

Equalizing the Student Experience

BY KATHLEEN McCARTNEY

SHORTLY AFTER my appointment as Smith College’s president, I addressed the campus and signaled some emergent priorities, primarily the importance of college access. More specifically, I shared a belief that is core to my personal and professional experience: “We must remain committed to recruiting and supporting students regardless of the resources of their secondary schools, the circumstances of their families, or the low expectations that society holds for some students.” Education access, I said, is the civil rights issue of our time.

There are three reasons campus leaders and governing boards need to focus on access. The first is to attract the most qualified students: Access equals excellence. Second, the high cost of college means that more students will need financial support, so bridging the gap between need and cost is strategic, especially in an increasingly competitive market. Finally, it is the right thing to do. Education provides a path to the American dream. For those who cannot access higher education, that dream often remains out of reach.

Eight years into my presidency at Smith, my commitment to access has broadened. Whereas I once focused on financial aid—scholarship support for tuition, room, and board—I now aspire to an even higher goal: equalizing the student experience. Like many others, I first encountered this concept from higher education scholar Anthony Abraham Jack in his groundbreaking 2019 book *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. His research illuminates how current college practices can exclude

students from poor families from many activities—and, worse, make them feel like they do not belong. As Jack has written, “Citizenship is so much more than just being in a place. It is being of it, with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto.”

Here are three foundational strategies that guide us at Smith as we work to equalize the student experience, regardless of background or circumstances.

Advising Matters

As a developmental psychologist and educator, I continue to reflect on what President George W. Bush called “the soft bigotry of low expectations” when signing his No Child Left Behind education bill into law. Bush was referring to the fact that some teachers, counselors, and other adults have low expectations for children based on family economic resources or race. I experienced this firsthand when my high school guidance counselor attempted to steer me away from competitive colleges or universities, no doubt because my father never finished high school and worked as a machinist. This kind of implicit bias continues to this day, as I know from Smith students who have confided similar stories to me. To counteract this bias, Smith is investing in career advising attuned to the needs of first-generation and low-income students. We are committed to ensuring that every student has access to four years of career counseling to support—and help raise—students’ aspirations for themselves. Further, we are engaging our alums and parents in the career-advising process, to help us expand professional networks for students who lack family connections.

All Means All

A college experience extends beyond the classroom, particularly on a residential campus. For example, student learning and development are deepened by conducting summer research, gaining meaningful work experience through internships, studying abroad, and participating in student activities. At Smith, we guarantee every student access to funding for a summer internship experience so that students who rely on summer earnings to fund their education can participate in enriching—but often unpaid—work experiences. Similarly, we recently increased student stipends for on-campus summer research, opening to every student the opportunity to strengthen their portfolios for graduate school, fellowships, and careers. More than 20 years ago, Smith instituted a policy in which a student’s financial aid award would “travel” with her if she elected to study away from campus, ensuring that a life-changing experience like study abroad was not limited to those from affluent families. Although we have endowed funds to cover costs associated with sports equipment, books, and commencement robes, we need additional resources to meet the needs of all students.

Modest Interventions Send Strong Signals

Without a doubt, it takes financial resources to equalize the student experience, so I am making this a fundraising priority. At the same time, many powerful interventions cost nothing at all. For example, it costs nothing to use more understandable and inclusive language to describe the opportunities the college



offers. As the first in my family to go to college, I experienced a pivotal moment when a psychology faculty member extended a personal invitation to attend a “colloquium” in child development. I had no idea that a colloquium was just an academic term for a professional talk, but the faculty member’s personal invitation gave me the courage to attend. Soon I was working in her lab, which led to graduate study and my eventual academic career.

A few years ago, a conversation with first-generation students persuaded me that asking faculty to be clear and explicit about the purpose of “office hours”—an opaque term to many first-generation students—would go a long way toward building important student–faculty rela-

tionships. At Smith, our teaching and learning center works hard to dispel the myth that, as one student put it, “you only go to office hours if you have a question worthy of a Nobel Prize.”

I was fortunate to have an outstanding academic experience in college. I am cognizant every day that it could have been otherwise for me, as it remains for too many young people. In my leadership work today, I take every opportunity to join with low-income and first-generation students in making ourselves visible. Every year, a Smith student group known as CLIFS—the Council for Low-Income and First-Gen Students—holds a celebration on the steps of our Campus Center to share their pride. I stand with them, as do other faculty and

staff in our CLIFS T-shirts, seeing and being seen.

When I went to college, I was supported by the generosity of those who came before me. They did not know me or my family or my life circumstances, but they knew the power of education to change lives. And so do I. There is much left to do to ensure all students have the same opportunities once they arrive on campus and that all experience the same sense of belonging. Working to equalize the student experience is the most rewarding part of my job. ■



Kathleen McCartney, PhD, is the president of Smith College. Email: presidentmccartney@smith.edu.