

Community-based Learning and Research Center

A proposal by Lisa Armstrong, Ginetta Candelario, Susannah Howe, and Donna Riley

“It is my opinion that by the education of women...
their weight of influence in reforming the evils of society will be greatly increased
[and] their power for good will be incalculably enlarged.” – Sophia Smith

We propose a Community-based Learning and Research Center at Smith College. We fully support the IRC proposal by Leslie King, Alan Bloomgarden, and David Smith offering a pilot project focused on Environmental Science and Policy, and we'd like to enlarge their vision. There is already significant interest and activity in community-based learning and research at Smith outside of ES&P that justifies a full-scale Community-based Learning and Research Center. Community-based learning and civic engagement could then become a cornerstone of Smith's identity.

We envision a Center that supports community-based learning and research on a model of social justice, highlighting reciprocity and community empowerment. The Center should focus on the development of human capital and expanded notions of citizenship, particularly in neighboring communities that are marginalized or disenfranchised. This model foregrounds community participation in teaching, learning, and research, rather than a charity-based model which predetermines the community's needs in an attempt to serve it. This model requires both grounding in theoretical knowledge building and full engagement with praxis (transformation of ideas into action). Our vision for the center is primarily pedagogical, curricular, and research-based; while we may draw on the good will and excellent community relationships built by the work of SOS in the past, these two projects do not significantly overlap.

Smith enjoys a strong commitment to praxis as an educational methodology; imagine what would happen if we could utilize all that energy and power to produce better outcomes. This project, in its focus on interdisciplinary pedagogy, will complement the Kahn Institute's focus on interdisciplinary research and scholarship. Community-based learning and research are already threaded throughout the College curriculum and research activities; a Center would enrich these resources and guard against negative impacts for participating partners as well as for Smith. Coordinating this important work has legal, ethical and methodological benefits for Smith and the greater community. In particular, there is a need to coordinate projects across disciplines and provide continuity across standard semester or research-project time frames. The Center could leverage a breadth of student and faculty expertise over the time the community needs to complete a project. It could also provide a central repository of information, connecting faculty and students in one discipline with interested faculty and students with complementary skill sets from other parts of the campus. The Center should not serve an oversight function of approving projects, but a coordination function to ensure the best use of Smith and community resources.

The Center would provide the following important resources that would enable us to conduct community-based learning and research in the most efficient and ethical way:

Logistical Administrative Coordination

A full-time administrative support position and a small number of work-study students would provide much-needed logistical support including scheduling, transportation, communication

among community partners, professors, and students, record keeping, and the like. Involving work-study students would provide on-site training for students interested in nonprofit work, grassroots activism or socially engaged research.

Intellectual Coordination

The Center's full-time director should be an internal hire who already knows Smith and is highly credentialed and trained in community-based learning and research, with large stores of social and political capital in the communities with which Smith engages. A faculty and community member advisory board would support the director in coordinating faculty and student training in community-based learning and research. Faculty board members would come from across divisions and have a proven record of community-based learning and/or research experience. Community representatives on the board would have experience working with Smith on community-based projects. The director would create synergies among classroom, research, and community needs, ensuring judicious use of both Smith and community resources. Hosting meetings with other schools would establish Smith as a leader in community-based learning and research, and help Smith capitalize on best practices among peer institutions. The director could widen connections with other colleges and universities in the Pioneer Valley, including and beyond the Five Colleges.

Faculty Development and Student Training Initiatives

The Center would offer training for faculty and students in community-based learning and research, so that participants can internalize the ethics of reciprocity and human rights. Human subjects review would be part of the collaborative process of developing a project proposal. As the center expands, there could be room for more faculty development initiatives including a Fellows program, support for development of publications to disseminate Smith's model for community-based learning and research, etc.

Methodological Clearinghouse

The center would create a vehicle for sharing methodologies from different disciplines, including multi-disciplinary methodologies, which can be brought to bear on a single project or subject. Sharing and integrating methodologies is important for creating sound approaches to research and learning, and for arriving at the fullest consideration of human subjects' welfare.

Assessment of Processes and Outcomes

The director and community/faculty advisory board would engage in assessment of the achievement of learning or research objectives, community project objectives, and collaborative process objectives. Assessment is not meant to provide undue scrutiny; rather it is an integral part of the learning process for all involved in order to ensure positive outcomes.

Smith faculty and students are already engaged in a great deal of community-based learning and research. If we can build upon best practices among peer institutions engaged in this work and bring some of Smith's unique assets to bear on this initiative, we can create a signature Center that would have significant impact both in the local community and more broadly in academe.