

Thursday, September 15, 2005
Session I

President Christ opened both with an overview of what she feels are Smith's distinctive strengths/"measures of excellence," and she spoke specifically about the sciences and the arts at Smith. She then spoke about the capacities we need to develop in students, and revealed that the faculty all agree on three things: writing, quantitative reasoning, and argumentative capacity (fostering a culture of civil discourse). President Christ referred to the recent curriculum review and said that much thought was now going into the process of integrating the findings of this committee.

She then opened the conversation up to alumnae, asking them about what strengths they developed at Smith, what has carried them through their careers, and what components of a Smith education would they carry forward into the future. She also asked what needs to change?

Comments were as follows:

- The first to speak was a woman from the 80's who said that she was grateful to Smith for teaching her the ability to communicate "in antagonistic environments" where she often felt hostility coming from her male counterparts. She said when people asked her where she developed these skills that she said, "I came from a woman's college."
- One woman asked how we were teaching "civil discourse" and President Christ described Donna Divine's history class where students play roles, often at odds with their own viewpoint, to "take on" and understand the position of another. President Christ described the "Hot Seat" initiative and the "At Odds" open debates between faculty. She mentioned using her "bully pulpit" to shape the thinking of students and to model civility for them.
- Other positive comments from women ranged from acknowledging the advantages of "being in a community of learners" and valuing an argument for the sake of learning from another's viewpoint.
- One woman from the class of '87 was a lawyer and stressed that her writing skills were superior as a result of her Smith education. She mentioned that it is important to teach writing as a "craft" as well as an intellectual exercise, and recommended courses that focused on clarity of communication and the importance of brevity. President Christ agreed.
- There was a complaint about the quality of the houses from a recent alumna back from her reunion. President Christ mentioned a recent Mellon Grant we received to hire an architect to analyze the current renovation plans, to determine whether redesigning of houses makes more sense than simple restoration.

- One woman from the class of '74 mentioned that her daughter from Bronxville wouldn't consider applying to Smith. Another from Mamaroneck concurred. She said "...my daughter doesn't need to find her voice...she is already a leader. What does Smith have to offer her?" President Christ went on to describe the current demographics of the college now, revealing statistics about access and affordability (2/3 of students on financial aid, 29% from bottom 5th of economic income scale), and this seem to resonate with these women. An alumna of '94 responded to the older women's concerns by saying: "I didn't have a wonderful feminist mother like you all. I needed a place like Smith to build my confidence. Maybe it isn't your daughter's calling to go to Smith because they got their feminism from their mothers. But there are many, many young women who need the kind of education that Smith has to offer."
- One woman asked if house parties were banned from campus. President Christ said no, that stricter alcohol policies have been put in place.
- Another woman who went on to Harvard for her MBA said that she supports the idea of requiring more quantitative learning...she floundered her first year. She said many women from women's colleges struggled with the quantitative portion of the curriculum. President Christ agreed and said this was something they were looking at very closely. "The person who understands the books runs the organization."
- Someone raised the issue of balancing work and family. President Christ responded with an emphatic "yes" and mentioned an alumna who wants to fund a program with this express purpose in mind. She said we want to teach students how to be "professionally flexible without losing traction" in the workplace to take time off to raise children.
- An older alumna from the class of '51 said that Smith taught her resilience and perseverance in dealing with "ghastly surprises." She said she also has a network of strong, supportive women friends from her Smith days.
- Someone asked about lesbian students, stating that while she is happy they have a place, she is concerned that straight women will feel marginalized. One woman said that Smith has a "PR problem" as a result of lesbians and the transgender "pronoun vote." Another woman suggested that going co-ed might be a solution to the "PR problem." The question was asked, "How is Smith going to change its image?"

President Christ responded to the lesbian and transgender issue by clearly distinguishing them as separate issues. She explained that there is a "caricature" of Smith now as a result of the media attention and that lesbian students are as diverse, serious, and passionate as any other minority group on campus. She said we must reject the caricature...this is a disservice to Smith and to the gay students. On the subject of co-education, President Christ said that this issue was recently removed

from the table during a faculty meeting. She said that Smith's distinctive identity is as a women's college, in brand and mission. Abandoning this would require serious thought, which will take place in the context of all the issues the college must address.

She then took a straw poll; six people voted "yes" for co-education, six "no." When one woman asked, "What if it would help the PR problem," a few more hands went up in favor of co-education.

President Christ said emphatically, "This would be the wrong reason to go co-ed."

- One young woman had the last word on co-education by referring to Vassar and stating that this was an example of an unsuccessful transition to co-education. She cited that they have a hard time recruiting men and they are often a less qualified constituency.