

Strategic Planning Proposal: A summer preparatory course for disadvantaged students entering Smith

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Smith is proud, and rightly so, of the increased diversity of its students. In significant part, this diversity is the result of a sustained effort to identify and recruit potential Smith students from under-represented groups. The college provides much in the way of academic support for all the students during the school year, but in spite of this, many of the less well-prepared students, and in particular, too many of the students from under-represented groups, struggle during their first year at Smith.

Students from all backgrounds find the first semester at college challenging; doing well, sometimes just keeping up, can be difficult. For students who come less prepared in math, critical thinking and writing, the first semester is doubly challenging; using their often shaky time-management skills, they must schedule the extra time they need to do their regular course work, and frequently, the time needed to take advantage of the extra tutoring they have available. Inevitably, despite the extra help available, many of these students become increasingly dispirited as the semester progresses, struggling with time management and disappointment in their progress as they fall ever more behind their better-prepared classmates. Too often this becomes a descending spiral of disappointment, poor performance and decreasing expectations, an outcome that serves no one; Smith, the student, and the student's community are all diminished by this result. To those working with them, it is clear that these students need to have a better grasp of the skills that we expect our students to have, and that these skills (or tools) must be in place before the first semester starts.

It would improve their preparation if we could provide a "bridge" course for disadvantaged students, to be taken during the summer before they enter, and designed to prepare the student for her first semester's courses at Smith. Ideally, Smith applicants who appear to be from a disadvantaged background and whose applications suggest they may have a difficult transition to their Smith courses, would be offered the opportunity to participate in such a course. A grant would be offered to cover all extra expense to the student and, ideally, a small stipend would be given for attending. Such a course would help to level the playing field for the disadvantaged students.