

Shaping the Future of Smith
Lehman Brothers, New York
March 30, 2006
Host: Susan Jansen

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 faculty, trustees and others are considering at this time. 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, she pointed out.

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 nineties opened the discussion by commenting that Smith grads need to develop a greater capacity to work with technology because it drives so many things. President Christ agreed and said that the college is creating a major in arts and technology, as well as one in biology and computer science. She said that one component of the new science and engineering building will be a computational center of the sciences that will support scientists and help compile data for partnerships between computer science and other departments.

An alumna from '79 said that, from her perspective, students should be able to communicate well, should have strong quantitative reasoning, should be able to argue and present a case well, and should inspire her to think of them as the next senior person at Lehman. She asked what Smith is doing to promote and develop leadership.

President Christ said the role of leadership for women's colleges today is a continuing theme. She noted that studies have proven that being in a women's environment develops

authenticity of self and confidence in abilities. To develop leaders, we have this concept woven into the very fabric of the college experience: small classes encourage class participation; the house governance system encourages student leadership; and capstone projects such as the engineering senior design project put students in leadership positions where they must think critically, defend their ideas, and present them to a corporate board. Doing independent work develops leadership.

President Christ then talked about the Phoebe Lewis Leadership Program, where students take two J-terms with an internship in the summer to perform as a consulting team for a local non-profit organization.

A woman from '69 said that building leadership skills requires walking through fear, going out on a limb, not always being comfortable. She said Smith taught her to be intellectually curious. President Christ agreed and said that there were many students who have become entrepreneurs by creating the bicycle shop, Smith Thrift, and other small businesses on campus.

Another woman from the seventies suggested there be a formal leadership curriculum. President Christ referred to the Women and Financial Independence program and explained that it wasn't a graded classroom experience, but was, nevertheless, an important co-curricular to teach students to "learn to work."

A woman from '89 said that many of the Smith grads she spoke with for jobs at Morgan Stanley were not balanced. She said they were either very bookish and had high math/science scores, or they were poised and sociable but had "no quantitative substance." President Christ mentioned that we have a new director at the CDO who has a lot of wonderful new ideas about preparing women to be leaders, which begin when they walk into the college.

A young economics major from 2000 said that she was not well prepared for her arrival in the financial world. She said her senior experience with Bloomingdale's and Sotheby's would have been more beneficial earlier in her Smith experience. She "stumbled" into finance, and her interview was "terrifying" because she knew so little about the business.

A woman from '79 said it was up to her to find out this information; she shouldn't expect the college to do everything for her.

President Christ said that students are requesting that we be more specific about what different careers entail. They want more information and counsel. Alumnae want more opportunities for professional affiliation and networking. She gave the example of the two-day "Smith Alumnae in the Media" event that took place a year ago and said this could be a model for gatherings of women in the science, law, journalism, etc.

An alumna from '02 said that she has a great job at ABC Television and no one contacted her! She said she was frustrated because we haven't been in touch.

A woman from the seventies said that we need to start earlier to build career plans and expectations. Junior year is critical for developing leadership skills, and yet 50 percent of students go abroad. President Christ agreed that the term abroad does affect senior year experience.

The same woman advised, "Don't spoon feed students" because what made her a strong leader was having to go out and struggle to find things and network with people to stretch beyond her comfort zone.

A woman from the sixties said not to put students in limited categories for jobs; prepare them for change, to take initiative, to prepare for lots of different careers and life situations.

A woman from '86 said she went to the London School of Economics in her senior year and then ended up working for British Telecom after graduation. She said it was important to have a plan and to have more support from the CDO. She found things only by doing a lot of digging at the CDO. President Christ mentioned the success of the Praxis Program and how this has enhanced students' ability to locate and secure jobs after graduation.

A woman from the eighties said that students need less mock interviewing and more mock cocktail parties to learn how to socialize in a business setting and to network. She said her leadership class in the eighties was weak; it was too theoretical rather than experiential. She said she would have benefited more from a team-building approach and more experiences that taught her how to network. President Christ mentioned that we now have a J-term program that focuses on business etiquette and professional socializing.

A woman from the nineties said that the "fear factor" is critical in developing leadership; women need to learn how to take risks. At her business school, Wharton, they go off as a team to climb in the Grand Tetons. Theoretical leadership studies are no good. Leadership must be practiced to be effective.

A woman from the sixties said she felt that both the theoretical and practical were important. She asked if Smith students understand themselves in relationship to the world and where other women are in terms of poverty and other issues. She asked if discussions of class ever come up, as this was something not talked about in the sixties.

President Christ said that in the women's studies courses in particular, but throughout the curriculum, there are consistent themes of women's issues and perspectives of class. She then referred to the Hot Seat events where moral issues are discussed and debated among faculty, staff and students. She explained that the 61% of our students receive need-based aid, and class issues and economic diversity are very important at Smith and create lively discussions.

A woman from '91 said her experience at Smith was a "four-year leadership course." She asked if this is still the case. She said we should encourage "scary" courses like economics and public speaking. President Christ said we are more aware than ever about the importance of public speaking and are seriously considering making this a requirement like the basic writing course. She also referenced the course called "Re-enacting History," where students are assigned roles and play a game based on their roles and the decisions their characters made that affected history.

A woman from '89 said that she favored the idea of a capstone project in the senior year. It could be executed on behalf of the community from start to finish, and this would teach teamwork and build confidence. President Christ referenced the engineering senior design clinic and the importance of the civic projects that several teams undertake.

An alumna from '89 also said that social problems in the houses could be brought to the larger college community for discussion. President Christ said that she had been having dialogues with students and found that they take them very seriously. She referenced the article in the *Sophian* that said students want both a quantitative requirement and other requirements across the board.

A woman from '69 who is a professional strategic planner asked, "What don't you want or what are you trying to avoid?" President Christ said that they had focused on 6-8 critical issues that they are selecting rather than excluding anything, and that the avoidance subjects are more of a private discussion. She said that the public face of Smith is changing. The college is seriously looking at new ways to engage adult learners on campus and to create an environment for continuing education. Expanding summer programs seems to be the way to begin.

A woman from 2000 said the Smith women in finance should continue to be in touch, that this was a great forum. She also said that continuing education is a big market. President Christ agreed. She said Stanford Business School is developing a whole program for women getting back into the workplace. She also mentioned the summer museum studies for undergrads exploring museum careers.

President Christ mentioned that the work/life balance issue would be addressed in a J-term course. She referenced Laura Nash's book *Just Enough* as containing examples of the multiple goals that women set for themselves. She said that students seem hungry for this information.

An economics graduate 2000 asked if international students have had problems with visas. President Christ said no, that this has primarily affected male students from other countries, and Smith has been much less affected. She said about eight percent of our students come from foreign countries, and three women were just admitted from Afghanistan.

A woman from the nineties said that returning to the workforce is a huge issue for women. She said women don't need how-to courses like interviewing, but skills refresher

courses in their field and updating of certifications, etc. Staying current with technology is key. She also took issue with the title "work/life balance" and said this implies a 50/50 split. She said it depends on your focus, and the percentages change. If it isn't 50/50, women are made to feel that something is out of balance, when perhaps the focus is on work for a certain period and then family, or vice versa.

A woman from the nineties asked about recruiting in high schools. President Christ replied that it remains very challenging. A woman in the seventies said rather loudly, "We are never asked to host or to help. Use us!" President Christ said that we do use alumnae in every state. She said 20% of our applicants now come through the Internet and never see the school. The same woman from the seventies said she felt we needed to be more of a presence.

A woman from '79 asked if Carol was confident that connections were being made with women when they are abroad. Is technology working? President Christ said we think they are good but need to improve.

A woman from '86 said she would encourage writing skills in any discipline. She is in the math world but is always writing.

A woman from the nineties asked if there was accountability for someone specific to manage the website so that it all weaves together? President Christ said yes, we have a director of information systems and technology.

A woman from '53 asked about diversity, to which President Christ replied that 30% of students are minorities: six percent are African-American, nine percent are Hispanic, and 13 percent are Asian.

A woman of color from 2000 asked how the regulatory environment has affected Smith, to which Carol replied that we have not had a formal race/ethnicity program. The Bridge Program is still in place.

An alumna from '86 asked if the Ada Comstock Scholars program was still active, and was it expanding? President Christ replied that we are keeping it the same size, but it is very successful and integral to the community. She mentioned a bequest from a faculty member that led to a challenge grant of her peers. An apartment house is being created for Ada Comstock scholars with children; it will be named the Jill Ker Conway House.

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