

Shaping the Future of Smith
San Diego, California
March 22, 2006
Host: Michelle Lord '89

Ms. Lord created a relaxing atmosphere in her home where she welcomed 21 guests from the San Diego Smith Club.

President Christ opened the session by inviting alumnae to share their views about the ways in which Smith should be considering its future. She asked their input on three key questions, ones that the faculty, trustees, staff and students are also considering. What are Smith's distinctive strengths and intellectual traditions? What capacities do we want to develop in all of our students? Given the landscape of higher education today, what are our challenges for the future? Where are we headed?

As examples of strengths, Carol cited Smith's well documented success in placing women in the sciences. The need is real; while women are 46 percent of the workforce, they hold just 11 percent of the jobs in engineering.

The arts are also an area of longstanding achievement and distinction for Smith, having been part of the college's curriculum since its inception. "It would be impossible for a college today to create from scratch the richness of Smith's arts offerings," President Christ noted.

International study is also an area of distinction and strength, with nearly 50 percent of students going abroad before graduation.

The faculty has already begun vigorous conversations on the capacities Smith students should have when they graduate. These include effective writing and speaking; quantitative literacy (the ability to understand and analyze information presented in quantitative terms); and the ability to engage, inside and outside the classroom, in civil discourse and argumentation – the ability to "carry on civil discussion about issues on which people of seriousness and integrity disagree."

A woman from the seventies kicked off the discussion by saying that she was a math major who initially didn't feel confident about speaking up in public or in the classroom. After four years at Smith, she felt she had the confidence to speak up and to do anything she put her mind to. (She recently retired at 50 after making several very successful commercial real estate investments).

A woman from the eighties agreed that Smith women are very outspoken. She advocated strongly that the college remain single sex. She loves the concept of the WFI program. A woman from '68 said that quantitative reasoning is important, but must be put in the context of good decision-making in business; you need to understand the numbers as they affect the process.

A woman from '63 said that Smith has a tradition of "coddling" students a little bit and wondered if we were teaching them appropriate life skills. She asked about the debate club and other extra-curricular activities.

President Christ responded that the debate club is taken very seriously and has done very well in tournaments. The self-governing house systems are also excellent places for students to learn life skills. She also mentioned the possibility of developing a "capstone experience" for each student similar to the engineering senior design clinic. The benefits would be the opportunity to do independent work, to challenge self-knowledge, and to learn to be a part of a team. President Christ suggested the example of social science majors helping with the analysis of data for a local homeless shelter. Senior art and music majors would be required to do final projects and recitals.

A woman from the sixties, an international student from India and now a professor of cross cultural psychology, asked about our students' capacity to understand and appreciate other cultures. She stated that American students know a lot about the U.S. but not a lot about other cultures. She said Smith could be a voice for women in parts of the world where they have no voice. Smith could take a leading role in supporting women who are affected by globalization.

President Christ talked about her recent experience in Dubai where she attended a conference on women's colleges. She was surprised to learn of so many colleges in the Middle East founded less than 15 years ago. She cited a group of Mount Holyoke students at the conference who are offering leadership training to Middle Eastern students.

The same woman from the sixties reiterated that Muslim women would probably prefer a women's college, and Smith has a unique opportunity to lead the way in terms of women's education.

A woman from 1961 asked if there were required courses. President Christ mentioned a recent article in the *Sophian* that stated how seriously students were taking this issue. The author of the article was in favor of both a quantitative requirement and requirements in general.

A woman from '85 countered that we should mix quantitative courses into the curriculum within social sciences rather than have a "stark quant course." She loved the open curriculum and feels that is what brought her to Smith. She loves the idea of a capstone course and suggested we create interdisciplinary teams to work together for the senior projects.

A 1992 Ada Comstock Scholar said that a high level of interdisciplinary work is what she finds today in industry, where she often sits at a table with engineers, scientists, marketing people and computer technologists. She said that someone like her with a liberal arts background could have a "big picture" perspective and be a calming voice on the team.

An alumna from '89 said that the idea of working on a team makes great sense. She said that she came out of Smith overconfident and competitive, but she had no experience working as a team member. In graduate school, she learned to listen and balance competitiveness with contemplation and respect for the opinions of others. She also acknowledged that the open curriculum is a recruitment tool, that we "learn how to learn" at Smith and then apply that to the rest of our lives.

A woman from the class of '74, a cultural anthropologist at Berkley, asked about Smith's commitment to women in the developing world (echoing the earlier comments of the women from '61). She asked what role Smith College can play in the lives of women on a global scale in terms of demographics, culture, linguistics, economics, and issues of immigration. Expectations of women's colleges are high. What can we do for the community?

President Christ agreed that students want more opportunities to work within the community rather than just volunteering. President Christ mentioned the change in demographics in our country from the northeast to the south and west where Smith has less of a presence. Students who can pay the full cost of a private college are in the top 10% demographically in the US, which means 90% of families couldn't afford a Smith education. Access and affordability are key issues for the college now, as 65% of students receive need-based financial aid.

A woman from the eighties mentioned that she thought most students have a strong desire to make a difference. Projects with a meaningful goal could be real "confidence boosters." She mentioned that she recently returned from a seminar on strength training that focused on building on professional strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses.

President Christ said that the college is looking into the idea of building a portfolio system for students.

A woman from '93 suggested that more students stay and work in summer programs as she did one summer where she lived and worked in Northampton. She said this made a real difference in her "life skills" portfolio.

President Christ said we are looking into the idea of post-baccalaureate degrees and continuing education programs on campus with the focus on the aging population.

An alumna from '85 said that we should offer programs for mothers returning to the marketplace, as well as for their daughters who may be prospective student applicants. She felt that we wait too long to reach daughters when they are juniors in high school. They have already made up their minds about a women's college. She said we need to capture their attention earlier, in junior high, and then develop relationships with faculty/students early on.

One alumna from '77 said that she felt the "coddling" at Smith built confidence. To develop math skills, she recommended math games like "Clue" and "Mixology" and encouraged house competitions that would create both community and a sense of spirit and fun.

Another alumna from '64 asked about percentage of students who do research at Smith. President Christ said she wasn't sure, but she wanted more students involved, especially students in the social sciences. In a subsequent conversation the following day, this alumna also said that we need to look at the markets for post-baccalaureate education, specifically conferences and "tuning up" skills for women transitioning back to work. Conferences are "big business," and Smith could build a center. She suggested that we also focus on women transitioning into retirement who have had "big careers." Smith could be a resource for these women, could host a conference on women's transitions and the history of the women's movement. She also said that the world is getting smaller, and Smith needs to think about supporting entrepreneurship among women in the Middle East. Smith ought to be right in there in order to have a global impact.

A woman from '68 said that she was in favor of the "capstone" project and suggested it be set up like a "mini-Ph.D." where research, analysis, and defense of a theory would be required. She said these skills are very important in business.

President Christ mentioned the Lewis Leadership program and described how students hire themselves out to organizations as consultants.

A woman from '01 said that "methods are key, and the more you know the better." She said that Smith imparted a set of skills in terms of analysis, leadership, and communication, but we could do more for other methods such as simulations, role-play, team building, etc. In business, no two days are the same, and change is the name of the game. At Smith, every class should be different; a new method of inquiry or learning should take place. Collaborative environments are key; individualistic approaches don't work anymore.

A woman from '51 said that her senior seminar pulled together everything she had learned, all the courses she had taken.

President Christ agreed and said the sense of sequence was sometimes lacking at Smith. She then added that she has been moved by the dedication of Smith faculty to their teaching and to the process of interrogating their own pedagogy.

An alumna from '79 said that we need to look at Smith in the marketplace and reexamine the admission process (She has been an Ada Comstock student and very involved in admissions in San Diego, as well as being very active at the local high school in La Jolla). She mentioned the high rate of burnout among students even before they enter college. We need to "get off the flywheel of *U.S. News* stats" and create new standards for admissions. She asked about recruitment abroad.

President Christ agreed that stress is a critical issue, that there is a kind of "stress Olympics" among students that removes the joy of learning. She thinks that the *U.S. News* survey has been destructive to higher education.

Another woman from the class of '01 said that she had a fabulous education but no social life. She agreed that off-campus activities weren't as safe or as fun. She said that campus life needed to be more relaxing and fun.

President Christ concurred, and said the campus center has helped somewhat and that the signing out of keys is no longer required by houses. Most parties are now moved to the campus center.

A woman from the class of '86 who was a science major said she benefited tremendously from the availability of science faculty as mentors. She said undergraduate students at the big universities don't get nearly as much hands-on experience. She then asked about the JYA experience at Smith.

President Christ explained that in addition to the Paris, Geneva, Hamburg and Florence experience, students have choices of more than 100 programs all over the world. Someone from '85 asked if there was still a JY exchange, and President Christ replied that yes, there is still the 12-college exchange program.

A woman from the 70's asked again about social life and opportunities at Smith. President Christ replied that Smith's biggest challenge is the quality of social life in making the case for a women's college. The benefits are the alumnae network, friendships, leadership development, and an extraordinary record of women's achievements. Satisfaction levels are at the top of COFHE peers. The message seems to be to communicate that Smith is not a convent.

A woman from '77 said that she was disappointed by her graduate school experience, and that she felt she was back in high school. Smith was unique; she feels she became a woman there.

An alumna from '84 asked how Smith compared to Berkley in President Christ's experience. Carol replied that students are much better served by small, liberal arts colleges with depth in many subjects.

Alumnae outlined the following areas where Smith could improve its efforts:

- communicating a vigorous sense of what to achieve outside the major
- increasing work in quantitative reasoning
- expanding the availability of research work
- minimizing vulnerability with regard to admissions

An alumna from '85 said we need to catch young women earlier in the admission process. President Christ agreed and noted that 20% of our applicants now apply on the web; we never see them.

A woman from '01 asked, "What is the tipping point? How do we penetrate the market now?"

An '89 alumna said we are too far away from the "touch point" for girls in high school. We need to start earlier to make inroads into the market and let young women know we are an option; we need to make relationships with guidance counselors earlier on in the process. We need more summer programs for junior high schoolers, maybe even co-ed!

A woman from '74, an anthropologist, said that when she speaks with her students they face difficult ethical choices about what is good and what is responsible behavior. How is Smith addressing this issue?

President Christ said that we are definitely focusing on the expansion on students' capacity for moral reasoning. Our philosophy department, headed by John Connolly, will be developing an ethics major. John is specifically interested in ethics in business.

President Christ also touched on issues of work-life balance and the book *Just Enough*, about finding the right combination of career, service and family commitment over a woman's lifetime. She believes it is important to provide students with a forum and with narratives of success. She mentioned that we would be having a J-term course that focuses on these issues in the coming years.

The session ended with thanks to the host and those who attended.