

Shaping the Future of Smith  
Summary of five events  
February 1-2, 2006  
Boston Area

President Christ asked each group of alumnae for their thoughts on two key questions; what most distinguishes a Smith education, and what capacities should we be developing in our students today?

To the question what most distinguishes a Smith education, alumnae offered the following responses.

A feeling of empowerment—I can do anything—most represents my Smith experience. The key value of a Smith degree is that it fosters the confidence that there is nothing impossible for women to do. If you are a Smith graduate, you will do your utmost to make a difference.

President Christ noted that an Ada Comstock Scholar, concerned about the spread of malaria, shared the plans for her upcoming Praxis internship in a university laboratory in Uganda. She said, “I came to Smith not knowing I could do something significant. I now know I can, and I know what it is.”

Alumnae commented that the most remarkable aspect of the Smith experience was to be part of several communities. This developed a sense of responsibility and leadership even in an era when most women didn't plan on professional work lives. Students today should learn how to build community, not just participate. They should use opportunities presented by

- Campus houses
- The Smith campus
- Northampton and in the future, their own communities
- International organizations and communities
- Multicultural groups and organizations

President Christ responded that Smith engages students in community responsibility because we want students to develop the capacity to take effective action in their various communities. The Chapel has sponsored two trips to Biloxi and New Orleans so students, faculty, and staff could participate in reconstruction and cleanup activities. She drew comparisons with the story of Smith alumnae helping to rebuild a village in France (twice), and that action's relationships to the Grécourt Gates that grace the entrance to campus.

Alumnae recalled that they were enriched by experiences outside the classroom. Playing on a team or singing with the Glee Club or serving in the SGA taught more about civil

discourse than any classroom experience, where it was possible to avoid interaction with fellow students if you wanted to.

Alumnae noted that they were influenced by the physical environment of the college. President Christ replied that the founders felt it the landscape, in its larger meaning, was part of the pedagogical design. President Seelye wrote that the mountains were “unsalaried professors.”

Alumnae commented that the Junior Year Abroad (JYA) experience provided the most formative component of their education. President Christ offered that currently 78 percent of the juniors are studying abroad.

There were several comments about how the house system provided a powerful arena to practice leadership skills and civil discourse. In particular, the common areas —dining room, TV area, and tea in the living room—were unifying forces.

President Christ stated that changes in dining were motivated by a larger social context, not just finances. Smith is rethinking common areas in the houses, which were designed when the patterns of students' lives were quite different. The so-called “beau parlors” may be redesigned as quiet or noisy areas. Likewise, dining rooms and kitchens were designed for served food, not cafeteria-style meals students want, and aren't functional.

Alumnae commented on the role of the liberal arts by noting that their liberal arts education gave them important essential skills: intellectual range and sophistication and an ability to carry on a conversation with anyone.

An alumna noted that she has great respect for the multiple points of view expressed by Smith community today. Thirty-five years ago, there was “no room for dialogue,” and more of a “single point of view.” Smith's focus on civil discourse is strongly supported by alumnae. Civil discourse is also important from to public speaking and private conversations. Often we're too polite; students must be given tools with which to debate.

President Christ reflected that from ages 18 to 20, students try on identities for size. There is passion in students' ideological discussions. Unfortunately, there are very few good public role models for them as students at this developmental point in their lives. Smith has developed several forums to teach students how to present their views and debate without shutting others down or becoming silent themselves:

- Two popular campus programs—“At Odds” and “The Hot Seat” —model civil discourse and ethical reflection through panel discussions involving faculty, staff, and students.
- Debate in classrooms require that students defend a point of view they don't share
- Re-enacting history class offers a unique educational experience by role-playing that brings to life tumultuous periods in history when debate on public issues was intense and shaped events

Alumnae recalled that hands-on science experience played a critical role in their growth as a scientist. It is essential that students have research experience as well while they are undergraduates.

President Christ replied that, while Smith is not a research university, we are committed to providing competitive research experiences for students. Currently, Smith offers numerous opportunities for student-faculty research; students are listed as co-authors on published papers and invited to present at national conferences. One of the ideas under consideration is a capstone experience for all graduating students patterned after the intensive design clinic work required of Smith engineers.

To the second question, what intellectual abilities should Smith strive to develop in women of the 21st century, alumnae offered the following suggestions.

Reasoning and debating are good skills to develop. Essential communication skills are needed if we are to be equipped to address issues as humans, not just quantitatively.

Students need life skills to cope when things don't work out. Students don't anticipate that life beyond Smith can be hard.

Smith develops leaders and needs to ramp up leadership skill development. In life, it's about teamwork, and Smith must teach those skills.

The college should make an effort to include ethics as a means of assessing individual and organizational behavior.

President Christ responded that Smith's distinctive strength is that it is a residential community, which helps develop relating skills in and out of the classroom. A recent bias incident in one of the houses resulted in the development of a set of standards for a respectful community.

How does one learn moral reasoning? How do we define success? A January-term course, "Narratives of Success," will commence next year. Students will reflect on multiple goals:

- Professional
- Relationship
- What we leave behind us
- What we give to society
- Work/life balance

Alumnae urged that Smith identify effective ways to encourage students to accumulate breadth in their courses of study, possibly through requirements or more focused advising, without which distribution requirements are worthless.

President Christ commented that the faculty, which considers itself a single intellectual community, all agree that they want students to distribute their courses broadly. Faculty disagree on how to achieve that goal. The current emphasis has been departmentally based because Smith has no core requirements beyond the writing requirement. There has been no institutional emphasis on general education courses. However, we are beginning to see a shift, i.e., “Science for the Concerned Citizen,” and “The Arts Around Us.”

Various alumnae named several essential skills graduates must possess:

- Critical thinking
- Creative thinking
- Ability to seek and evaluate information; know the difference between a credible journal article and something posted on the web with no review
- Ability to synthesize information to determine a solution
- Cross-training
- Public speaking
- Writing
- Quantitative reasoning

Alumnae also emphasized the importance of developing students' capacity to understand and participate in a global community and to become multicultural in outlook.

President Christ replied that the college does need to be more precise when it claims to be a world college; we must look at how the elements we have in mind actually combine and add up.

Alumnae were concerned with rebuilding alumnae connections to the college. They noted that they are willing to assist students and urged the college to capture their extensive expertise and tap into them as resources, on campus or in their communities. They asked to be connected to students as mentors and wondered whether Smith Clubs are still the best way to connect to one another, given the demands on women's lives? They listed the following ways in which they wish to participate:

- Develop Praxis opportunities within their organizations
- Help the college maintain its commitment to financial aid
- Noting that their positive experiences with the Career Development Office as students came mostly from interactions with alumnae, use them to develop the idea with students that the CDO is for life.
- Provide some form of continuing education: we'd love to return, take classes, utilize campus resources
- Conduct more profession-based gatherings
- Work with the college to arrange multi (contiguous)-year reunions
- Upgrade the AASC website to include a bulletin board and opportunity to create listservs
- Use alumnae to get the word out to prospective students through conversation.

President Christ spoke to the points made by noting that 58 percent of Smith students receive need-based aid. We meet the full need of all admitted students. Smith maintains a diverse socio-economic profile and has trimmed the budget in other areas to maintain that profile. Of our current students:

- 30% are under-represented minorities
- 8% are international
- 8% are Ada Comstock Scholars
- 19% of first-year students are first-generation

She noted that the demographics for the college-bound population in the next several years show the following:

- A growing population shift away from the American northeast to the south and west
- A growth in the number of college-bound students until 2009, followed by a drop-off until 2018
- The south and west “export” a smaller percentage of students away from their region than the northeast
- Women comprise 58% of college students
- More than half of U.S. college graduates go to more than one school
- The Caucasian population will decrease, the Hispanic population will increase significantly, and there will be a smaller increase in Asians and African-Americans.
- There will be a drop in per capita income.

“We need to learn to fish in different pools,” the president said. “The Ada Comstock Scholars Program developed as a response to a shift in demographics at that time.”

Alumnae expressed their interest in and support of one another throughout life. The questions they ask themselves are:

- What have we achieved?
- What have we survived?
- What have we done that we never imagined we would or could do?

President Christ shared her recognition of how interested students are in the life stories of alumnae. What choices did they make? If you close a door, do you close it for the rest of your life? Women have many phases of their lives and don't need to make a single “opt-out” decision. An alumna may feel that if she knew as a student the shape of her career, she wouldn't have chosen it, yet she may find great rewards. How do all these choices and changes feel as a lived life?