

Shaping the Future of Smith

When: October 29, 2005, following the conclusion of AASC symposium *Graceful Transitions*

Location: University Club of Chicago

Audience: Most were alumnae who remained after the symposium to participate

Note: As Carol Christ opened this conversation, there were only about eight or nine alumnae present. Partway through the earlier remarks another 9-10 filtered in one or two at a time.

Carol Christ provided the backdrop for this discussion (as she has been doing with other conversations) by highlighting the accomplishments of the recently concluded *This is about Smith* campaign, and explaining that we need to consider what are the next priorities for the curriculum and the college. With an accreditation scheduled in two years, she feels this is a particularly good time to think in these terms.

The two questions she posed: What are the distinctive strengths of Smith? (What makes it excellent?) What capacities should be developed in students during their time at Smith?

She offered that among the strengths the faculty cited were the Brown Fine Arts Center, the Museum of Art, the high numbers of women seeking advanced degrees in sciences, the theater, the 5-college dance program, Landscape Studies, and International Studies. The faculty also suggested capacities of writing, which they have recently strengthened, quantitative reasoning/literacy, and argumentative capacity.

A former math major commented that she had to write papers in a number of courses, but that the reverse (others having to take a math class) did not occur, and that these were necessary life skills. CTC agreed and stated that though she had taught English Literature, she uses quantitative skills every day.

* It was at this point that a few others started to join the group as Carol encouraged everyone to introduce themselves. This led to a variety of statements ranging from "I never took a math class and I'm just fine," to "I took a math class, and it proved very helpful in life." A lawyer commented that as she writes briefs she follows the same process that is used to solve proofs. She uses mathematical theory every day.

One woman said that the efforts related to science/engineering were great, but she was concerned the college will lose sight of the former traditional majors in Liberal Arts. Carol assured her that others shared her concern and that this would not be the case. Government remains the number one major (greeted by pleased mutterings), and the social sciences in general continue to be very strong. Carol went on to say that in general many more students were looking to universities instead of liberal arts colleges, and it is important that we work to position the colleges in a better light. Having been at both types of institutions, she feels a better education is offered by the colleges; although the universities have more choices, you can't take advantage of all those choices.

An alumna commented that education is for life, not for a job.

Another noted that she received a grounding in the classics in a new framework, which prepared her well for tackling the theory in graduate school. She expressed dismay that courses like Art 100 have been removed from the curriculum. Carol reassured her that Art 100 lives on under a different course title. She said that the College heeded the vocal concerns by many, many alumnae and reinstated the course.

Returning to Carol's contrast between universities and colleges, one alumna explained that she had studied the classics and created her own minor in Southeast Studies. She served as a graduate instructor at a large university and agrees the quality of education is very different, as is the attention given by professors. You are a number at the large institutions, not a person. She also credited Smith with her ability to read in graduate school.

One woman had two points to make (1) she loved not having core requirements and that Kiki Smith had encouraged them to explore and to learn; (2) Smith prepared her for life—clarity, ability to write, read, analyze and convey to others, which contributed to her success at work.

Referring to the symposium discussions about transitions and work/life balance, another alumna observed that not all women live in sequence. There is no right way in chronology of choice; great information to share doesn't mean the audience is ready to hear; timing is everything, but it's important to start the conversation.

Carol asked, "What specifically did Smith give you that you needed? Or, things you wished you'd had?"

One wished she'd learned how to navigate difficult times and difficult people; create greater self-confidence in women.

Another commented on the sisterhood—heard a lot about women who take on the world through "firsts" and wanted to be one of them. Important to help students realize that not all will achieve that. She likes the idea of student-alumnae conversations, since as a student she missed that opportunity, that would help students better understand choices at different points in their lives. Not enough are told it's acceptable to be a "normal, happy person" rather than a world-changer.

The next alumna echoed those same sentiments acknowledging that being told at graduation they'd change the world and be "firsts" resulted in a lot of pressure. It took her a while to realize the "world" could be her family, career, community, and "firsts" could be small breakthroughs, which are as important. She feels it is important to have conversations with students that are more balanced.

Admitting that type of conversation would not have resonated with her due to content, an alumna explained that in her senior year she knew she was headed to law school and would eventually have a family. She felt that about six years out, it would have carried more significance for her. She went on to share that Smith President Mary Maples Dunn having them in for tea to discuss apartheid issues left them feeling that their views and opinions mattered. In law school when she asked for an appointment to see the Dean and was queried by his secretary, "About what?" she was startled. She was used to having access to administrators and deans because Smith not only permitted, but

encouraged it. She expressed that the message of “expecting you to do well” should be tempered with reality. One of the most valuable things she has is the Smith network.

Carol asked if there were any suggestions on how Smith might begin conversations with students on goals and balance, and how should we include alumnae as a resource.

One suggestion was incorporating it into the Leadership Program, or beginning it during January interterm and involve alumnae as faculty. (Carol liked this idea as she had been thinking about J-term, and adding the alumnae as faculty was an interesting twist.) The alumnae went on to say that there are a number of ways for alumnae to be involved and to give back to Smith: contact CDO, become involved with students, admission work, etc.

Carol shared an anecdote that reflected the frustration of both alumna and daughter, when the daughter had chosen to be a carpenter instead of an executive like her mother. She loved her life and choices and didn't want to be her mother.

Another suggestion was to hold a seminar with alumnae who have not had linear success to share those choices/possibilities with students. Carol suggested that those narratives could also be placed on the web. She also commented that it has been interesting in the Shaping the Future of Smith conversations to note the concerns of the different decades, including the young alumnae versus intergenerational conversations.

An alumna suggested summer sessions as an extension of the Leadership Program, WFI, or J-term might be a possibility, especially utilizing the web for ongoing discussion.

Another encouraged us to find ways to pair intergenerational alumnae together as mentors.

It was immediately suggested by a woman that this might be an opportunity to leverage local Smith Clubs. She experienced a “yield tea” and left feeling, “I want to grow up to be like that.” She feels the clubs have the responsibility to bring students into meetings and team up to help them before they are in troubled waters.

A question was posed about Advance Placement tests and if Smith allows students to advance quickly if they choose to. Carol assured them that they are allowed.

Carol asked how the group felt about the issue of co-education, and if they felt it should be a topic of discussion as the college looks to the future.

None felt it should be a consideration at this time. They spoke of the benefits they received from a single-sex school:

Self-confidence; leadership opportunities

Appreciation for women; had two daughters who graduated from a single-sex school; would be very sad if single-sex colleges were not an available option.

Carol commented that single-sex colleges face greater admission challenges, since they are not often the first choice of 17- and 18-year olds, even though they value the experience as alumnae.

An alumna offered her experience with her Gillette housemates as an example of the bonds formed in single-sex colleges: Fifteen years ago, she didn't see any of her Gillette pals at reunion and hypothesized that they felt more house-based, than Smith-based. She called around and got a group together and they agreed to stay in touch. They still gather every few months in different cities. She met up with a former housemate who had withdrawn and convinced her to explore the Ada Comstock Program, which she then completed. She recently attended a group gathering where they were offering support for one of the others who is facing a battle with cancer. It is thrilling to know you have those connections. Carol volunteered that two alumnae had recognized her on the metro in from the airport. They were on their way to a mini-reunion in Chicago that same weekend.

Returning to the co-ed issue, a young alumna explained that she knew a few women who transferred out of Smith, but felt she benefited from the single-sex environment. The level of social consciousness was raised in a number of ways, including at dinner conversations. Co-education changes the dynamics, and the interplay at Smith doesn't take place at a Big 10 university.

An alumna asked if Smith needed to consider this question seriously, and Carol assured them it did not. She was curious since the question had come up at an early conversation and it surprised her that it was raised. She enjoys the learning experience it offers her to hear alumnae reflect on the topic.

Speaking of equality and access, one woman stated that the glass ceiling is still evident in most professions. She remembered that after a social weekend, a classmate's Harvard boyfriend attended class and dominated the conversation as a guest. Single-sex education must remain an option; it provides a nurturing option with intellectual discussion, leadership, and the chance to explore who you are.

During lunch a table discussion by '72, '73, and '74 commented on the difficulty of meeting men and a lackluster social life at single-sex institutions. Carol mentioned that student surveys indicate this as a topic of discontent, and a recent conversation with the Student Government Association confirmed this as continued concern. She deferred the project of suggestions back to the SGA explaining that she was quite certain any ideas she had for their social life would probably not resonate with the students.

An alumna felt that JYA offered an opportunity for developing the soft social skills needed for interacting with men and helping students learn how to navigate those waters. She hopes the JYA experience will continue for a number of reasons. Carol assured that it does continue and approximately 50% of the students participate.

An alumna asked a question about affordability and accessibility, and is it possible for Smith's admission to be need blind? Carol responded by explaining Smith is far more socio-economically diverse than many peer institutions who have need blind admissions policies. Smith was recently cited in *The New York Times* for its socio-economic diversity and it is a point of pride for both Carol and college. She shared the following statistics: 64% receive financial aid vs 40% at peer institutions; 19% are first generation college students; 21% are from families with incomes of \$30,000 or less.

This information prompted an alumna to ask if Smith has noted any differences in what 18- and 19-year old Hispanics want for college? Carol said that while the proportion of Hispanic students is growing, no group characteristics have been identified. Our focus is more on how to encourage more Hispanics to consider college.

In response to a last question about a Smith connection with a Japanese college, Carol shared that the college is no longer a women's college, and we no longer have that connection.