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Re-imagining a Liberal  
Arts Education:  
Linking Smith's Past to Its  
Future in Bold New Ways

Strategic Directions for  
Smith College, 2006 to 2015

Report of the Committee  
on Mission and Priorities  
May 2006

# Re-imagining a Liberal Arts Education: Linking Smith's Past to Its Future in Bold New Ways

During the 2005–06 academic year, the President and the Committee on Mission and Priorities began a strategic planning process designed to sustain and enhance the college's distinction in the decade ahead. Smith embarks on this process from a position of considerable strength. New programs in engineering, landscape studies, the poetry center, the Praxis internship program, and the Kahn Institute for Liberal Arts provide enhanced educational and scholarship opportunities for students and faculty. Major capital projects in the museum and fine arts complex and in the performing arts have updated and expanded Smith's already enviable resources in historically strong areas. The newly constructed campus center is a central element in the college's initiative to balance strong, small-scale residential environments for students with increased opportunities to socialize across house boundaries and to coordinate and amplify student activities. These and other recent accomplishments provide a sense of momentum critical to the intellectual vitality of the college, while budget planning efforts ensure that we are moving forward on solid financial footing.

## *The Planning Process*

In preparation for the planning process, the committee began with an understanding of the current position of the college—its position relative to its peers, its academic and curricular distinctiveness, and the areas where it stands to build on the momentum of recent initiatives and investments. This review served as an important beginning to the planning process, providing data, analysis, and background to inform and frame subsequent discussions with the community.

Over the past several months, the President led a series of more than fifty small group discussions with faculty, students, staff, alumnae, and trustees focused on three questions:

- ▶ What are the distinctive strengths of the college and what opportunities do they provide for the future?
- ▶ What capacities should we develop in all students in their time at Smith?
- ▶ How can the college best anticipate projected changes in the world of higher education?

Reflecting on these discussions, the committee has developed eight strategic directions to guide the next phase of our planning effort. During this next phase, we will seek ideas for specific initiatives and strategies to advance our progress in each of these critical areas.

The eight strategic directions all engage us in re-imagining the liberal arts. As we shift our attention from identifying critical areas of focus to crafting specific strategies to pursue, the committee urges the Smith community to think creatively about how best to make important new connections in at least three areas: among Smith constituencies, between the curriculum and the co-curriculum, and between the college and the cultures in which it is located. Also, there are several

essential principles that pervade all of the strategic directions rather than serving as specific directions on their own. First, we intend to make explicit and measurable commitments to diversity in the strategies supporting each of the eight directions. Secondly, we will strive for synergy between the curriculum and the co-curriculum, taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the residential character of the college. Finally, each strategic direction will involve issues related to staffing, funding, facilities, and structure/organization.

This fall, the President will convene a combination of roundtable discussions and other opportunities to explore each area in greater detail, with an aim toward developing specific proposals. We will also seek input from individual faculty, students, staff, and alumnae on potential strategies. By the end of the fall, we will identify the most promising ideas (including expected outcomes, resources needed, and action plans) under each strategic direction in order to develop a final planning document during Spring 2007.

## *Re-imagining the Liberal Arts at Smith*

The important issues with which students may find themselves engaged during and after Smith are, by their nature, complex. Some of these challenges are already evident: poverty, quality of and access to health care, HIV/AIDS, cancer, technology literacy and the digital divide, sustainability and stewardship of the environment, education, human rights, freedom of expression, and conflict resolution. Furthermore, the world in which our students will live and work is increasingly diverse. All of these problems are messy and difficult, and their solutions will require complex, interdisciplinary thinking skills.

Ensuring students' abilities to address such problems requires skills of synthesis and integration, not simply a satisfaction of distribution requirements. Liberal arts colleges, such as Smith, are well-positioned to achieve these aims, with their focus on student-faculty interactions in and out of class, productive collaborations among students, ample opportunities for active and inquiry-based learning experiences, prompt and meaningful feedback to students, and experiences with students and faculty from other cultures and backgrounds. The challenge to Smith is to construct a curriculum and overall college experience that makes use of these structures and experiences to develop essential student capacities. The strategic planning process should encourage the college to take risks, rethink organizational structures, and propose creative ways of achieving institutional goals.

Below, we introduce each of the eight strategic directions, along with questions we believe will inform and frame our conversations this fall and a sampling of potential initiatives that emerged during the spring's discussions. These possible initiatives are not intended as specific proposals or commitments, but as a means of encouraging and extending discussion. Similarly, the areas of exploration listed in each section are not intended as an exhaustive list, but rather as guides for further analyses.

# Strengthen Essential Student Capacities

For more than 35 years, Smith has had an open curriculum, leaving students free to choose courses outside of their majors. Faculty, students, and alumnae have all expressed concern about whether the current curriculum ensures a coherent liberal arts education responsive to today's world. We need to determine what capacities students should develop in their time at Smith and how best to shape the curriculum to that end.

Giving greater consequence to our choices is the fact that half the faculty are likely to retire or otherwise leave the college in the next decade. We have the opportunity to think anew about our disciplinary organization, creating incentives for cooperation and coordination across disciplines and between departments and programs. As staffing and curricular needs shift, we urgently need to talk to each other across the curriculum, to think beyond departmental losses toward new connections and a reconfigured core.

An ongoing faculty discussion about the curriculum seeks to define the core capacities that every Smith graduate should develop in her time here, including critical reasoning, writing, public speaking and presentation, and quantitative skills. In the course of their college years, Smith students report significant growth in their skills and capacities. Smith compares very well relative to its peers in regard to student perceptions of their own growth in writing, public speaking, learning on one's own, leadership, placing issues in perspective, foreign languages, arts appreciation, and awareness of social issues. Students report less growth relative to their peers in the areas of quantitative skills, identifying moral and ethical issues, and understanding the process of science and experimentation.

Achieving the goals we desire for our students depends significantly on the experiences and support that students receive outside of the classroom. As a residential college, Smith can develop programs through residence life and through extra-curricular activities that help build essential student capacities. We already link student life with educational experiences in a wide range of programs—pre-orientation, internships, and interterm. Smith has the potential to make this integration even more purposeful and focused.

## *Areas for Exploration*

- ▶ What are the intellectual and personal capacities the college should strive to develop in students? What curricular, academic support, and co-curricular experiences develop these capacities? How should the college help students to structure each year in their academic programs, through special curricular opportunities and through advising?
- ▶ How have the meaning and content of a liberal arts education changed? Have the college's organization and curricular structure evolved adequately to reflect these changes?
- ▶ What are the college's goals as a residential liberal arts college? Why is residential life central to the college's mission and goals?

- ▶ How should the college extend the impact of its recent investment in the sciences and engineering and its longstanding strengths in the arts?
- ▶ Should the college create more student life programming, such as volunteer opportunities and visiting speakers, to complement academic coursework in the development of capacities?
- ▶ How well do our facilities and other resources support our needs?
- ▶ How can we recruit a faculty and develop a curriculum to build each student's capacity to engage the diversity of America's cultures?
- ▶ Are we making the most of Five College opportunities, academically and administratively?

## *Potential Strategies Emerging from Campus and Alumnae Discussions*

- ▶ Provide students with alternative "roadmaps" for structuring the 64 credits outside the major in meaningful ways, including integrative and interdisciplinary courses and experiences.
- ▶ Ensure the strength of the multiple learning communities (e.g., libraries, museum, academic support centers, etc.) on campus and that students understand how each can contribute to their educations.
- ▶ Teach students how to navigate the academic and other resources at Smith, providing more transparent communications about opportunities, rethinking support systems, and revamping pre-major advising.
- ▶ Create a coherent and integrated curriculum where the arts and humanities, natural sciences, engineering, and social sciences all play important roles.
- ▶ Encourage courses and projects that develop complex thinking in response to complex problems.

# Promote a Culture of Research, Inquiry, and Discovery

As one of a small number of "research colleges," Smith combines the teaching mission of an undergraduate liberal arts college with a vigorous research culture. This research culture is evident in the awards and honors bestowed on faculty, the volume of sponsored research on campus, and the production of scholarly publications and other creative works. Students throughout the college's academic programs are engaged in independent research, in assisting faculty research, participating in community-based learning projects, and excelling at the performing and visual arts. Students in the engineering program work collaboratively on design teams to address real problems.

Smith is well-positioned to distinguish itself by integrating inquiry-based learning into teaching and the curriculum. Through research, creative endeavors, and performance arts, the college emphasizes the importance of original intellectual contributions. Students and faculty apply their knowledge and skills to problems and issues, formulating questions and analyzing arguments and results. We see these experienc-

es, including the mentor-student relationship, as essential to our liberal arts mission. Through them, students develop the critical capacities they need to be successful in their academic, professional, and personal pursuits.

Smith has the potential to continue to educate outstanding thinkers and problem solvers if it is willing to invest further in research and student-faculty collaboration. We can involve our students more broadly and extensively in research, making it a focal point of our curriculum. Currently, there are substantial contrasts across the divisions in the availability of research opportunities, and our current honors and independent study options may not be serving our students as well as they might. We should consider a variety of experiences, such as hands-on projects in classes, opportunities for student-faculty and peer interactions, and connections to community service.

#### *Areas for Exploration*

- ▶ How well do we support faculty and student research at Smith and how well do we recognize research or inquiry-based learning on campus?
- ▶ How do Smith faculty in various divisions or departments view research and inquiry-based learning opportunities available to students?
- ▶ How do the research opportunities available to Smith students compare to the opportunities for undergraduates at other colleges and universities?
- ▶ How do research opportunities at the undergraduate level change the academic experience and career choices of students?
- ▶ How do current levels of staffing and types of facilities and equipment provided support or limit our research efforts?
- ▶ What emerging opportunities in academic and administrative technology should the college pursue to ensure that capabilities in this area maintain pace with changing needs?

#### *Potential Strategies Emerging from Campus and Alumnae Discussions*

- ▶ Require every student to complete an independent project at some point in her junior or senior year.
- ▶ Require every major to have an integrative experience.
- ▶ Broaden student engagement with research and independent work earlier in their college careers by expanding STRIDE-like opportunities to more students.
- ▶ Create opportunities for students to work on research teams, utilizing alumnae networks where possible.
- ▶ Identify curricular initiatives and structures that promote inquiry-based learning and increase faculty-student interaction, either one-on-one or in small groups.
- ▶ Identify shorter-term research experiences for students in their first two years at Smith to build skills in preparation for larger projects in their majors.
- ▶ Create explicit links between research projects and community-based service projects.

## Encourage Purposeful Engagement with Society's Challenges

From the time of its founding, Smith has inspired its students to increase their power for effective social action, and fostered their development as citizens and ethical leaders. Conversations with alumnae, students, faculty, and staff have identified and reaffirmed the centrality of this goal to the college's mission.

The residential character of our community also provides many opportunities to develop the capacities essential to such development. We can model within the college the robust civil discourse critical to living in a diverse society. Moreover, our location in the city of Northampton and proximity to urban areas provide opportunities for community-based learning, allowing students to use the intellectual tools they have acquired in applied projects of tangible impact and social significance.

#### *Areas for Exploration*

- ▶ What will most effectively build the capacity for civil discourse among our students and our larger community?
- ▶ How can the college develop a full and robust conversation about diversity?
- ▶ What are effective structures and opportunities for volunteer engagement in the community and for community based learning? How can we utilize alumnae and others to further this goal?
- ▶ How can we most effectively develop the capacity for ethical reasoning?
- ▶ How can the college foster a culture of active engagement with social, political, aesthetic, and scientific issues on all levels (local, national, and global)?

#### *Potential Strategies Emerging from Campus and Alumnae Discussions*

- ▶ Integrate internships and service learning more fully into the curriculum. Use Praxis more effectively and tie it to curricular issues.
- ▶ Highlight community involvement opportunities in communications with prospective students during the admission process.
- ▶ Integrate service learning into the curriculum, including coursework, thesis work, and independent projects.
- ▶ Recognize students for their work in and contributions to the surrounding communities, and highlight alumnae who have made substantial contributions to their communities.
- ▶ Offer faculty workshops on "ways of learning" to assist their efforts to engage students from diverse backgrounds in the classroom.
- ▶ Develop initiatives to support civil discourse through "difficult dialogues" for students.

## Deepen Students' Awareness and Appreciation of Other Cultures and Global Issues

We live in a shrinking world, in which it is ever more critical to understand other cultures and to move across borders. Smith has long had an international emphasis in its curriculum, and a significant investment in this area, with particularly strong and extensive programs in language and literature, area studies, and study abroad. However, the rapidly changing global context—where economic, social, and political issues and relationships are in constant flux—demands a re-examination of our curriculum. The careers and lives students will pursue after Smith require a deeper and more nuanced understanding of other peoples and cultures. In this context, Smith must consider how best to structure and proportion its commitments to international study and research both on campus and abroad.

The basic challenge for Smith is how best to leverage its considerable strengths, resources, and tradition of excellence in this area of growing importance in ways that prepare students for success in an increasingly global and interconnected world.

Recent discussions about study abroad have suggested that the scattered character of our international programs reduces their coherence and lessens their impact. Students and faculty have commented on the difficulty of integrating study abroad experiences into their ongoing studies. Student enrollments abroad are heavily clustered in Western Europe and English-speaking countries. The large number of programs approved for independent study abroad makes program oversight and quality control a challenge.

### *Areas for Exploration*

- ▶ What is the best balance between investment in study abroad and international programs on campus? What is the best balance among semester-long, year-long, interterm, and summer opportunities for international experiences?
- ▶ How can Smith best shape its array of study abroad options? How might we better prepare students for study abroad and facilitate the transition of students back to campus, incorporating their experiences into the life at Smith?
- ▶ What balance should we seek between study abroad in Europe and English-speaking countries and other parts of the world?
- ▶ Should we increase the proportion of international students at Smith? How well do we support international students' needs on campus?
- ▶ How many languages should we support on campus, and what are other viable ways of delivering these? What are creative options for language study? Are we comfortable with the prevalence of study in English-speaking parts of the world? How do we make study abroad a viable and integrated option for students in all academic divisions?

### *Potential Strategies Emerging from Campus and Alumnae Discussions*

- ▶ Establish a Center for International Study to consolidate, highlight, and draw attention to the college's multiple efforts and opportunities in global education. Utilize the center to provide greater visibility for international visitors and to expand support for international efforts, including better publicity about campus opportunities to engage international issues.
- ▶ Establish or join consortial programs in under-represented parts of the world, including Asia, Africa, and South America to ensure access to high-quality academic programs.
- ▶ Develop international partnerships and agreements to extend Smith's reach and exposure, particularly in Asia, including faculty and student exchanges, field work, and other research collaborations.
- ▶ Pursue research collaborations and other opportunities that facilitate study abroad for science and engineering students.

## Prepare Women for Rewarding Lives in a Rapidly Changing World

The relationship between the liberal arts and the world of work has been a debated topic for decades. We need to re-think our responsibility to prepare students for their lives beyond college. Current students demand it as they look forward to entering a competitive workplace with high ambitions. Alumnae discussions have revealed the need to provide women with better tools to approach a life of multiple careers and the challenges of balancing family obligations with work and other commitments.

As a women's college, Smith has a particular obligation to help students reflect systematically and deeply about how they imagine a fulfilling life. We can structure opportunities for students to consider the relationship between their activities across the curriculum and the co-curriculum: in the classroom, research and independent study, internships, community service, work-study, study abroad, and leadership in student organizations. We are currently developing a January term program about work-life balance designed to engage students in reflecting on the multiple goals of their lives and their relationships to one another. We need to identify other ways in which students can bring their experiences outside the classroom back to their academic pursuits on campus, and to consider how to provide students and alumnae with more opportunities for interaction.

Our efforts should build upon two projects from the last strategic planning process that specifically address the world of work: the Praxis internships and Women and Financial Independence. The Career Development Office needs to be more fully integrated into this strategic focus, helping to coordinate mentoring relationships between current students and alumnae.

### *Areas for Exploration*

- ▶ How can the college encourage inquiry-based learning and connections to the world of work, such as student research opportunities, internships, engagement with alumnae, and community-based learning?
- ▶ What initiatives should the college pursue to provide students with effective models of work-life balance to reduce stress on campus and to prepare students to lead healthy and productive lives?
- ▶ How can we enhance links between students and alumnae to position students more powerfully as they compete for jobs?
- ▶ How should we re-think work-study opportunities to take advantage of their potential as preparation for life beyond Smith?

### *Potential Strategies Emerging from Campus and Alumnae Discussions*

- ▶ Enhance connections between students and alumnae and among alumnae after graduation through continuing education opportunities, networking, mentoring, and alumnae-related internships.
- ▶ Link the Career Development Office, Praxis, Women and Financial Independence, the leadership program, summer science, and other college efforts to create a systematic preparation for students' lives beyond Smith.
- ▶ Support curricular initiatives that encourage students to integrate and synthesize their multiple experiences at Smith.

## Support and Promote Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability and its scientific, economic, and social components have become increasingly urgent concerns, affecting us on all levels—local, regional, national, and global. Smith has already developed considerable strength in this area, including programs in landscape studies, environmental science and policy, and engineering. These programs emphasize sustainability and its critical relationship to the natural world and to human societies and provide an exceptional opportunity for further program development. Moreover, sustainability as an operational principle ensures responsible stewardship of the college's physical resources. The college continues to improve its energy and waste management practices.

### *Areas for Exploration*

- ▶ How can we best develop environmental literacy in our students?
- ▶ How can we best structure and focus our research and curricular efforts with connections to sustainability?
- ▶ What should be the college's commitment to sustainability as it relates to the curriculum and co-curriculum? What academic initiatives in this area will serve us best?
- ▶ What is the most effective way of building sustainability goals into our campus operations, such as the physical plant and dining services?

### *Potential Strategies Emerging from Campus and Alumnae Discussions*

- ▶ Coordinate and enhance curricular offerings related to environmental stewardship, policy, and impact.
- ▶ Coordinate existing policies and programs that focus on the natural and built environment and on the sustainable use of resources.
- ▶ Sustain and enhance energy conservation through equipment changeovers, community awareness, energy policies, etc.
- ▶ Integrate environmental awareness into planning for facilities construction and renovation.
- ▶ Involve students in these issues to provide educational and community service opportunities.

## Open Doors to Women of Promise

Smith fills its class with strong students each year, and it has been very successful in achieving socio-economic diversity among its student body. Nonetheless, the margin of students we do not admit who are qualified to perform well at Smith is thinner than we would like, and the commitment that we have made to financial aid involves challenging trade-offs in other areas of the budget. The five applications Smith receives for every spot in the entering class is less than half the number received by many peer colleges. Our admission profile leaves us vulnerable to a drop in applications or yield, or a shift in financial need.

Smith has faced a challenging decade in admissions. Despite several new recruitment initiatives, the college's applicant pool has grown more slowly than that of many of its peers. In part because of increasing use of merit aid across the private sector, we have seen our competitive market for students expand to encompass a broader range of institutions. Our research suggests that prospective students recognize the excellence of our faculty and programs, but are largely unaware of Smith's other distinctive strengths. The fact that we are the largest of the women's colleges leaves us little latitude to weather a downturn in applications or yield rate, or shifts in financial aid patterns.

Smith has a proud record of providing access to students of varying economic means, both in the Ada Comstock Scholars and traditional student populations. The socio-economic profile of Smith's student body differs in fundamental ways from that of the majority of colleges and universities in its traditional peer group. Smith has the highest level of socio-economic diversity among its peers—a point of distinctive pride for the college. But this distinction presents economic challenges for the college: we have the highest discount rate among our peers and the highest proportion of students on need-based aid.

### *Areas for Exploration*

- ▶ How can we increase our applicant base? How should we address the geographical imbalance projected for high school graduates over the next decade, with growth focused in the South and West?
- ▶ Have the increased number of applications in the last two admission cycles provided us with adequate flexibility? What is the appropriate

applicant pool, in terms of size, financial need, and quality?

- ▶ How should access compare to other top priorities, such as faculty compensation, curricular strength, study abroad, etc.? What size discount rate should we seek to maintain over the longer term? What are the implications of various discount rate levels on other parts of the budget? To what extent can the college control its own discount rate?
- ▶ How should Smith define quality for the purposes of evaluating trends in its admission position?
- ▶ How should Smith define its goal of providing access? How much financial aid can we prudently afford?

### *Potential Strategies Emerging from Campus and Alumnae Discussions*

- ▶ Invest in admission marketing and outreach in the South and West to build awareness of Smith.
- ▶ Build “feeder school” relationships in specific targeted areas, such as the arts, sciences and engineering, etc.
- ▶ Improve Smith’s Web site and develop a virtual tour.
- ▶ Reduce the traditional enrollment size of the college, striking a balance among issues of diversity, access, and measures of quality.
- ▶ Increase use of merit aid to yield top-ranking lower-need students.
- ▶ Develop opportunities for the campus community to come together for conversations that explore critical intersections between excellence and diversity.

## Extend Smith’s Impact on the World

Many changes in the patterns of women’s lives and in higher education make this an opportune moment to consider meaningful ways in which Smith connects to and influences the world beyond the college. As the education of women is increasingly recognized as a force for development worldwide, women’s colleges, their students, faculty and alumnae, have an opportunity to broaden their impact through new forms of engagement, partnership and philanthropy.

One way in which the college can broaden its regional, national and international reach is by extending its academic resources to new populations. Smith has enjoyed considerable success with a few targeted non-traditional academic programs, such as executive education and summer science and engineering. Given the growing interest in both pre-baccalaureate programs for high school students and post-baccalaureate programs for adults contemplating graduate or professional school or career changes, the college could consider whether new programs could reinforce core strengths and reputation while, at the same time, offering revenue opportunities and utilizing facilities during non-peak periods. Among the strategies to consider could be distance learning, a modality possibly well-suited to coursework originating in programs such as Women and Financial Independence.

Alumnae would be among the audiences for continuing education programs, and finding new ways to engage them, whether academic or social/philanthropic, is an imperative for Smith. Younger generations

of alumnae report that our traditional forms of engagement do not speak as directly to their needs and interests as perhaps they did to older generations. There is also a growing sentiment among our alumnae that we do not utilize their talents and experiences on behalf of the college as effectively or extensively as we might. As the baby boom generation emerges as a significant force in American philanthropy, colleges like Smith will be challenged to stand out among the philanthropic opportunities appealing to their graduates. Re-engaging alumnae in the life of the college today and enhancing their pride in Smith are important factors in annual and campaign giving, in admission recruitment, and in creating opportunities for our students and faculty today and in the future.

### *Areas for Exploration*

- ▶ What alternate forms of alumnae engagement might we offer, both on campus and off?
- ▶ How can we best prepare for the inter-generational transfer of wealth anticipated in this country?
- ▶ How can we best raise our profile in areas of the country and the world in which we are less well known?
- ▶ Recognizing that visibility is often linked to demonstrable outcomes, what data, internal and external, do we need to tell our story effectively?
- ▶ What resources (technological, other) do we need to extend our global reach?
- ▶ How can we utilize our alumnae and other constituencies to help us in these efforts?
- ▶ Should Smith develop a small group of post-baccalaureate programs, consistent with its strengths and mission, to serve the continuing education market? If so, what programs offer the best potential?

### *Potential Strategies Emerging from Campus and Alumnae Discussions*

- ▶ Engage in market research and message development; audiences would be prospective students, alumnae, donors (and non-donors), continuing education populations.
- ▶ Develop strategic alliances/relationships with other institutions or organizations that can advance Smith’s visibility and goals, such as the Picker Engineering Program’s exchange with Princeton University.
- ▶ Continue to explore alumnae affinity groups centered on professions or shared interests.
- ▶ Consider ways in which distinctive Smith curricula (e.g., women’s financial education) could be “exported” to other populations, possibly via distance education.

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*Members of the Committee on Mission and Priorities, 2005–06*

- ▶ Carol Christ, President (Chair)
- ▶ Susan Bourque, Provost & Dean of the Faculty (Vice Chair)
- ▶ Nancy Bradbury, Associate Professor of English Language and Literature
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- ▶ Ruth Constantine, Vice President for Finance & Administration
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- ▶ Sue J.M. Freeman, Professor of Education and Child Study
- ▶ Patricia Jackson, Vice President for Advancement
- ▶ Maureen Mahoney, Dean of the College
- ▶ Tamar Malloy, Class of 2007
- ▶ Malgorzata Pfabé, Sophia Smith Professor of Physics (Fall 2005)
- ▶ Nicole Rodier, Class of 2006
- ▶ Marilyn Schuster, Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities (Spring 2006)
- ▶ Charles Staelin, Dean for Academic Development
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*Contact Us*

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For more information on the strategic planning process at Smith, visit [www.smith.edu/planning](http://www.smith.edu/planning).