

Strategic Planning Proposal
Research Experiences for Students from Traditionally Underrepresented Groups
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OVERVIEW:

As part of efforts to benefit from the diversity of students at Smith, I propose that a program be created to link students from traditionally underrepresented with faculty research mentors during their first years at Smith College.

The aims of this program include:

- Increasing interactions between faculty and entering underrepresented students
- Providing research opportunities for underrepresented students
- Increasing opportunities for academic connections between early-year students (1st and 2nd years) and upper-class students

BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

The diversity of our students is clearly one of our greatest strengths, particularly given the diverse perspectives found amongst our students and the often-impressive commitment to education that they display. A further strength of Smith is the ability of our students to interact one-on-one with faculty. Although there are few data available on the level of interactions of our various populations of students, I worry that students from larger high schools and from more diverse backgrounds may at times perceive a greater barrier to access of faculty. Hence, I propose we create a program that increases interactions of students from traditionally underrepresented groups with faculty, and provides research opportunities.

THE PROGRAM

To increase interactions between faculty and underrepresented students, I propose we create a program that parallels the STRIDE program but targets students from underrepresented groups. These students would be matched with research advisors from across the curriculum, with the aim of providing students opportunities for in depth work in a field of interest. Students in this program could be paid for up to 8 (or more?) hours a work a week, and these hours could be counted towards work-study as appropriate. I propose the program be run for 1st and 2nd year students. The faculty member who administers the program would bring the students and other participating faculty together at least once a year, and would also check in mid-year to make any necessary adjustments in placements.

I have been running an analogous program called “Scholars in Biology” over the past six of so years. On average, I speak with 8-10 first years each year. Most of them go on to meet with individual biology faculty. Some stay in labs only a brief period (I’ll rematch those who don’t ‘fit’ into their first program) while others have worked for nearly eight semesters! I believe success in this program has included: (1) providing opportunities for students to meet with faculty; (2) enabling students to experience research in their early years; (3) providing an ‘academic home’ to students in the science center; (4) at times, opening the door on a multi-year research experience for students from underrepresented groups.

EVALUATION:

There are many levels of success possible in this program. First off, students may benefit from the increase in one-on-one interactions with faculty early in their time at Smith. Some students may begin in the program, meet a faculty member, and then decide research is not the thing for them at this time; this is a valuable lesson. Other students may swap faculty mentors after a semester/year or stay on with one faculty for her whole time at Smith. A further possible benefit is to increase interactions among entering and upper-class students if participants match with a faculty who is mentoring others at the same time.

To measure the success of such a program requires: (1) we first need to assess the current levels of involvement of students from traditionally underrepresented groups in research at the early and later years. (We should do this regardless). (2) once we have a baseline, we can assess the effectiveness of an underrepresented student research program by following the total numbers as well as the fates of individual students.