

Shaping the Future of Smith  
October 11, 2005

A total of 16 alumnae attended this late-afternoon event in Princeton, N.J. President Christ began with brief remarks highlighting accomplishments on campus created by the *This is about Smith* campaign. She explained that the conversations she is conducting with alumnae this year are an important piece of a strategic planning process that will take place over the coming two years. She posed two questions to the group, which she explained are also being addressed by faculty on campus:

What are the distinctive strengths and areas of excellence at Smith?

What capacities should Smith strive to develop in all of its students?

President Christ cited examples from the science and engineering, the arts, and social policy as some areas that are clearly identified as Smith strengths. She also mentioned a recent NSF study that shows Smith as the #1 college in the country for its production of women graduates who go on to earn Ph.D.s in the sciences.

She discussed four capacities that faculty have targeted for further concentration, including writing, quantitative literacy (which she said faculty are now referring to as “Q”), argumentation/civil discourse, and ethics and ethical reasoning.

President Christ then invited comments, suggestions, and questions.

A 1980 grad who is a teacher said that she was struck on a recent college tour by a first-year seminar program offered at Skidmore. Each year, the college chooses a topic for a seminar taken by all first year students. The classes are then led by a rotating group of faculty from across the disciplines. She commented that this allowed students to have their eyes opened around a number of different possibilities and different fields.

A '90 grad, who is a researcher for an investment company and who was an American Studies major at Smith, remarked that her experience of having an interdisciplinary major shapes the work that she does now. She added that interdisciplinary perspectives are important not only in the classroom but around the dining table as well.

An Ada asked President Christ, as an English professor, for her reaction to the book *The World is Flat*. She said that American higher education needs to focus on the message in that book.

An alumna from class of '55 stated her belief that Smith's strength is in preparing women for leadership positions, by stressing and providing opportunities for them to gain leadership abilities, and by preparing women to be confident in their future undertakings.

Her comments resonated with many in the room. A '97 grad stated that women need confidence around ethical issues such as salary equity and in speaking out in situations where they may feel intimidated. She says she sees this happening constantly in the court

system where she works. She suggested that Smith offer a course for seniors that might simulate a business site in which ethical issues are discussed from different approaches.

A Class of '47 alumna cited Smith women's self-confidence as essential. She said she has found herself as the only woman in a seminar on many occasions, and she is comfortable in those situations. She said that Smith has several programs that engender leadership such as Praxis and the Kahn Institute. These allow women to gain skills that then show up in leadership from international to local levels.

A 2000 math major remarked that Smith is not good at putting students in real world situations. The academic culture at Smith is wonderful, and students have great accessibility to faculty, but Smith does not prepare them for other roles they will encounter in life. She said that many Smith students are not led to expect the "real world." President Christ explained that the Picker Engineering Program's philosophical approach stresses real world problems and solutions and engineering students seem to be taking that approach to their other courses.

A '79 alumna said that Smith gives you contact with people from a wide range of backgrounds, and it is important for students to get to know that others have varying personal viewpoints and political beliefs. She said that talking with others in small groups is what helps you to figure out what you believe. She works as a dean at a girls' school, and she noted that learning to civilly disagree is an issue there as well. She said that Smith gives you the opportunity to talk to other women, to learn to trust themselves, and to speak from the gut. She later commented that she has observed that girls tend to take disagreements much more personally than boys.

An alumna who is in an MFA program at Bennington mentioned that she is finding a required letter-writing experience that is part of her program very valuable and enriching. She later mentioned that the arts provide many examples of women struggling to find their voice and their roles and suggested that the arts be tapped as a way to help prepare women for future choices that await them.

A woman from '65 noted that women are biological beings and that there is not a lot of discussion or good resources available for women who are struggling to juggle motherhood and careers. There is not enough discussion for young women to understand the tradeoffs and implications for their professional life. President Christ spoke about her interest in developing a program at Smith for both alumnae and undergraduates that will help women understand that it is not an either/or choice. She said that this is the number one issue that preoccupies alumnae in their 30s and 40s. She said it is one of her goals to help connect alums and students around this issue.

One woman responded that she thought this would be a wonderful resource for alums who need to hear that there is no one right way or wrong way to do it. She said that she found Jill Conway's remarks on women's lives and choices at her 25th reunion enormously inspiring.

An alumna from an early class commented that her own life demonstrates that there is plenty of time to have a career after your children are young.

A lecturer in molecular biology, Class of '88, said that there are many paths to success, and Smith should make sure that students are aware that they will need to make some choices.

A graduate from the class of 1990 said that she got weary of political correctness at Smith during her era there. She commented that Smith also infuses students with the mentality that they are powerful and a leader. In the workforce, not everyone will feel that way about you. Smith grads tend to feel a great deal of pressure to live up to their degree. Smith is identified with high-powered women leaders and many alumnae end up feeling that they are not measuring up.

Another alumna responded that her Smith network of friends is what is helping them get through the transitions and choices of their late 20s and early 30s. She said that she fears that those strong links might disappear with recent changes to the dining system.

A suggestion that several alumnae liked was to invite alumnae who are now 5 to 10 years out to return to campus and to interact with seniors about the highs and lows they have experienced post-Smith. The idea is not to burst anyone's bubble but to give a reality check.

A class of '50 alum commented that she went to girls' schools all her life and that this is what gave her a light at the end of the tunnel during the years that she raised her many children. Like it or not, women have primary responsibility for raising children, and the world is not yet fair on this issue.

Another alumna recalled January term courses that provided students with an opportunity to gain practical knowledge, such as auto mechanics. She said that these can be highly valuable experiences for students to complement their academics.

Following the event, a social worker, whose daughter is also a Smith alumna working in publishing, said that she thought these small-scale conversations with alumnae are a very good idea. Alumnae are very invested in their Smith identity, and it makes them feel valued to be consulted in this way.