

This is About Learning: Enhanced Support for Students with Learning Challenges

The goal of this proposal is to help fulfill Smith's educational mission for women with an emphasis on three strategic directions: *Strengthening Essential Student Capacities, Prepare Women for Rewarding Lives in a Rapidly Changing World, and Opening Doors to Women of Promise*. A multi-year initiative is proposed to strengthen the college's capacity to comply with disability non-discrimination laws and manifest its commitment to diversity by actively supporting the success of talented students for whom learning challenges might otherwise be a barrier to success in college and in life.

Enhancing Smith's current system of learning supports is essential to the college's current legal compliance by providing essential student accommodations and supports and to recruit and retain a talented and diverse student body in the future.

This proposal, endorsed by the Disability Access Advisory Committee at its Oct. 2006 meeting as a top priority, seeks to establish an enhanced system of transitional and ongoing services and supports for students with documented learning disabilities and provision of early identification, evaluation, and learning support services to students with undiagnosed learning challenges. The proposed Learning Initiative would be a collaborative effort between the Jacobson Center, Educational Technology Services, and Disability services to establish a clear process for identifying students with learning challenges and expand available learning supports, including individual and group sessions with a learning specialist, facilitating peer support groups, and access to appropriate assistive technology. Efforts to collaborate with faculty to identify and provide information and support for teaching diverse learners would be an important component.

Services provided by the Jacobson Center and Educational Technology Services are important to many students, but play a unique role in supporting the success of students with learning disabilities and other students with learning challenges that may result from socio-economic, language, preparation or other factors. This proposed learning initiative will support Smith's ability to help all students participate in and benefit from all eight strategic directions with particular attention to supporting women for whom the road to higher education may have been more difficult one due to socio-economic and other factors that create learning challenges.

An enhanced system of supports would be developed as a collaborative project between the Jacobson Center, Disability Services, and ETS, would:

- Increase the expertise and resources within the Jacobson Center by hiring a Master's level Learning Specialist to provide learning support services for students with learning disabilities and informal assessment and learning support to students with undiagnosed learning challenges. This specialist would also aid in supporting faculty development efforts.
- Deepen the expertise and improve capacity of Educational Technology Services by hiring an experienced Assistive Technology Specialist to evaluate and apply

existing and emerging technologies to enhance learning for students with disabilities, increase access to electronic information systems, and support faculty in increasing access to classroom instruction through use of technology

- Assure the availability of assistive technology and training through designated funding to purchase necessary technology for use by students, staff, and faculty.
- Provide appropriate evaluation of the accommodation needs of students with learning disabilities under non-discrimination law through continued funding for expert clinical consultation to the Disability Services Office and by establishing a specific fund for diagnostic testing of students with suspected learning disabilities as determined necessary by the ODS Director when no other funding options exist, using a cost share formula based on financial need.

Background

Women with learning disabilities and other learning challenges are among a group of diverse learners whose needs are addressed by recommendations on different ways of learning included in the recently released Common Ground Report and through the work of the Disability Access Advisory Committee. Based on experience and increasing demands on existing services, diverse students with learning disabilities and undiagnosed learning challenges may need both transitional and ongoing forms of learning support to develop learning skills and strategies essential to academic and career success. Smith has many programs and services that attempt to support these students with mixed success.

Representatives of many campus programs, the Class Deans, and the Provost's office recently met to discuss the increase in students who have multiple challenges that impact learning. Recognition of the need for additional expertise and resources emerged from these conversations and a collaborative initiative for learning support was developed through Jacobson Center, Disability Services, and ETS based on a review of existing resources at Smith and an examination of models employed at other comparable colleges.

Under the new initiative, students would be referred to Jacobson Center for an evaluative intake with the Learning Specialist based on specific recognized criteria. Several tools to screen for learning difficulties will be used as needed. Students will then be directed to appropriate learning support through the learning specialist or other services within the Jacobson Center, to ETS for evaluation and introduction to assistive technology, or to Disability Services for assessment of accommodation needs or referral for more definitive diagnostic evaluation. Referral to Class Deans, other campus programs, and outside resources would occur as appropriate. Engagement in all aspects of the learning initiative would be voluntary and self-directed as participation is intended to increase self-knowledge, learning capacities, as well as negotiation and communication skills.

This is an important effort in support of the college's continued ability to comply with disability non-discrimination laws, the effective and efficient use of college resources over time, and most importantly as essential to aid learning and ultimately to supporting student success at Smith and beyond. Success will be measured by monitoring academic progress as well as increases retention and graduation rates among this population