

## Strategic Initiative Proposal:

### **Interdisciplinary Independent Inquiry as a Capstone Experience**

For the past several years, a pre-orientation program entitled Intellectual Inquiry has introduced incoming first year students to the pleasures and challenges of pursuing independent, interdisciplinary research at Smith College. In this intense, 48-hour program, students consider a prompt (a painting at the Museum), form themselves into "interest" groups, develop a single multi-disciplinary question to explore, and then furiously seek answers to that question, using all the various and rich resources available to them in the College and the community. Students produce joint, final presentations, sharing what they have learned with their faculty advisors and with other students pursuing their own group questions. The Intellectual Inquiry program has been highly successful, and its success has prompted us to think about meaningful ways to expand the model of independent, interdisciplinary research to a wider audience.

Our idea is to design an interdisciplinary capstone experience for outstanding senior students that would be an alternative to an honors thesis. As we imagine it, students from various disciplines would come together to develop a joint project, with the supervision of faculty members from more than one division. Using the resources not only of Smith College, but of libraries, museums, and laboratories throughout the area, these groups of students would engage in year-long investigations of an interdisciplinary problem of their own selection. Though they would meet periodically with their advisors, these student research groups would work largely on their own—framing their questions, developing a research strategy, sharing expertise and ultimately writing up their findings as a single piece of work. These projects would be collaborative in the fullest sense, with students bringing expertise from their particular majors to the larger group. In the process, students would come to understand the role and context of their own discipline in solving problems—a lesson that would prepare them well for the transition into life beyond the College.

As we see it, Interdisciplinary Independent Inquiry (III) Projects would possess the following characteristics:

- Students would work in small groups of three or four, developing an interdisciplinary question.
- Students working together would be required to come from three different majors, and at least two different divisions.
- Students would work with pairs of faculty from two different divisions.
- Students would be admitted into the Interdisciplinary Independent Inquiry Project through a process similar to the one used for admittance to the honors thesis: they would be required to possess a minimum gpa, they would need to identify willing advisors, and they would write a research proposal to be submitted to the Committee on Honors and Independent Studies at the beginning of their senior year.

- A thesis-scale research report would be submitted to faculty evaluators, who would also attend a group presentation/defense.
- Student work would be evaluated as is honors work, with students receiving a special designation on their diplomas—in a form as yet to be determined.

A program of Interdisciplinary Independent Inquiry would require little financial support. We see the following as core needs for such a program:

- \* summer support for faculty to develop and clarify the program
- \* research money available for students seeking to use resources outside the College (travel money, for example).
- \* staff support to advertise and disseminate information about the program

What we are proposing supports many of the initiatives that Smith has advanced in the last several years, interdisciplinary thinking, critical inquiry skills, and nurturing a culture of research. But the relevance to Smith students and to the life they will lead when they graduate is perhaps more significant. The problems alumnae will encounter are not likely to be constrained by disciplinary boundaries. The solutions they seek will require varied resources, multiple skills, and will necessarily involve the efforts of many. Our graduates will be working in teams, teams of individuals selected for their differing strengths and expertise. Our students will succeed to the extent that they can communicate and contribute as specialists and generalists. The proposed capstone experience reflects and prepares students for this reality.

Respectfully submitted by:

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