



PLANNING FOR SMITH'S FUTURE 2007-2012

by
President Carol T. Christ
and
The Committee on Mission and Priorities

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Smith College occupies a distinctive position in American higher education; it is a liberal arts college with an international reputation, and, within that selective group, the largest women's college. Through the spring of 2007, the college will engage in broad-ranging discussions about its future and its position on the higher education landscape over the next decade. A critical element--a prerequisite, really, to these discussions--is thoroughly understanding the current position of the college—its position relative to its peers, its particular academic and curricular strengths, and the areas where it stands to build on the momentum of recent initiatives and investments. We must therefore begin with a candid look at the college, identifying strengths and weaknesses and understanding their implications for the future. To this end, we have spent the fall looking comprehensively at the college, analyzing data trends and peer comparisons. This review does not offer a plan for the future, but instead provides a picture of Smith today. It is a doorway into the planning process, providing data, analysis, and background to inform our discussions. This document provides a summary of that review. It then identifies issues and themes that have already begun to emerge in our discussions.

Throughout the planning process, the college will seek participation from faculty, staff, students, and alumnae through a variety of means, including open meetings, committee meetings, and Web-based and e-mail comments. We will provide regular updates to the community on the progress of planning efforts, relaying decisions as well as describing next steps, important outstanding questions, and where to go for additional information.

(For more on the planning process, including an outline of the process, key planning questions, and opportunities to participate, see the main planning Web site at www.smith.edu/planning.)

SETTING THE CONTEXT: THE CURRENT CONDITION OF SMITH

The college begins its efforts from a position of considerable strength, with a talented and engaged student body, an excellent faculty distinguished for its teaching and research, dedicated staff, substantial financial resources, and extraordinary facilities. The new plan will build on the momentum of the last strategic plan from the 1990s and its related fund-raising campaign, whose initiatives have propelled the college forward in recent years.

The college embarks on the planning process in the wake of a period characterized both by bold new investments and by financial constraint and restructuring. In recent years, Smith has established the first engineering program at a women's college and one of the few found at a liberal arts college. This initiative, coupled with projected investments in the sciences, signals the college's intention to address the critical shortage of women in science and engineering. A major renovation of the fine arts complex and additions and renovations to the Lyman Plant House have expanded Smith's already enviable resources in these historically strong areas. Smith has enhanced its athletic facilities with the Olin Fitness Center. The newly constructed campus center is the centerpiece of our effort to balance the strong, small-scale residential environments of our house system with opportunities to socialize across house boundaries and to coordinate and enhance student activities. In addition to these new and renovated facilities, Smith has initiated a number of bold and imaginative programs over the last several years: Praxis, the Center for Women and Financial Independence, the Poetry Center, the new program in landscape studies, and the Kahn Liberal Arts Institute.

In the last few years, we have also strengthened the financial position of the college through careful planning. We have stabilized the financial aid discount rate, reduced the draw from the endowment, made compensation more competitive, and increased funding for renewal and replacement of the college's existing facilities.

Recent accomplishments provide a sense of momentum in several areas critical to the intellectual vitality of the college, while budget planning efforts ensure that we are moving forward on solid financial footing.

External Trends

Like all colleges and universities, Smith is affected by and connected to the world beyond its campus in important and essential ways. Consequently, its planning must be informed by and responsive to developments in society, the economy, science and technology, and political life. As we look to the next decade, several important trends emerge on the horizon that will both challenge the college and provide opportunities for innovation.

Colleges and universities face important challenges as the result of shifting national demographics. The geographical distribution of traditional college-age students will continue to shift away from the northeast toward the south and west. The population will become more diverse, with a significant decrease in the numbers of Caucasian students and a significant increase in Latina students. The proportion of women students will continue to grow.

Shifts in the age composition of the population, changing career patterns, and the speed of technological and economic change will combine to increase the interest in and demand for lifelong learning opportunities. In addition, students will increasingly seek more flexible options for completing their undergraduate degrees, with less focus on the four-year uninterrupted residential experience. The proportion of students attending private liberal arts colleges likely will continue to shrink as a share of the overall higher education market.

Economically, colleges and universities are likely to see a continuing decline in public funding, in government research support, and in financial aid. Higher education will increasingly be seen as an individual, not a public responsibility. Individual institutions will face increasing budget pressure resulting from energy costs, health insurance, and financial aid. Although public funding is expected to decrease, public scrutiny and the demand for increased accountability from colleges and universities is on the rise, particularly in the area of college costs and educational outcomes.

Finally, the next decade will continue to test the adaptability of colleges and universities to the needs of a much smaller and more interconnected world. These challenges will range from preparing students to understand issues from multiple cultural perspectives to the economic ascendancy of Asia and its challenge to America's long-held pre-eminence in science and technology.

Admission and Financial Aid

Smith has faced a challenging decade in admissions. Despite several new recruitment initiatives, the college's applicant pool has grown more slowly than that of many of its peers. In part because of increasing use of merit aid across the private sector, we have seen a shift in our competitive market for students to a broader range of institutions. The fact that we are the largest of the women's colleges—recruiting a class of about 650 women each year—leaves us little latitude to weather a downturn in applications or yield rate, or shifts in financial aid patterns.

Financial aid has presented one of the primary budgetary challenges to the college in recent years, as the discount rate increased sharply from 30% in 2000 to 36% in 2004. In response, the college has implemented several changes to its policies and practices, including increased loan expectations and new merit aid programs. The discount rate has stabilized at approximately 36% since 2004 and is expected to remain near that level in the near-term future.

The socio-economic profile of Smith's student body differs in fundamental ways from that of the majority of colleges and universities in its traditional peer group. Smith has the highest level of socio-economic diversity among its peers—a point of distinctive pride for the college. But this distinction presents economic challenges for the college: we have the highest discount rate among our peers and the highest proportion of students on need-based aid. These differences translate into real tradeoffs in the operating budget, reflected in fewer resources to invest in faculty salaries, academic programs, and other initiatives.

Academic Program

Smith offers a broad and deep academic program, with majors in 46 fields of study. The college has historic strengths in the fine and performing arts and in the foreign languages and international study, including an active study abroad program. In the social sciences, Smith has focused on policy and social issues, augmented by work in the Department of Education and Child Study, the School for Social Work, and interdisciplinary programs. More recently, the college has strengthened its emphasis on the sciences, stressing opportunities for student research and establishing an engineering program with explicit interdisciplinary ties to other sciences and the liberal arts.

An ongoing faculty discussion about the curriculum seeks to define the core capacities that the faculty feels every Smith graduate should develop in her time here, including critical reasoning, writing, and quantitative skills. In this regard, it is interesting to review students' self-assessment upon entering Smith in comparison to our peers. Our students report higher self-assessment in the areas of creativity and artistic ability but report lower self-confidence in math ability, drive to achieve, and time management skills.

In the course of their college years, Smith students report significant growth in their skills and capacities. Smith compares very well relative to its peers in regard to student perceptions of their own growth in writing, public speaking, learning on one's own, leadership, placing issues in perspective, foreign languages, arts appreciation, and awareness of social issues. Students report less growth relative to their peers in the areas of quantitative skills, identifying moral and ethical issues, and understanding the process of science and experimentation.

Smith has experienced gradual shifts in majors and course enrollments over the past twenty years, with declines in humanities and social sciences offset by increases in the natural sciences and engineering as well as in interdisciplinary programs. With 30% of students majoring in the sciences, Smith far outpaces the national figures for the proportion of undergraduate degrees to women awarded in the sciences (18%). Among the graduating class, approximately 20% earn Latin honors, and 7% earn departmental honors, recognizing successful completion of an honors thesis. These rates have been fairly steady over time.

Review of the data for academic programs revealed one unexpected finding. While Smith students rate their academic experiences favorably, they are less likely to report satisfaction with research opportunities with faculty.

Study abroad, a great strength of Smith's academic program, has been an area of sustained review and attention for the college over the past few years. Smith's participation rates in these programs are high; Smith ranks first among U.S. baccalaureate institutions in the percentage of students studying abroad for a full year, and students give their experiences studying abroad high marks. Challenges in this area involve the high relative costs of the college's own junior year abroad programs, enrollment volatility, the concentration of students abroad in Europe and English-speaking countries, where expenses are high, and the need for more explicit and effective connection between students' experiences abroad and their curricular experiences at Smith.

Smith's four-year graduation (83%) and persistence (90%) rates trail the norms for its traditional peer group, and compound the admission challenge for the college. Of those students who choose to leave the college, approximately 50% do so for academic or medical reasons. Others cite as motivations the campus community, lack of social fit, the single-sex environment, the campus political climate, and too few interesting social activities.

Student Life

Student life at the college has been defined by two primary challenges in recent years: striking a balance between the small-scale intensity of the residential houses and participation in the broader campus community and building more integration between curricular and co-curricular experiences. Efforts to address the first of these challenges include the dining reconfiguration, the new campus center, reorganization of the residential life staff, and enhanced student activities programming. The college has made efforts to link student life with educational experiences through a wide range of programs, including pre-orientation activities, internships and community service, and interterm and leadership program opportunities.

In general, students report high levels of satisfaction with student services and campus life. Students identify areas of strength in student government, campus events, and a sense of community in the houses. Students report lower levels of satisfaction relative to their peers at other colleges, including women's colleges, with social life on campus, the climate for diversity, and opportunities for extracurricular activities. There was an upswing in the proportion of students identifying a highly politicized climate on campus as a significant problem area in 2005.

Diversity

The recent history of the college has reflected dynamic engagement with different matters of diversity across a range of campus constituencies. In spring 2002, in the "Grass Roots" movement, concerned students raised the awareness in the campus community with regard to tensions around race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. As a result, a campus working group appointed by the president developed a plan for action, called *Repairing a Community*, which focused on knowledge and skills development across the campus, including mediation training for residential life staff; a review and evaluation of diversity policies and procedures; and efforts to strengthen structural support for diversity initiatives, including multicultural training for all interested staff and the introduction of new courses in the curriculum on American ethnicities. The Grass Roots efforts together with other initiatives have increased satisfaction levels with the climate for diversity, although there is still progress to be made.

For the academic year ending 2005, 15% of the regular faculty and 10% of the college's staff identify as members of ethnic minority groups. There has been a slight improvement in staff diversity over the past decade, from 8.5% in 1996 to the current 10% for 2005. Staff and faculty diversity still trails diversity in the student body (24%) by a considerable margin. Nationally, 28% of administrative and non-professional staff and 14% of faculty at private four-year colleges self-report as minorities. Given these numbers, hiring diverse faculty and staff remains a top priority of the college.

Preliminary data from the Common Ground focus group study suggest that while Smith has made improvements around issues of diversity in recent years, a number of challenges remain, including the level of responsibility for diversity work placed upon individuals from under-represented groups; tensions between tradition ("that's not the way things are done at Smith") and growth ("how do we want to define ourselves as a

community in the future?"); and lack of comfort with managing conflict through civil discourse as honest and yet respectful members of a shared community.

Financial and Other Resources

Smith enters the planning process on solid financial footing, with a balanced budget, diversified revenue streams, a sustainable draw from the endowment, new investment management, shifts in portfolio allocation, and projected surpluses in coming years. We have addressed faculty and staff compensation concerns through competitive increases in recent years, and we have built realistic assumptions into the future years of our financial plan. After the staff reductions of two years ago, Smith's overall staffing levels look more in line with peer norms.

Still, challenges remain. The financial aid discount remains the largest of our peers and reduces net student revenues; we have not yet identified adequate funding for our full renewal and facilities needs over the next decade and beyond; we have seen some drops in our level of philanthropic giving with the completion of our comprehensive campaign, "This Is About Smith;" and rapidly escalating energy costs threaten to consume the budget flexibility achieved through the recent financial equilibrium plan.

IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING SMITH

Several important issues have begun to emerge based on this review of the current state of the college, discussions with the Committee on Mission and Priorities, a planning retreat of the Board of Trustees, and conversations with alumnae in a series of events entitled "Shaping the Future of Smith." The following initial observations are meant to extend the conversation not to constrain it. We welcome your feedback on these emerging issues, and also your comments about other issues on which we should focus.

Enhancing admissions competitiveness

While Smith enrolls a talented group of entering students each year, we have become increasingly aware of how thin the margin is within our applicant pool, with the result that the college has little flexibility to respond to even moderate changes in application flow or the financial aid profile of the pool. Strategic investments in recent years have not led to significant increases in applications from highly qualified students, or notably higher yield rates among our existing base of admitted students.

While we always want to be sure that every aspect of our admissions operation is as effective as possible, we also need to ask larger structural questions. While I don't believe that we should refuse to consider any issue, I have decided that we should not take up co-education during this planning cycle. We see too much in the landscape of higher education and society that argues for the important continuing role of women's colleges, particularly in areas such as the sciences where women are still significantly under-represented. However, I do think we should consider both the issue of merit aid and the question of whether we should reduce the size of the entering class slightly to gain more flexibility and selectivity within our existing or slightly expanded applicant pool.

Balancing economic access with competing institutional priorities

Smith is a leader among its peers in providing access to low- and middle-income students. Within our peer group, the college has both the highest proportion of students on need-based aid and on Pell Grants, as well as the highest discount rate. While this is a source of great institutional pride and is consistent with our mission, the high level of support for needy students presents tradeoffs with other areas of our budget. When our discount rate increases rapidly over a short period of time, as recent experience painfully demonstrated, we need to make real sacrifices in other areas of our program. We face the question of how we should balance our commitment toward economic access among students with other competing claims on resources. What is the right balance between need-eligible and full-pay students? Wherever we decide to position ourselves on this important question, the resulting impact on our finances should be intentional and manageable, not reactive and unpredictable. We need to ask ourselves in regard to financial aid, what are we trying to achieve and who are we trying to attract? What should be our goals in regard to equitable packaging? Is the balance of our aid investment among various student populations the right one?

Exploring the shape of the curriculum and intellectual capacities

Few questions are as critical to institutional planning as the structure of the curriculum and the academic outcomes we shape it to achieve. We have made progress in our discussion of academic skills and intellectual capacities over the past year, particularly in the areas of writing and quantitative skills, but this discussion must become more ambitious and comprehensive, extending to other areas, such as awareness of international perspectives, public speaking, critical thinking, historical imagination, civil discourse, moral reasoning, social commitment and engagement. These issues have come up repeatedly as I have spoken with alumnae about how Smith can best prepare its students to meet the demands and opportunities of life and work.

Beyond the capacities and skills we hope to develop in our students, we must reflect on the structure of the curriculum to determine how it supports these ends, as well as how we continue to develop its distinctive areas of excellence while embracing new opportunities. Some very specific questions have emerged.

- The status of the open curriculum. Is it achieving the goals we feel are most important for our students? How does the current curricular structure promote and inhibit student progress toward desirable educational outcomes? Is the advising system adequate, particularly in the first two years?
- The place of research and independent projects in the curriculum. One of the surprising findings of our research on the current condition of the college is the relatively low satisfaction students reveal with the research opportunities available to them. What is responsible for this perception? How can we best change this? Should every student have a research or other individual project experience with a faculty member? Should capstone experiences be a required element for every student's major program of study? Should we rethink departmental honors?

- The co-curriculum. How might we connect the co-curriculum to education goals, using the strengths of Smith’s relatively small-scale residential experience? Is there an opportunity to build upon student interest in and curricular emphasis upon social issues through active inquiry-based learning?
- International study. Much has been made in recent years of Smith’s existing goal to be a “world college.” We must do more to understand what that label means, both in terms of the study abroad opportunities that we make available to students, but also the opportunities at Smith to engage international issues through the curriculum, the study of language, visitors, and special programs. Smith holds a distinctive advantage over most of its peers in this area given the strength of our foreign language programs and study abroad programs. How can we capitalize on these strengths as we consider what it means to be an effective “world college?”
- Science and engineering. Given Smith’s historic strength in the sciences, its recent investment in engineering, and women’s under-representation in science and technology, science and engineering should be a signature strength for Smith. How do we best secure, develop and promote it? What infrastructure is necessary for our sciences to thrive? Should we develop an emphasis on sustainability?
- The arts and technology. Smith has historic depth and strength in the arts. Can we build upon it by creating and articulating a new connection between the arts and engineering and technology?

Investing in faculty development

Smith’s faculty is a critically important resource. Are we preparing adequately for the faculty renewal that will take place over the next decade? Are we doing everything we can to position our junior faculty well for achieving tenure? Are we offering the appropriate resources to associate professors for them to continue to develop their research and teaching programs? What programs should we offer our growing population of emeriti?

Leveraging role as residential academic community

Smith is a residential college, with nearly all of its students residing on-campus and many of its faculty in relative close proximity. This offers great advantages, in terms of the types of special academic and related programming we can offer as well as the sense of a coherent intellectual and social community it imparts. We must challenge ourselves to view the residential system for students as a critical component of their educational experience. How can we develop the co-curriculum to be even more supportive of the goals we have for the curriculum and more integrated with it? Our discussion of skills and capacities offers an opportunity to do this, as we consider the impact of the co-curriculum on such areas as leadership skills, civil discourse, appreciation of multiple perspectives, the ability to balance multiple commitments and handle stress, the ability to work in groups. Furthermore, research shows that peer interactions contribute in important ways to the academic success and accomplishments of students. We should think creatively about how to structure the co-curriculum to support and encourage such interaction. We have made significant progress in the area

of student life over the past decade. What are the next steps? As with the curriculum, some specific issues have emerged.

- How can we best link the curriculum to employment opportunities? Can we articulate more coherently the relationship of a Smith education to life after Smith and develop the programming to support it?
- How can we best enable our students to engage in civil discourse about controversial topics? To broaden the political conversation?
- How do we continue to build upon the distinctive strengths our house system affords while also encouraging a sense of campus-wide community?
- What are the root causes of student withdrawals, with particular focus on their interplay with admission decisions and student experience and satisfaction?

Examining opportunities for special academic programs

Smith has enjoyed considerable success with a few targeted non-traditional academic programs, such as executive education and summer science and engineering. Given the growing interest in both pre-baccalaureate programs for high school students and post-baccalaureate programs for adults considering graduate or professional school or career changes, the college should consider whether new programs could offer revenue opportunities while at the same time utilizing facilities and other resources at non-peak times, such as January term or the summer. Several other liberal arts colleges, for example, have had success with post-baccalaureate certificate programs preparing students for medical school. We should also explore the possibility of developing lifelong education programs aimed at alumnae, perhaps utilizing distance education technology. A separate, but related, discussion must take place concerning our own graduate-level programs beyond the School for Social Work. We should review the programs carefully and individually to determine what combination of programs is optimal for the college and how best to support them and integrate them with our mission.

Articulating Smith's distinctive position and advantage

A strong theme in my conversations both on and off campus has been the way in which Smith tells its story and the extent to which that story engages its audiences in a noisy, diffuse, and competitive environment. How should the college talk about its distinctive position and advantages with regard to the curriculum, student experiences, student profile, and facilities and resources? On the most fundamental level, this is an issue of mission and vision. We need to come together as a community around a distinct core set of values for the college in which we all have a stake. We need to increase the connections between our current students and our alumnae population, and we need to mobilize our alumnae more effectively in transmitting our story. We also need to build alliances and affiliations with non-traditional groups to open doors and to spread the word about Smith's excellence.

Enhancing philanthropic support

Along with admission, perhaps the data trends of most concern in the recent review of the college involve our fund-raising performance in recent years. To be sure, the college enjoyed great success with its most recent campaign, raising \$387 million and implementing several important programs and capital improvements. However, we have experienced some persistent adverse trends since the recent economic downturn. Of particular concern, our alumnae participation rate in giving has diminished. While it is true that through the last campaign our focus was on larger gifts more than participation rate, these data are troubling in what they may portend for philanthropic support moving forward.

Smith, like other colleges, will also be challenged by the generational transfer of wealth from the generation of alumnae upon which we have traditionally relied for larger gifts to younger generations. We are seeing increased interest among donors in directing gifts and comparing gifts among philanthropic opportunities to determine where they will have the greatest impact. We may have opportunities to expand our reach for gifts from corporations and foundations, seeking matches with our own strategic priorities.

Improving the climate for diversity

We have many accomplishments in the area of diversity, including the economic diversity among students, recent growth in the proportion of students from under-represented groups, and programs emerging from the Grass Roots initiatives several years ago aimed at improving the climate for diversity on campus. Still, students express concern about diversity issues on campus, and we continue to be challenged by faculty and staff recruitment as well as how to engage in productive, constructive discussions of diversity issues on campus.

We have embarked on the Common Ground initiative with hopes that it will offer recommendations on strategic directions for enhancing diversity at Smith. We need to sharpen our thinking about what elements of diversity we want to emphasize. Are there concepts we should develop related to the curriculum that will help us achieve diversity?

Aligning facilities planning with strategic priorities

In recent years we have made a considerable investment in the physical facilities on campus, both in the form of new buildings, like the campus center, and major renovation projects--the art museum, the performing arts center, science facilities, and student residences. In the near future, we will continue to renovate student residences, and we will construct the new building for engineering and the sciences. Given the high volume of recent activity and the constrained resources at our disposal, it is important that we study our use of space on campus, particularly as we consider new planning initiatives. It is clear that in our current state, we have underutilized space in some areas or buildings and increased demands in other areas.

Two other facilities-related issues will play important roles in our future planning. While the recent financial equilibrium plan made substantial increases in the amount of funding available for renewal and replacement of our existing facilities over the next

decade, they are not nearly enough to meet our basic needs and to avoid deferred maintenance. In addition, energy costs have increased significantly during the past two years and show no signs of diminishing. The impact of this trend will be measured in the millions of dollars in the college's budget. Such anticipated energy costs increase the importance of our planning efforts with regard to space planning, energy conservation, and sustainability. Finally, we need to ask whether our technology planning is adequate for future needs.

NEXT STEPS IN PLANNING PROCESS

We held a planning retreat with the trustees in late January to gather a sense of their thinking on the most critical issues facing the college. Next, we will engage the campus community through a series of seventeen small-group discussions on campus during February and March (see schedule at www.smith.edu/planning/dialogue). The discussions are intended to reach all campus constituencies, and will include meetings open to all as well as meetings targeting particular groups. We have also established a planning Web site through which individuals can send their observations on critical issues facing the college (www.smith.edu/planning).

Our goal is to identify six to eight clearly articulated critical issues by the end of the spring semester. These issues will serve as the basis for analysis and data collection over the summer before we turn our attention in the fall to specific goals and alternative strategies for addressing each critical issue.

Committee on Mission and Priorities

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