

Shaping the Future of Smith
October 4, 2005
Audience: Recent alumnae

President Christ began the conversation with remarks noting success of *This is about Smith* campaign and some findings of the recent curricular review. She also commented on how pleased she was to meet with a group of younger alumnae, as she was eager to add their perspectives to the mix and to see if differences existed between this group and some of the other conversations she had already held.

As she spoke about Smith's strength in JYA programs, she asked how many present had studied abroad while at Smith. More than half of the group responded affirmatively. She then asked the attendees to reflect back upon their time at Smith and to consider what would have improved their experiences.

The first question was about concern for the leadership of the Engineering Program since Dr. Grasso left. This provided President Christ with an opportunity to showcase Linda Jones, the new director, to share news of our ABET accreditation, and to talk about both the new building and the increasing number of engineering majors.

Someone then asked about town/gown issues surrounding the new building and what the college was doing to find housing for displaced tenants. All seemed impressed with the plans to renovate Bedford Terrace, and the conversation shifted to more specific academic programs and opportunities.

There was some discussion about when the writing requirement started, and the assembled group decided it was 2002 based on who did and did not have such. One alumna noted, "I wish I had had requirements: what did I know at the ripe old age of 18?"

Others praised the open curriculum but noted that paying attention to what one needed for Latin Honors helped them decide what courses to take. An academic noted, "As a professor, I appreciate an open curriculum, but agree that a writing requirement is important." Someone echoed that former writing requirement was to buy *Strunk and White*—but she added that she never had to open the book!

Several called attention to the importance of First Year Seminars as writing-intensive courses and appreciated that these courses covered a broad range of topics and disciplines.

Someone then asked what tools the faculty members were provided for improving the teaching of writing. The President spoke about some of the programs at the Jacobson Center.

An alumna asked the President to elaborate on possibility of a quantitative reasoning requirement and how it could be effectively integrated across the curriculum. People were pleased to learn that plan was for something along the lines of writing-intensive courses rather than a specific math course requirement. Several noted they wish such had

existed for them. One in particular commented, “I am another one of those government majors who shied away from math courses. I wish my advisors and those at the Career Development Office had been more helpful in terms of steering me toward quantitative courses, as I certainly realized I needed them once in graduate school.”

Another alumna mentioned the importance of providing opportunities for students to develop public speaking skills. She called attention to the student panel during the Volunteer Leadership weekend claiming that “while the NASA students were impressive and their content strong, their delivery was less so.” She continued, noting that she thinks some senior seminars and other high level courses ought to be considered speaking-intensive and that consideration of speaking-intensive requirement is important.

Others claimed that the Lewis Leadership Program helped with public speaking but it was too distributed to be helpful to all students. Some noted that teaching courses during InterTerm was one of the best ways to improve one’s speaking skills. Others noted the importance of internships and wondered what percentage of students take advantage of Praxis. The President responded that approximately two-thirds of the students participate in this program. A couple of students commented on how helpful the Praxis program had been to them in terms of “opening doors for future employment.”

The conversation then shifted to the Career Development Office. One alumna noted how she wished there were more corporate recruiters on campus. Another commented that she was surprised that she had to pay for CDO services after graduation and wished she had taken better advantage of the CDO while on campus. A couple of academics expressed concern that the CDO seemed to have a bias against those going on to graduate school and were especially disappointed that no one at CDO was able to help them with fellowship applications. The President noted that a person had been hired to work with prospective graduate students and that the new CDO director, Stacie Hagenbaugh, was already addressing many of their other concerns.

One alumna then asked if there might be more faculty or staff supervision of/involvement in some of the other clubs and organizations that help to foster leadership skills in students. President Christ reported that there is greater faculty involvement with the *Sophian*, as well as some other clubs. Another alumna noted that, “I loved certain pieces of my Smith experience, but I needed greater ways to get involved. I didn’t feel encouraged to explore options that would have helped me to become more well rounded. There was nothing enticing enough to forsake academics, so I just studied more.”

Several students responded that many of their greatest learning experiences took place outside of the classroom in clubs, organizations and athletics, and they feared that this part of the Smith experience was fading, and that “academic obsession” was becoming a problem on campus. Several of the athletes present noted that they thought Smith could do a better job of encouraging physical fitness for all students. There was also a concern that Smith didn’t do enough to prepare students for some of the life choices they would need to make. President Christ took this opportunity to speak a bit about the possibility of programming for students and alumnae on work/life balance, and whether this would

appeal to this group. There was some nervous laughter, and then an alumna responded, “It only resonates if you are paid enough to have a life!” Another noted that “We all know we will have multiple jobs in our lives, so it is important that we learn to have fun.” One person even suggested the President hire a “minister of fun.”

The alumnae present were supportive of the commitment to civil discourse, though they wondered if such could actually be taught. One alumna stated, “I so admire people who can respond non-defensively to issues, and wish I could acquire that skill.”

The President then asked the group to reflect on Smith as women’s college. There was a palpable gasp in the room. Carol quickly assured them she had no hidden agenda, but that several alumnae at other meetings had raised the issue, and she was curious how this group felt. While the group unanimously expressed their support for Smith as a women’s college, some did comment on how much they questioned their going to a women’s college even while there. One noted, “This is always a conflict for me; I loved my classes, but I had no social life whatsoever.”

Several agreed that it was important to continue to find ways to build community to address some of the concerns with lack of a social life. One alumna said that whenever someone asks me “if I know so and so who went to Smith, I don’t.” Most of the group expressed support for the changes in dining as way to broaden on campus networks and circles of friends.

Near the end of the conversation, an alumna claimed, “I came out of Smith with an amazing amount of debt.” She went on to note that she believes Smith attracts first-year students with strong packages, but then decreases them markedly as they progress through the institution. The President was able to share some of the economic diversity of the Smith student body and assured the student we continue to refine our financial aid packages so as not to be an undue burden on students and their families. She shared that no package contains a debt level of more than \$16,000.