

Provost's Report on the Working Group on Campus Discourse October 2014-May 2015

Working Group Charge

Convened during the academic year 2014-15, the Working Group on Campus Discourse was charged with developing a plan for a year-long series of events, education and communication to foster a deep understanding of the responsibilities and challenges to open and fruitful discourse in a networked world. Its charge was to address current needs in our community as well as recommend frameworks that would serve Smith in the future when facing contentious and complex issues. We aimed to create a transparent process that would engage students, faculty, staff and alumnae. We sought to identify paths that would lead to a campus community that cherishes dissent and welcomes widely divergent views. We began with task force brainstorming and feedback from these four communities, followed by programming and recommendations. As a result of this work, we recommended four paths of future action (see below) across the institution as a whole.

This report by the Provost's Office summarizes our work, synthesizes our conclusions, lists our recommendations, and indicates next steps the President's Cabinet will be pursuing in AY15-16.

Recommendations and Next Steps

The Working Group concluded that its core questions need to be an ongoing and routine focus of college programming. We generated concrete ideas for 2015-16 that we recommended the college implement. After reflection on our conclusions, the President's Cabinet recommends this be an institutional effort, rather than the focus of a single task force or group. Here were our four main recommendations and the initiatives that will follow on them:

1. Make the practice of open and self-reflective disagreement on difficult topics the subject of a speaker series.

→ The Presidential Colloquium in AY15-16 will focus on the topic of "Thinking in Public" in a networked world. Speakers are listed here: <http://www.smith.edu/president/colloquium-series>

2. Support students to increase awareness and take ownership of the conflicts around campus discourse in ways that are consistent with their primary commitment to be students.

→ Dean of the College Office will explore activities with student Social Justice and Equity representatives (SJE) and Residence Life staff in the houses, and focus on open discourse and inclusive practices in First-Year Orientation.

3. Stage regular debates on difficult topics that include student perspectives and have student groups in the lead.

→ Dean of the College Office will work with SGA to explore the possibility of SGA sponsoring regular debates between student groups with diverging perspectives.

4. Develop strategies for accountability and inclusive practices across all campus operations that raise our communal awareness of implicit bias of all kinds and redress it systemically.

→ The Office of Inclusion, Diversity and Equity is launching a campus climate survey. The Provost's office has inaugurated implicit bias work with all faculty in hiring departments.

Summary of Work

At the beginning of the fall semester, the Working Group membership was established in consultation with Faculty Council, Staff Council, the Student Government Association (SGA), the Alumnae Association, and members of the President's Cabinet.

Katherine Rowe, Provost and Dean of the Faculty, Chair
Agnes Bundy Scanlan '79, Trustee Emerita
Justin Cammy, Associate Professor of Jewish Studies and Comparative Literature
Jennifer Chrisler '92, VP for Alumnae Relations and Ex. Dir. of the Alumnae Association
Ana Darrow '15
Rebecca Davidson '16
Yasmin Chin Eisenhauer '94, Instructional Technologist
Ambreen Hai, Professor of English Language and Literature
Andrea Hairston, Professor of Theatre and Afro-American Studies
Zara Jamshed '17
Hye Kyung Kang, Associate Professor of Social Work
Marc Lendler, Professor of Government
Donna Lisker, Dean of the College and Vice President for Campus Life
Janis Luke '17
Alison Marsh '17
Sam Masinter, Director of College Relations
Calvin McFadden, Dean of the Sophomore Class and Ada Comstock Scholars
Freda Raitelu, AC
Michael Thurston, Professor of English Language and Literature
Nanci Young, College Archivist
Hayley Spizz, Faculty Policies Specialist, Staff Support

The Working Group held its first meeting in October and developed ground rules to guide our work including: listening to understand, bringing candor and respect, and being willing to change our minds. We reviewed our Charge and ideas that had been collected from the community, which included suggestions for speakers, panels, teach-ins and topics to address. We outlined our focus and goals for 2014-15.

During our November meetings, we broke into two smaller groups—Toolkits and Panels. The Toolkits group identified programming to invite wider community participation in the task of strengthening campus discourse and provide resources for doing so. The Panel group sketched a

series of panels on speech-related topics to include diverse groups of panelists with multiple perspectives who could model deliberation and disagreement in an open and fruitful way.

During the spring semester, we implemented those plans in the following programming:

- January 22, 2015, Ask Big Questions Training: The Working Group invited Ask Big Questions (www.askbigquestions.org) to come to campus to share their model of holding conversations that help people understand themselves and each other. ABQ is 3 1/2 years old and has trained more than 600 students on 70 campuses. On January 22 ABQ held a workshop for 26 participants (13 student leaders and 13 staff). Participants learned about ABQ methodology and resources that can be used to support our task of strengthening campus discourse.
- February 23, 2015, Conversation on Race and Politics: Following a reading by Claudia Rankine from *Citizen*, we offered small-group facilitated conversations over dinner around the themes of Race and Politics using the Ask Big Questions model of Ask-Share-Learn-Do. Our big question was, "How Are We Seen?" We used the Ask Big Questions conversation and facilitator guides as models and adapted them for our purposes following student feedback, including using a passage from *Citizen* for the "learn" component. We were prepared to offer 5 conversations co-facilitated by 10 facilitators for up to 56 participants. We held 1 conversation, which included faculty, staff, and student participants and facilitators. The conversation provided participants an opportunity to share reactions from the reading, closely interpret a passage from *Citizen*, share and listen to each other's stories about experiences of race, racism, and being seen and unseen, and to engage in the work of creating change.
- March 30, 2015, Speech Panel and Conversations on Campus Speech: Five panelists explored historical and present-day disagreements on speech protections and limits, and the role of educational institutions in a panel entitled *Say What!?: Speech Rights, Learning Communities, and Academic Freedom* (video available online: <http://www.smith.edu/discourse/resources.php>). Katherine Rowe, Provost and Dean of the Faculty, served as moderator. The panelists were Carrie Baker, Associate Professor for the Study of Women and Gender; Ambreen Hai, Professor of English Language and Literature; Dwight Hamilton, Chief Diversity Officer; Marc Lendler, Professor of Government; and Marilyn Schuster, Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities and Professor of the Study of Women and Gender. Following the panel, audience members were invited to reflect and talk about speech on campus over dinner in small-group facilitated conversations using the big question, "How Are We Heard?" We further refined the conversation and facilitator guides and held 3 conversations which included faculty, staff, and student participants and facilitators. Conversation participants reflected on the panel, expanded their understanding of each other's experiences of speech on campus, explored the themes of being heard and silenced, and discussed possibilities for change at Smith.
- April 30, 2015 Conversation on Gender Matters: Following a talk by professor, author and transgender activist Jennifer Finney Boylan, we offered small-group facilitated conversations over dinner using the big question, "Where Do You Belong?" We further refined the conversation and facilitator guides and held 1 conversation which included faculty, staff, and student participants and facilitators. The conversation included

discussion of Boylan's talk, exploration of the themes of gender and belonging, and sharing of personal experiences and hopes for change.

The Working Group engaged the wider Smith community in these big questions through several publicity efforts: eDigest, postcards distributed at the events, dining hall table tents, and sidewalk chalking. We also worked with the Ask Big Question training participants, Working Group members, as well as selected faculty and administrators in developing the conversation and facilitator guides and debriefing each event.

What We Learned

Over three different sets of conversations, three different very charged topics – race and politics in the U.S., free speech on campus, gender transition – here are the common themes that emerged that we discussed in the Working Group:

1. A large majority of students want the college to be a place where we can debate ideas openly, particularly outside the classroom.
 - “Students need to re-dedicate ourselves to the idea that Smith is a community where we can disagree openly, period.”
 - “This should be part of our admissions outreach, so students know what community they are coming to, and our freshman orientation should have to do with it.”
2. Students with very different perspectives agree on the need for ongoing efforts to improve the campus speech culture and ask widely, “What kind of discourse community do we want to have?”
3. Students in our conversations were especially challenged by the culture of online discourse and the consequences of living in a community in which forums such as Smith Confessional are a fact of our discourse system.
4. The costs of inter-personal and inter-cohort conflict in a community as small and intimate as ours are high and students experience those costs with immediacy and directness.

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