

Shaping the Future of Smith
October 5, 2005

President Christ began the conversation with remarks noting success of *This is about Smith* campaign and some findings of the recent curricular review. She recognized the many years of volunteer service represented in the room acknowledging that much of our recent success was due to their efforts.

The first comment was praise of President's Christ's accessibility and willingness to participate in these important conversations. The person then went on to ask if there was concern that increasing diversity of student body could have an adverse effect on future philanthropic support of the institution. The President shared some of the demographics of the student body and also noted some of the initiatives aimed at teaching philanthropy on campus through WFI programs and similar activities. She added that most alumnae with whom she speaks who received financial aid feel an obligation to repay that debt to Smith through their philanthropy.

An alumna then asked if students should graduate with some sort of scientific literacy. The President noted that the faculty members are wrestling with this very question. She explained that some faculty advocated for broadly-distributed courses with no requirements, while others thought science requirements, including labs, were important. She also called attention to two popular courses entitled "Science for the Concerned Citizen" and "Natural Disasters." She then returned the question to the audience and asked if alumnae objected to specific requirements.

Some commented that while they recognized the recruiting advantage of the open curriculum, they shared concerns that our students might not graduate with what they needed to succeed. Several stressed the importance of advising if the fully open curriculum continues. Another recalled that looking at what was required for Latin Honors was helpful to her as she decided what courses to take.

An alumna then asked about the President's own commitment to diversity. President Christ reported with pride that the diversity of the student body had increased each year of her presidency. She also spoke about some of the campus programs including *Common Ground*.

Someone asked if Smith would consider coeducation as part of the strategic planning process. The President responded that she has been surprised at the variety of opinions on this topic that have come up during the SFS conversations. She went on to explain that she had shared with the faculty that she did not think the time was right to consider coeducation now due to demographics and other factors, and yet some alumnae had encouraged her to raise the issue. An alumna wondered if there would be a legal battle if Smith remained a single-sex institution. The President responded that she did not believe so, since there was not a large group of males clamoring for the benefits of a Smith education.

Others in the room recalled that the last time Smith looked seriously at coeducation was during a tougher admissions market. Some noted that it would likely be hard to recruit men of the same academic caliber as the women we are currently recruiting. Someone asked why we thought we had such a strong year in number of applications and could we expect continued growth here?

The President responded that the admissions staff and volunteers work very hard during each part of the admissions process, and that they would continue to do so as we saw the population of college-bound students decline in coming years. People were also surprised by the current gender imbalance in college enrollments, especially when the economic benefits of attending college are so prevalent today. It was noted that much of this imbalance was due to increased number of Hispanic women enrolling in college and a corresponding decrease in the number of African-American males.

There was some concern that waiving the application fee for online applications might lead to an increase of unqualified applicants. The President shared that this didn't appear to be the case, and that Smith was not interested in encouraging unqualified students to apply to the College.

An alumna brought up the recent *New York Times* article about the increasing number of female college graduates who do not expect to work outside the home and wondered if Smith was finding this to be true? The President noted that in national senior surveys, 75% of female graduates from coeducational institutions thought marriage and family would be a part of their futures, while only 50% of graduates from women's colleges responded in this way. She continued that while these figures are too simplistic to tell us much, she also thought that the dichotomous nature of working inside or outside of the home is much too simplistic for the complex lives led by our graduates. She shared her own hope that Smith might take the lead in showcasing models, labor policies, and other efforts aimed at improving the lives of men and women. Many expressed support of this goal and volunteered to help in whatever ways they could.

Several noted that the arts and non-profit organizations seem "more forgiving" of work/family issues and that the legal and financial industries are the "toughest." Some wondered if Smith's commitment to work and family balance could be articulated in recruitment materials "without turning off young women."

One alumna noted that while Smith had provided her with a variety of good work experiences through internships and other employment, she graduated needing more management skills and proven strategies for working with very diverse teams of people. Another alumna responded that more alumnae should take advantage of "the lifelong guarantee of services from the Career Development Office" to meet ongoing needs.

An alumna then asked if "Anyone anywhere is doing anything to address the ridiculous costs of private higher education?" The President empathized and assured her that many were concerned with this problem, noting that Smith and its board have taken the path of many premier liberal arts institutions of "high tuition combined with high financial aid."

The President then elaborated on some of the difficulties in trying to reduce costs in other ways, especially when market demand for excellent liberal arts education has not yet decreased.

An alumna then lauded the Picker Engineering Program as truly distinctive and wondered how Smith could better articulate some of its other distinctive characteristics such as the alumnae network and “access to professors and genuine faculty who teach the courses.” Someone then noted the *Collaborations* program as a great way to introduce prospective students and their families to Smith. Another praised Smith’s Junior Year Abroad programs, especially the fact that they are taught in native languages.

There was some discussion about the benefits of the Five-College consortium with the recognition that this sometimes works better for faculty and administrators than it does for students due to distance between the campuses—though 50% of Smith students take at least one course on another campus during their tenures.

Someone then asked how to maintain the value of the house system while simultaneously giving students the opportunity to meet others on campus and beyond. Several expressed dismay at the current state of some houses. The President responded that many efforts were underway on this front, and that she was pleased that this year’s SGA wanted to focus on “Smith traditions.” She also spoke about the Mellon grant that enabled the college to consider some suites or alternative living arrangements and recognized that current plan of house renovations every 30 years is not adequate.

Someone noted they hoped as part of the emphasis on traditions, that some sort of etiquette courses might be designed for students. The President responded that such courses are available through the Leadership Program, thanked the hostess for her graciousness, and ended the session.