

Conversation turned to the challenges of marketing Smith in the context of misperceptions about the sexuality of students who attend women's colleges. Although Smith's academic programs are arguably stronger in many ways than those of Ivy League institutions, some students are turned away by the perception of a lesbian culture and how choosing Smith might reflect on them. The group discussed the importance of positive media coverage of Smith today.

An alumna from Class of 1959 said she regularly employs interns from the college's Praxis program and finds them to be invaluable and highly talented. These are some of the college's best ambassadors, and they fan out to workplaces and communities across the country and the world every year, she noted; they are an important part of the college's outreach.

Following that point, an alumna who graduated in the 1990 emphasized, "We ALL need to be ambassadors for Smith, beyond the marketing brochures."

A 1993 alumna expressed surprise at the direction the conversation had taken. "We all ended up at Smith" despite the reputational challenges, she pointed out. Of her undergraduate friends, straight and gay, she said, "We had more in common than points of difference."

Sexual mores and choices are one of the most rapidly changing areas of our society, President Christ noted. "Smith students are varied, complicated, capable and talented. I hope I can count on you to tell a correct story."