

Extending the Poetry Center's Outreach to a National Audience of Educators

The Executive Committee of the Poetry Center unanimously and enthusiastically supports the following proposal:

Initiative #1: The Smith Poetry Prize for High School Girls—Going National

The Smith College Poetry Center has recently turned its energies and resources to the important task of reaching out to high school students and their teachers. While the Poetry Center has always solicited audiences from local schools, it has taken a major step forward this year, initiating a state-wide poetry contest for Massachusetts high school girls. The contest, now in its inaugural year, involves collaboration with the Office of Admission and the Dean of Enrollment and has solicited entries from students around the state. As designed, the contest engages Smith students in the early screening process of submissions, after which a poet of national stature will choose among the top submissions. The winning student and three finalists will be invited to tour the campus, to read their work, and to meet privately with the poet-judge. The Smith Poetry Prize for High School Girls is an ideal way to bring Smith to the attention of potential applicants, to teachers who work with top students around the state, and to the public at large.

We propose extending the contest to a national audience where the many benefits derived from the state-wide prize would expand exponentially. Among the benefits are the following:

- National advertising of the contest through brochures, emails and such venues as Poets and Writers magazine would bring Smith's name to high schools in all parts of the country, associating that name with intellectual and creative work—the work that defines life here at Smith.
- Because the contest is directed to sophomores and juniors, national solicitation of submissions would necessarily extend Smith's target audience of potential applicants—students who might otherwise not have thought of Smith as a college choice.
- Working in collaboration with Admission, promotion of the contest could be directed to high schools of high priority for Smith, particularly in regions outside the Northeast.

Presently, The Poetry Center and the Office of Admission are sharing the costs and work of running the state-level contest. Moving to a national audience will necessarily require additional support (including staff help for managing submissions, costs associated with printing and mailing of brochures, and travel and accommodations for the winner and finalists). We also see the potential for alumnae involvement on a national level, with clubs throughout the country helping to spread word of the contest, and field inquiries.

This national high school contest falls naturally under at least two of the Strategic Planning Initiatives developed by CMP. Such a contest would surely “extend Smith’s impact on the world” (even before students have arrived at our gates), while “opening doors to women of promise” (including young poets, strong writers, and most importantly—women who might never have heard of Smith but for the contest brochure given to them by an English teacher).

Note: Although the deadline for submissions for the statewide contest begun this year is not until December 1st, the initial response has been very positive, leading us to believe that a national contest would be very well received.

Initiative #2—National Poetry Writing Workshop for High School Teachers

The Poetry Center seeks to institute a national poetry workshop for high school teachers, a weeklong summer session in which exceptional teacher-writers from around the country would come to Smith to work with the Poetry Center Director, developing poetry manuscripts and sharing their work with other teachers.

The workshop would be based loosely on the seminar model designed by the National Endowment for the Humanities. For many years NEH has sponsored summer enrichment seminars for high school teachers on scholarly topics proposed by college and university faculty. As conceived by the NEH, these seminars are short-term and topic-driven. Seminar leaders choose 10-12 teachers to participate in their classes, and those participants receive stipends that cover their transportation to the college and their living expenses; they also receive an additional honorarium for their work.

Like the NEH seminars, Smith’s Summer Poetry Workshop for Teachers would solicit applications from teachers around the country, would choose 10-12 participants, and would support their week at the College through a stipend and honorarium. Unlike the seminars, Smith’s summer workshop would be built around the written work of the participants themselves, not the study of texts. In this sense, it would be unique.

A summer workshop for high school teachers would do much for teachers and much for Smith. For teachers, it would provide an intimate, supportive forum for writing and for talking about writing. It would allow teacher-writers the luxury of working intensively in a beautiful college environment with a nationally recognized poet, and a cohort of like-minded colleagues. For the College, the seminar would provide many of the benefits enumerated above in the description of the High School Poetry Prize: widespread national publicity through brochures and other advertising, and the growing support of Smith College from workshop graduates who bring back to their schools the positive experiences they had on our campus. It could be possible to recruit and select participants for the workshop from high schools or geographic regions of strategic importance to admission. Finally, such a workshop, offered on a regular basis, would serve to reinforce Smith’s reputation as a summer “place for poetry” in the way that Middlebury is perceived as “a place for foreign languages.”

Major expenses associated with this initiative would include the costs of advertising the program, the staff time associated with screening and choosing applicants, the stipends for participants, their room and board, and the salary for the Director during the week-long seminar.

Like the High School Poetry Prize, the Summer Poetry Workshop for Teachers falls under at least two of the Strategic Planning Initiatives: Extending Smith's Impact on the World and Opening Doors to Women of Promise. Introducing high school teachers to the richness of Smith College can only have great benefit for us. One teacher works with 130-150 students a year. The potential impact of such a program on our admissions is obvious.

Respectfully submitted by Rosetta Cohen, on behalf of The Smith College Poetry Center