

TO: President Christ

FR: Jennifer L. Walters, Dean of Religious Life  
Tiertza-leah Schwartz, Director of Voluntary Service

RE: Strategic Initiative: Encourage Purposeful Engagement with Society's Challenges

DT: October 16, 2007

This moment in the college's history offers an opportunity to strengthen effective but under-resourced programs and to imagine new ways to connect student learning and faculty teaching and research with the needs of our local and global community. Smith Educational Outreach, Voluntary Community Service and S.O.S. have developed healthy and long-term relationships with community schools and agencies. Our students have a great interest in community engagement locally and abroad. In addition, a number of faculty members have incorporated community-based activities into their syllabi and research agendas.

However, the college is in need of three things:

1. Programmatic leadership that articulates the college's vision in this area, nurtures innovation, and facilitates productive relationships among our scholars, researchers, teachers, learners and local and global community partners.
2. Additional resources and personnel to develop our existing programs (Educational Outreach, Voluntary Service, Praxis, Alternative J-term and Spring Break programs, term-time internships, off campus work-study). We need to deepen agency partnerships, provide more opportunities for students to develop leadership and life-after-college-skills, and reflect on their community service experience in a nuanced way that includes ethical reflection; analysis of power, privilege, policy; and the social consequences of oppression and discrimination.
3. Policies and organizational structures which will allow us to create and promote meaningful opportunities for our students who need to work on campus and off.
4. A program to assist our faculty to develop beyond-the-classroom pedagogies, craft syllabi, expand and sustain partnerships with agencies (local and global), and develop interdisciplinary projects with colleagues.

We propose the following initiative to accomplish these goals:

1. While a "center" for civic engagement to organize all of these activities at Smith may be attractive, we think that maintaining a decentralized set of programs (reporting both to the Provost and the Dean of the College) may better serve the goal of keeping the curricular and the co-curricular areas of the college in conversation. We propose that an "institute" rather than a "center" would better serve this purpose. We imagine an

“institute” to bring together colleagues – faculty, program staff, agency administrators, and students – much like the Kahn Institute. The institute we propose, however, will bring people together in sustained conversation around community-based learning, service, and research. Governmental agencies, NGOs, and schools are critical partners in identifying fruitful projects. Any strategy Smith develops in this area needs to include them.

The institute, as we imagine it would straddle the curricular and co-curricular domains by having administrative and faculty co-leadership (that would report to the Provost and Dean of the College). Unlike the Kahn where the topic areas change yearly, the subject area of this institute would always be community-based learning, service and research. Some projects might extend several years along with agency partnerships. The focus of conversations and the membership would change somewhat given whatever projects are in development. We imagine that such an institute would regularly bring community partners, Smith program staff in Educational Outreach, Voluntary Service, Praxis, international study (and others) together with faculty engaged in community-oriented projects. Partners would engage in conversation, share information, and resources along a number of different lines e.g., specific projects, programmatic innovations, collaboration, faculty colloquia, grant-writing, or logistics.

2. Increased resources dedicated to intensive reflection on voluntary community service and social activism. Our partnership with the School for Social Work, the Community Service Internship Program (CSIP) has been a very effective model that deserves expansion. In this program a group of students worked 8 hours a week with a local agency and then met in a weekly two-hour seminar which focuses on listening skills, interpersonal conflicts, challenges for the agencies and clients with whom, they work, and the connections with their course work. We have had to cut back this program due to decreased resources. We would like to rejuvenate and expand this offering to include more substantive conversations with agency leaders. For example, nearly a dozen Smith students work regularly at the Interfaith Cot Shelter in Northampton. With additional staffing, we would be able to offer regular seminar-like conversations with that group of students in concert with agency personnel that would deepen their knowledge, skills, and critical social analysis. Similar offerings could be made available to students working in different settings (e.g., jail, schools, environmental activism). Such programs could be expanded to collaborate with course-based projects, the Educational Outreach program, and five-college efforts.

We thank you for your consideration of these ideas and look forward to participating in further conversations about this area of strategic planning.