

Smith College Center for the Environment and Sustainability¹

The need for an environmental education, one that enhances an individual's understanding of ecological processes and sustainable human interactions with the natural world, is great. If we are to address any of the defining, largely anthropogenic, problems of the twenty-first century (e.g., climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental injustice, natural resource depletion), we must: (1) inform a broader range of undergraduates about environmental concepts, (2) present them with everyday examples of sustainable design, and (3) provide multiple pathways in the natural sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities to deepen their environmental understanding. As part of its Strategic Planning Initiative, we propose that Smith College take a leading role in seeking solutions to environmental problems by establishing a Center for the Environment and Sustainability as a physical and intellectual nexus for all on-campus environmental activities (e.g., academic programs, college operations, student groups). Such a center will facilitate current and future efforts to:

- enhance the curriculum to train all Smith students to be environmentally literate.
- increase opportunities for deeper involvement in environmental issues through student-faculty research collaborations, advanced courses, internships, and study-abroad experiences.
- conduct campus operations and improving campus infrastructure in an environmentally sustainable fashion.
- integrate action into the curriculum to address real-world environmental problems locally, nationally, and internationally.

Smith College has made progress on a number of these objectives, but the College needs to articulate these goals as an essential element of our collective identity, establish them as our collective commitment, and crystallize them through the establishment of a Center for the Environment and Sustainability. Continuing and future environmental and sustainability efforts are important for at least three reasons. First, Smith College will attract student applicants and faculty hires that now look to other peer liberal arts institutions for environmental direction. Second, an environmental focus will provide a powerful and meaningful context for student learning. Third, an environmental education will serve as a primary vehicle to promote the 6-8 critical issues identified by the Faculty Council and the Committee on Missions and Priorities. For example:

- Greater civic engagement is needed to resolve issues of environmental justice.
- Increased international involvement and training of our students are essential, given that environmental problems transcend national boundaries and often exacerbate political tensions.
- The need for problem-solving approaches that cross academic disciplines and institutional divisions will generate opportunities for independent and collaborative environmental research between students, faculty, and staff.

¹ This is a modified version of a memo sent to President Christ on May 8, 2006. See also October 16, 2006 proposal for a Center from Landscape Studies and interested faculty

- An environmental education and the skills that accompany such training (e.g., spatial analysis, landscape and architectural design) will position our graduates for employment in existing and emerging careers.
- These alumnae will increase Smith College's visibility and impact on the world.

Smith College is ideally positioned to meet these challenges. Existing academic programs in Environmental Science and Policy, Engineering, and Landscape Studies already bridge disciplines in their respective approaches to the study of the environment. Other entities, such as the Botanic Garden, the Committee on Sustainability, the Green Team, and numerous student groups (MASSPIRG, Gaia, Clean Energy for Smith!), are working actively to promote sustainable initiatives on campus.

A Center for the Environment and Sustainability would serve as the hub for all environmental activities on the Smith campus. A major goal of the center would be to foster cohesiveness among (1) academic departments and programs that incorporate environmental issues in their curricular offerings and/or their research endeavors, (2) campus operational units (e.g., Physical Plant, Residence and Dining Services) that deal with sustainability, (3) initiatives (or other proposed centers) that focus on civic or international engagement, and (4) student environmental organizations. The center would be led by a Director and be home to the College's Sustainability Coordinator. The Director would coordinate activities, seek external funding, attend meetings, and raise Smith College's environmental profile. The center would provide a physical space for meetings and seminars, informational displays, and visiting activists or educators.

The potential synergies that can develop from having a Center for the Environment and Sustainability will attract capable students, faculty, staff, and external funding, thus greatly enhancing Smith College's reputation. We have the necessary foundation in place: we need a focused effort and a commitment by Smith College to realize these worthy goals.

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