

Date: October 16, 2006

To: President Carol Christ

From: Kevin Shea

RE: Strategic Planning Initiative

Title: Study and Research Abroad Program

Summary

The Study and Research Abroad Program will enable students to participate in a traditional study abroad program for one semester and explore a research project under the mentorship of a faculty member in this location during the summer months. Thus, students would spend a significant amount of time experiencing a foreign culture and obtain valuable skills as an independent researcher.

Background

It is often difficult for science and engineering students to fully participate in study abroad programs.¹ Semester-long programs would be ideal for Division III students, however, these are often challenging to find and do not always provide the level of cultural immersion that we find most appealing. Furthermore, absence from Smith for two semesters makes it very difficult (if not impossible) for Division III students to complete an Honors Thesis upon their return to Smith for their senior year. This results from the number of courses required for science and engineering majors that are not offered at abroad institutions and must be completed during the senior year (not leaving room for thesis research). Consequently, we often advise against our strongest students going abroad and many of our talented majors who are not at the top of their class and do go abroad are shut out of the valuable experience of conducting Honors Thesis research. I believe that study abroad and independent research are two of the most important learning experiences students can take advantage of while in college. Thus, the idea of combining the two seems like a wonderful chance to help provide students with a unique and very valuable educational opportunity.

Proposal

The Study and Research Abroad Program will enable Smith students to enroll in classes at a foreign institution for one semester (either fall or spring) and to complete an independent research project with a faculty member at that institution during 10 weeks in the summer. (Students enrolling in the fall semester would complete research during the preceding summer; students enrolling the spring semester would complete research during the following summer.)

¹ Naomi Miller commented that this proposal will also be attractive to Mellon-Mays fellows who cannot spend two semesters in a Junior Year Abroad Program.

This idea addresses several of the Strategic Directions identified in *Re-Imagining a Liberal Arts Education*. Obviously, it promotes a culture of research, inquiry, and discovery and it deepens students' awareness and appreciation of other cultures and global issues. I believe the research component also strengthens essential student capacities and helps prepare women for rewarding lives in a rapidly changing world. Furthermore, successful completion of independent research projects by our students will definitely extend Smith's impact on the world.

For this proposal to work well, I see the need for several areas of investment by the Smith administration and faculty. First, students must be trained to conduct original research at Smith before conducting research abroad. This can best be accomplished individually through either STRIDE, Special Studies, or CFCD funded research projects. Students with training in our research labs will have the skills needed to obtain research positions at top labs around the world.^{2,3} Second, funding beyond the traditional \$2,000 available from Praxis must be made available. It will be very difficult for students, especially those who need summer employment to help fund their education, to spend 10 weeks in a foreign country while only earning \$2,000. Third, faculty must identify foreign faculty members who will provide valuable research experiences for our students. In my opinion, this is the most important point of the proposal. Faculty in other countries who value, nurture, and respect undergraduate researchers will be wonderful partners in this program. Not all abroad faculty will be "enlightened" enough to actively support the research of our students, and Smith faculty must be actively engaged in recruiting advisors who will provide meaningful experiences for our students. (This could also blossom into an interesting research exchange program.)

² Florina Voica '07 successfully used this strategy to obtain two different research positions in Paris and London last year. She worked in my lab during her first two years at Smith. I helped her obtain a position with Jean-Pierre Genet in Paris and she later, independently, secured a position with Steve Ley in London during the summer (funded by Praxis money).

³ This is also a model that could be used to support sending students to other labs around the country. Last year, I mentored Maureen Reilly '08 in the research lab and she subsequently spent a productive summer conducting research with Greg Dudley at Florida State University. Seiko Fujii '08, a current member of my research lab, plans to pursue a similar experience with Jeff Bode at the University of California at Santa Barbara next summer.