

Shaping the Future of Smith
October 4, 2005
Arts-oriented alumnae group

President Christ began the conversation with remarks noting success of *This is about Smith* campaign and some findings of the recent curricular review. Not surprisingly, she stressed strength of the arts in the review, and let the group know that the Smith Museum of Art and the Metropolitan were founded in the same year! She then opened the floor for questions.

The first question concerned the truthfulness of the recent *Atlantic* article about Jim Miller, and whether he had received tenure. [*Research could not find the article referenced.*] President Christ assured the group that Professor Miller had received tenure and remained an outstanding teacher. She added that diversity of faculty viewpoints enhances Smith's academic excellence.

Someone then asked if Carol taught at Smith, which provided an opportunity for her to speak about her course, *The Arts Around Us*. At this point, the conversation shifted primarily to the arts. One woman noted how much more prepared she was for graduate work in art history due to her Smith education. In particular she spoke of the value of working in the Museum, studying non-Western art, and having to compare and contrast pieces of art in written form. (With regard to non-Western art, she claimed "I minored in Dana Liebsohn!")

Someone chimed in that though she only minored in art history (AH) at Smith, she was still better prepared for AH graduate school than AH majors from other institutions due to "the rigor of Art 100."

Several people asked how Smith might better market its strong arts programs. They encouraged continuation of Susannah Fabing's summer program in museum's studies and better articulation of the ways to combine varied interests in arts such studio art and art history; art and architecture; and arts and engineering. The high standards of each of these programs should be reinforced at all times.

Several noted the natural marriage of art and science within architecture, and hoped that addition of engineering to the curriculum might further enhance this traditional strength of Smith's.

One woman stated "that the best things about Smith education follow graduation when you have the chance to join the network of competent, wonderful and reliable alumnae." A younger woman commented that "as a new alumna, I feel a need to learn to love the history of Smith and its alumnae."

Another woman from the 80's noted that there were three reasons she had come to Smith: 1) no core requirements, 2) Junior Year Abroad programs, and 3) the strength of the art history program. She graduated most grateful for her writing experience and the network

of women in the arts. She believes strengthening the writing program makes sense and also thinks that some sort of quantitative reasoning requirement is important for today's students. She encouraged the college to take greater advantage of the strong network of women in the arts, especially for the benefit of today's students.

Several expressed support of the commitment to civil discourse and the importance of providing students with opportunities to communicate their ideas effectively in both written and spoken forms. Some noted that their public speaking skills were honed in experiences outside the classroom at Smith.

An alumna from the 40's said how pleased she had always been that her Smith education "connected all the dots, and that as a theatre major, I graduated with a rich grounding in history, literature and economics that made me more successful in the theatre."

The conversation then shifted to how to recruit and retain both excellent students and outstanding faculty. Several alumnae noted the impact of particular faculty as one of Smith's distinctive strengths and encouraged President Christ to invest wisely here. President Christ commented on the continued strength of today's faculty and also mentioned the expectation of 50% turnover of the faculty in the next decade. She assured them that Smith almost always gets its first choice faculty candidates.

An alumna from the Class of 2005 commented that there are "so many great opportunities for students at Smith," and how she appreciated the fact that she could take ideas and develop them to fruition noting her establishment of "Leading Ladies" theatre group. She praised the "infrastructure Smith has in place to nurture success in students." She also noted the support of her history faculty to take arts courses and vice versa.

An Ada Comstock alumna echoed these sentiments claiming that one of the best pieces of advice she received at Smith was "if you can't find the job you want, create it!"

Other alumnae expressed appreciation for Smith's "non-competitive" environment, traditions like tea, and recruitment activities like Smith Book Awards. One alumna enthusiastically noted that "Smith teaches women to work together."

An alumna then called attention to "the elephant in the room" and noted the challenges in being perceived as a "lesbian institution," and wondered how the president and administration were working to address this misperception? President Christ answered this question directly stating the media distortion of Smith and encouraged those present to "help us combat the perception that only lesbians go to Smith."

This discussion led someone to ask whether there is still a role for women's colleges in today's environment. President Christ took this opportunity to share that she had let the faculty know that she didn't think it was right time to consider co-education as part of this particular strategic planning effort, but wondered how the assembled group felt about this. The vast majority of attendees agreed with her assessment. Many went on to note how difficult it is to get today's young women to consider a single-sex school, and

several alumnae from the 80's shared that they attended Smith "despite the fact it was a women's college, but graduated committed to single-sex education." Other alumnae noted the importance of getting prospective students to campus as the place is so "intoxicating." Another said "the immediate sense of empowerment and community once you set foot on campus."

President Christ concluded the conversation after an alumna stated, "I wish every young woman interested in college could be here today!"