

Smith Accelerated Gifted Education Program (SAGE)

This concept paper is a proposal for Smith College to launch a residential program for exceptionally and profoundly gifted young women of high school age. These students, who will have already demonstrated unusual intellectual abilities and a powerful interest in learning, would match or exceed in academic achievement Smith's top traditional-age students and Ada Comstock Scholars. The Smith Accelerated Gifted Education (SAGE) program would enhance the academic profile of the college and bring attention to Smith for its innovative offerings to women of all ages.

The last decade has seen an explosion of information about exceptionally and profoundly gifted students. Once thought to be extremely rare ("one in a million"), more recent evidence reveals that children with IQs of 180, or SAT scores of 1400+ before the age of 13, exist in far greater numbers than were assumed in earlier years. Through the growth of summer programs such as the Center for Talented Youth (CTY) run by Johns Hopkins or the Talent Identification Program (TIP) of Duke University, thousands of young students with college-level capability are identified annually. Many of these students, usually beginning at age 12, pursue college coursework in the summers, enjoying intellectual stimulation, and of equal importance, a peer social group experience not available to them during the academic year.

The need for the program: Traditional schooling rarely meets the needs of the exceptionally gifted. A very high percentage of these children—with estimates up to 90%—are now home-schooled. But alternative options are much needed, and proponents of academic acceleration continue to grow and speak out as research continues. (An article with brief quotes from numerous studies may be found at: http://www.geniusdenied.com/articles.aspx?articleid=40&NavID=3_1.) About 20 colleges and universities now have some kind of program in place for young, highly gifted students to take classes during the academic year, with most programs offering college as a replacement for the final year or two of high school. (See a listing at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_college_entrance_program.) Educators and researchers concur that it is crucial for exceptionally gifted students to be encouraged, nurtured, mentored and challenged. With appropriate support, they can become the adults who are among society's most significant innovators, discoverers and pioneers.

Why Smith? Considering Smith's strategic directions and looking at bold new ways to link Smith's past to its future, we can begin with the college's mission, as defined by founder Sophia Smith, "to develop as fully as may be the powers of womanhood." This mission has been fulfilled with great success for college-age young women, and also for "women of non-traditional age" through the Ada Comstock Scholars Program. In a certain way, the Ada Comstock Scholars Program—very bold at the time of its inception—provides a model for SAGE. With the addition of exceptional young students, the college will be in a truly unique position in higher education, serving women across the age spectrum.

What would the program contribute to Smith? Looking at Smith's new strategic directions, the SAGE program would serve several goals. SAGE students would be involved in research activities of the kind outlined in the goal to "promote a culture of research, inquiry and discovery." Smith would open doors to young women of promise at a time when other options to help them fulfill their true promise are quite limited. The program would extend Smith's impact on the world in a number of ways, including extending its academic resources to a young population of students, building upon the successes of such programs as Smith Summer Science and Engineering, and existing collaborations that allow top Northampton High School students to take classes at Smith. The SAGE program would attract, at a young age, truly remarkable students who might not otherwise consider applying to a women's college. SAGE would bring added attention to Smith College by attracting and serving the very top young women scholars in the country, whose achievements would often be newsworthy. In addition, the program would bring to our campus students of exceptional ability in the sciences, adding to the college's profile in science and engineering. As STRIDE students excite the interest of faculty, so would the addition of these unique thinkers, who would bring much to the classroom and to other students as well.

SAGE student profile: Entering SAGE students would typically be between 14 and 16 years old, with SAT scores of 1300 or higher in year prior to entrance. In some cases, Smith College would replace their high school experience entirely; in others, students would enter after one or two years in high school. Preference would be given to applicants who have already demonstrated their readiness for college work in a variety of ways, including success in prior college coursework.

Target number of students: 25-40 students in the program at any time, providing SAGE students with a substantial peer group.

Housing, advising and mentoring: Smith's residential, supportive and home-like housing system provides an ideal environment for SAGE students. Students would live together in one small Smith residence with two live-in staff members, similar to "house parents" common in boarding schools. Students would have age-appropriate restrictions/guidelines such as a curfew. Faculty mentor/advisors and others involved with SAGE students would have regular conversations with students to ensure that their academic, social and emotional needs are being met.

Course load: Fully matriculated students living on campus would be expected to take and be able to handle a full course load. However, flexibility is vitally important, and decisions about the appropriate course load for each student would be made in collaboration with their advisors.

Tuition and costs to students: Students would receive need-based financial aid. Ideally, the work-study and loan component of each award will be funded by the college as merit aid, perhaps from the Zollman Merit Endowed Scholarship Fund, other available funds, or new funding sources. If additional funding from new sources for merit aid is received, Smith may build these grants into the program.

Staffing: Program director, ½ time support staff, two live-in house staff

Summary: Smith College is well positioned to launch a program to serve the most gifted, promising young women in the country, meeting their special academic and social needs. The program would benefit Smith by enhancing the academic level of college's applicant pool and raising Smith's profile. No doubt, in future years, the young women who benefit from the SAGE program will become innovators, discoverers and achievers, who will continue to reflect positively on Smith College.

Submitted by: Stephanie Schoen, Associate Director of Donor Relations,
Advancement Office