

PROPOSAL FOR A LABYRINTH AT SMITH COLLEGE
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WHAT IS A LABYRINTH?

Unlike a maze, a labyrinth is an intricate design based on a single path, thus easy to navigate.

Labyrinths have existed from prehistoric times. They exist in many different parts of the world (e.g., Europe, North and South America, Australia, India, Nepal, Java), in many different forms (e.g., Cretan, Chartres Cathedral model, spiral), and in many different media (e.g., petroglyph, turf, paving stone, carpet). Prehistoric ones were perhaps designed as traps to snare malevolent spirits. Four classical labyrinths are mentioned by Pliny in his *Natural History*. Labyrinths flourished during the 12th and 13th centuries in the floors of medieval European churches, as places of symbolic pilgrimage to be walked by believers.

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in labyrinths, with Grace Cathedral in San Francisco leading the way: a stone labyrinth on the outside terrace, and a carpet version in the nave, both using the Chartres design. Grace Cathedral describes the process of walking its labyrinths as happening in three stages:

Purgation (Releasing) ~ A releasing, a letting go of the details of your life. This is the act of shedding thoughts and distractions. A time to open the heart and quiet the mind.

Illumination (Receiving) ~ When you reach the center, stay there as long as you like. It is a place of meditation and prayer. Receive what is there for you to receive.

Union (Returning) ~ As you leave, following the same path out of the center as you came in, you enter the third stage, which is joining God, your Higher Power, or the healing forces at work in the world. Each time you walk the labyrinth you become more empowered to find and do the work you feel your soul reaching for.

Today labyrinths are viewed as a link to ancient mystical tradition, and as calming spaces for contemplation, meditation, reflection, stress-relief.

WHY AT SMITH?

As there is currently no labyrinth in the Valley, neither at the educational institutions nor in the parks and churches, creating one at Smith would garner much publicity. (It's possible there is none in Massachusetts.)

It would undoubtedly attract labyrinth-devotees from around the world.

A labyrinth would add to the distinctiveness of Smith, and to its national and international reputation.

Importantly, in this high-stress environment, a labyrinth would offer a serene, meditative place to students, faculty, staff, and members of the surrounding communities.

Our long tradition of a beautiful landscape between and around our buildings would be honored.

Engineering and landscape-studies students could be actively involved in the process: helping to choose or create a design, and then participating in the work of planning out the details.

I specially like to imagine it being walked by local kindergarten children and their teachers.

HOW DOES IT FIT INTO THE STRATEGIC PLANNING CONCEPTS?

It fits into 3 of the categories:

1. strengthening student capacities:

While the labyrinth would appeal in a spiritual way to students who are already religious, even more importantly it might appeal to students who arrive at Smith without a spiritual sense of themselves and the world.

2. preparing women for rewarding lives in a rapidly changing world:

The touchstone of the labyrinth links us to antiquity, to a sense of what remains constant and unaffected by time; the experience of walking the labyrinth provides a vehicle for checking in with the self, for musing on one's path in life, its many turns and surprises, and for reflecting on how each of us walks that path alone and how each gains strength from the path itself; returning regularly to the labyrinth is a means of building reflection, meditation, stress relief into one's life and work.

3. extending Smith's impact on the world:

The labyrinth would attract worldwide interest; and, thanks to its multi-cultural history, it would bring to Smith a particularly beautiful and unifying image of the world.

SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT:

While this proposal comes from me individually, the Poetry Center Committee is strongly in favor of another serene and meditative space on campus.

Other parties on campus who have an active interest in developing the idea and being part of any future conversations are Nina Antonetti, Linda Jones, Ann Leone, Tom Litwin, Michael Marcotrigiano, Jessica Nicoll, Jennifer Walters.

Shavaun Towers should, of course, be involved in discussions of sustainability, design, and masterplan considerations.