

**Shaping the Future of Smith
Laurelmead Retirement Community
Providence, RI
March 8, 2006**

Thirty-nine alumnae gathered in one of the common rooms at Laurelmead, a retirement community in Providence. Elaine Loeffler '50, a Laurelmead resident, introduced President Christ, who set the agenda for the evening's discussion by briefly outlining the on campus discussions happening as part of the reaccreditation process. She then went on to pose the two questions she is asking alumnae throughout the country: What are Smith's distinctive strengths? What capacities should we develop in all our students?

An alumna from the fifties opened the discussion with a comment about using the faculty advising system to encourage students to take a diverse range of classes. President Christ answered this question with two comments. The first was that the faculty is discussing the open curriculum. The second is that she hears from students that they would like faculty to be more directive in their advising.

The open curriculum was very attractive to an alumna from the early nineties, when she was a prospective student. However, she is now in an MPH program and wishes she had more quantitative skills, as she had taken primarily humanities course while at Smith. President Christ mentioned a recent gift from an alumna in a very similar situation to fund a J-Term program that designed to address some of these issues.

An eighties graduate asked whether all faculty members are required to advise and what incentives they have for advising. President Christ answered that all faculty are assigned students as pre-major advisors, and then students self-select their major advisor.

An alumna from the late nineties commented on how much she appreciated the open curriculum and how her friends at large state schools had many requirements. This forced them to take many courses that did not interest them, and they therefore did not apply themselves.

A transfer student and 2001 graduate commented that she was immediately given an advisor in her department major (chemistry), and this advisor was very good at making recommendations for courses in chemistry. However, when it came to making recommendations outside of his field of study, he was not as good. As a consequence, she only took one literature course as a senior and wished she had time to take more.

An alumna from the nineties wondered whether advising could come out of the class dean's office, as this would give the advisor a broader view of the curriculum. President Christ thought this was an interesting idea.

An alumna from the forties asked whether there is there still an honors program at the college. President Christ answered yes, there are in fact two separate honors programs: Latin honors and English honors.

Faculty members expect the same basic competencies from all students taking their courses commented an alumna from the nineties. She felt this made it difficult to branch out to courses outside of her discipline. President Christ answered that since we don't have courses like "Rocks for Jocks" she understood this issue.

The Latin Honors requirements forced a recent alumna to take a broad range of courses, and she felt that other competitive Smithies did the same thing. She thought this was a good way of encouraging students to take a broad range of courses without developing core requirements for everyone. President Christ noted that the college has seen a decline in participation for Latin Honors, and that most often math is the missing requirement. The president also noted that in the Engineering Program all students are required to satisfy the Latin Honors requirements.

An alumna from the class of 1999 had an advisor who pushed her into the science and math courses geared toward non-majors. She in turn told her friends about these courses, which enabled them to take the courses, as not all advisors were aware of these offerings. President Christ commented that this speaks to the need for a sort of 'advising school' for the faculty.

"Having an advisor who is also your teacher in the first year is a bad idea as it poses a conflict of interest," commented an alumna from the fifties.

"Is there a course on reading legal documents," asked an alumna for the forties? President Christ commented that while there is not a specific course on that topic, 20 percent of alumnae go on to get law degrees. Because of this fact, there is a desire to review and possibly enhance the pre-law program. A fifties alumna commented that one reason for the number of graduates with law degrees is that for many years it was one of the few professions where women were accepted.

An alumna from the fifties brought up the article in *Business Week* featuring Amherst President Tony Marx and his views concerning the need to broaden the socioeconomic diversity of Amherst students. The alumna then asked how Smith was doing in this regard. President Christ answered by saying that currently 61 percent of Smith students are on need-based financial aid. She also mentioned that at the end of the *Business Week* article Smith was mentioned as one of the "four schools doing it right." President Christ went on to comment that access and affordability are the top issues in higher education today with only 10 percent of American families able to pay full tuition at the top schools.

An alumna from the forties was concerned about the housing system and the expense of operating it. President Christ answered by saying that we are happy with the housing system and do not plan on changing it.

The subject of co-education was brought up by an alumna from the seventies who wondered if it is part of the strategic plan. President Christ answered that co-education is not currently on the table, and she feels there is still a place for women's education. She also said that every college has a set of distinctive characteristics and important resources. Single-sex education is one of Smith's distinctive characteristics. We are getting terrific students who want to be part of Smith's incredible history of educating women.

An alumna from the eighties asked about the application numbers. President Christ answered that numbers are up, and we have set records for the last couple of years. A follow-up question was asked regarding the SATs and whether Smith still requires them, to which the president answered yes, we do still require the SATs.

The issue of social life was raised by an alumna in the eighties. President Christ responded by saying that it is the biggest challenge with students, and it is the number one reason students give for why they leave Smith. The same alumna wondered why Wellesley did not have this same issue. She asked if it was the proximity to Boston. President Christ said she felt that Boston did indeed help Wellesley's image.

An alumna from the nineties commented that being involved with the Five College Sailing Club and other five-college activities helped her social life. Another alumna from the nineties stated that the Smiffenpoofs were her social life, and that participating in five-college activities was hard without a car. Yet another recent alumna commented that the men attending house parties were not the type of men you would want to meet. She asked if there were plans for other sorts of activities to attract men to campus. President Christ said the college and various student organizations are exploring ways to improve the social life. The campus center has already helped in this regard.

The subject of being prepared for family life after Smith was raised by an alumna from the eighties. She felt that Smith did a wonderful job preparing her intellectually and for a career, but she did not gain the skills needed around family life. She wondered if something could be done to show students the various pictures of where their life could lead. President Christ brought up again the recent gift from an alumna for a J-term program around this topic. The program currently referred to as "Narratives of Success" would offer an opportunity to show different life models. The program will follow the writings of Laura Nash, author of *Just Enough*.

An alumna from the eighties then raised the issue of diversity. She was raising it specifically in regards to Smith being a women's college. She had a question from a 17-year old prospective student about lesbianism. President Christ first answered the question from perspective of racial and ethnic diversity by noting that 30 percent of Smith students are women of color. She then went on to say that diversity must be defined in a broader way, and that in some way we are all diverse. Specifically in regard to sexual orientation, President Christ commented that there is a greater comfort level on the whole for this generation of 18-22 year olds and that all colleges have gay populations. Sexual orientation is not the dominant fact about anyone's identification.

One alumna from the nineties argued that single-sex education does not prepare you for the real world. Has President Christ heard this argument from alumnae? President Christ answered that she has in fact heard just the opposite. Smith has given women greater self-confidence, and alumnae feel they have great preparation for the real world.

An alumna from the fifties inquired about opportunities for students to work on campus. President Christ replied that there are many opportunities, ranging from working in the kitchens to the museum to community organizations.

The benefits of a strong athletic program were mentioned by an alumna from the seventies. She felt athletics prepared her well for going out into the world. President Christ concurred that she had heard this from many alumnae, especially in regard to teamwork.

Connecting service learning to core capacities was an issue raised by an alumna from the eighties. President Christ commented that this is an issue she has heard from many areas.

Using alumnae who want to interact with students as advisors or mentors through the proposed January program was an idea raised by an alumna from the eighties. President Christ mentioned that the new CDO director, Stacie Hagenbaugh, wants to involve alumnae in new ways which may also fit this idea.

An alumna from the fifties asked about the language programs. She stated that when she was a student, she was taught to read and write, but not to speak the language. Have things changed? President Christ noted that Smith offers more languages than any other liberal arts college. She also said that students are certainly now taught how to speak.

Making research more practical and transferable into the real world was a concern raised by an alumna from the nineties. President Christ mentioned that the engineering program is currently doing this through the Senior Design Clinic and that other departments may follow this model.

The state of interdisciplinary programs was raised by an alumna from the nineties. President Christ said that because Smith does not house all faculty together by department, there are many opportunities for interaction across departments and a growing awareness of new ways to work across disciplines.

After hearing from her major department, religion, an alumna from the nineties asked if any smaller departments are on the chopping block. President Christ said that no programs are currently on the chopping block and, in fact, religion is a very popular major.

Are there any key differences in opinions coming from Ada alumnae and traditional alumnae, asked an alumna from the eighties? President Christ commented that she was unable to see any difference between those two groups, but was able to see differences by decade.

Speaking with professors and visiting lecturers was a great experience for an alumna from the nineties. She enjoyed going to faculty members' homes to have informal discussions after lectures. She is surprised to see the graduate students she works with at Brown uncomfortable in these situations.

An alumna from the nineties asked about the current state of dining. She alumna stated that she learned so much from dining room conversations, including how to talk about politics. She also asked how dining has affected the house communities. President Christ answered that the college currently has 19 dining rooms and 11 kitchens. The changes were made because, while two-thirds of students were happy with dining as it was, one third of students were not happy. Current students like many features but still desire more changes. The college is also working hard to make sure house communities are still strong as we go through dining changes.

Housing was great for an alumna from the nineties for three years, and then she desired a change. She was lucky and moved into a Friedman apartment her senior year. However, many more students wanted to be in Friedman; are there any plans to create more options like that? President Christ replied that there are plans to change the housing options, including remodeling Baldwin this summer, to make more suites.

“Are there any five-college housing options,” asked an alumna from the seventies. President Christ explained that a Hillel house proposal did not go anywhere a couple of years ago. Transportation and time in traffic crossing the bridge to the other colleges make this idea difficult.

An alumna from the nineties asked if the Bridge program still exists. President Christ explained that it still does exist, but it is now open to all students, not just students of color. She also mentioned that two-thirds of all students participate in a pre-orientation program.

Seeing house renovations pleased an alumna from the nineties. When she visited her partner at Wellesley, she was jealous of the beautiful dorms there. President Christ agreed that renovations need to happen on a more regular basis and stated that we recently took on another bond issue to work on more renovations.

Holding cluster reunions was an idea brought up by an alumna in the eighties. President Christ said the Alumnae Association is planning a review of its reunion programs in the next year.

The president thanked the host and alumnae for their participation in the event.