

DATE: April 27, 2015

TO: Smith College Faculty

FROM: Daphne Lamothe and Audrey Smith, Admission Policy Study Group co-chairs

cc: Admission Policy Study Group

**RE: Admission Policy Study Group Report and Recommendations**

### **Executive Summary**

At the April 29 meeting of the faculty we will discuss and ask for your advisory vote on the following three motions resulting from the work of the Admission Policy Study Group:

1. Who should be considered for admission to Smith:
  - a. To be considered for admission candidates must live and/or identify as a woman or have been designated female at birth (DFAB) regardless of gender identity.  
or
  - b. To be considered for admission candidates must live and/or identify as a woman.
2. What documentation is needed for consideration for admission to Smith:  
To be considered for admission to Smith candidates must select “female” on the application.
3. The president should establish a working group charged with developing a comprehensive approach to support all transgender and non-binary students at Smith College. The group should begin its work in fall 2015.

The results of the advisory vote will be communicated, along with the recommendations of the Admission Policy Study Group, to the Board of Trustees.

### **Background**

President McCartney and Board Chair Elizabeth Eveillard charged the Admission Policy Study Group to present to the faculty and trustees a recommendation regarding admission policy in light of Smith’s mission as a women’s college at a time when concepts of gender are evolving. Currently, Smith expects that to be considered for admission, all of the applicant’s materials (transcript, letters of recommendation, etc.) must consistently reflect identity as a woman. The study group was asked to make recommendations on two questions:

- In addition to women, should Smith also consider gender nonconforming individuals and/or transmen for admission?

- Is self-identification of gender identity sufficient for admission consideration, or should any additional documentation be presented in order to be considered for admission to Smith?

As part of our charge, we were asked to:

- Consult experts and research in relevant fields;
- Seek input from individuals and groups in the Smith community;
- Share relevant material with the faculty, which is charged with oversight of admission policy, so that they can make an informed evaluation of the study group recommendations;
- Keep the board of trustees informed on its progress, as they will make the final decision on any change in admission policy.

We served as co-chairs of the study group, which included the following members of the Smith community: **Carrie Baker**, Associate Professor of the Study of Women and Gender; **Zoe Brian '17**; **Jennifer Chrisler '92**, Vice President for Alumnae Relations, Executive Director of the Alumnae Association; **Tobias Davis '03**, Assistant Director, Continuing Education, Smith School For Social Work; **Liberty Dupuis '17**; **Mehammed Mack**, Assistant Professor of French Studies; **Kevin Quashie**, Professor of Afro-American Studies; **Amy Rhodes '91**, Associate Professor of Geosciences; **Debra Shaver**, Dean of Admission; **Haruka Shimoto '15**; and **Nancy Whittier**, Professor of Sociology.

### **Summary of our work:**

The study group met regularly from December 2014 through April 2015. We consulted broadly with experts and members of the Smith community. Our interactions took a variety of forms; members of the study group (sometimes the full study group and sometimes representatives) met with faculty from the Program for the Study of Women and Gender; met with the college attorney and the Board of Trustees; reviewed responses (over 1,800) to the feedback form provided by the president; met with students; spoke with staff members in student affairs; hosted an open meeting with faculty and one with staff council; heard from alumnae through telephone listening sessions timed to allow international alumnae participation; and provided an interim report to the faculty. While we kept abreast of policy announcements at other women's colleges, our work was guided by the charge to develop a policy recommendation that reflects Smith's distinct mission, history and current climate.

The study group read widely and debated intensively during our meetings. We worked as a committee of the whole as well as in subcommittees. Members reflected deeply on our mission as a women's college and reported evolving and shifting views as our work progressed. The importance of a supportive campus climate for all members of the Smith community was central to our deliberations.

We thoroughly discussed our understanding of Smith's mission as a women's college in light of evolving understandings of gender. We acknowledged the past, present and future presence of gender non-conforming individuals as well as trans men in the Smith student body. We agreed on the importance of ensuring a supportive and welcoming environment for all students, including gender non-conforming individuals, but could not reach consensus on whether considering trans men for admission was in keeping with Smith's mission. As a result, the study group presents two differing motions on this question for your consideration.

Although not part of our formal charge, our recommendation also includes a motion to establish a working group to address campus climate issues for transgender students. This issue was central to our deliberations and, in our view, is a critical institutional need regardless of admission policy in order to

ensure that Smith provides a supportive learning environment for all of its students, including gender nonconforming students.

### **Recommendations:**

Below we provide our policy recommendations for the two questions we were asked to address, a brief rationale for each, and a motion for the faculty consider.

**Question 1:** In addition to women, should Smith also consider gender nonconforming individuals and/or transmen for admission?

The study group's charge was to make a recommendation in light of our mission as a women's college, a mission strongly endorsed by all members of the study group. **The study group unanimously affirmed that as an institution founded on the commitment to expand educational opportunities for women, that designated male at birth (DMAB) trans women are eligible for consideration for admission to Smith. We recommend this be made more explicit in admissions materials and the admission department's website.**

Given the group's interpretation of Smith's mission and our evolving understanding of gender, we wrestled with the question of whether gender nonconforming people should be considered for admission. Some study group members recommended that Smith consider for admission all designated female at birth (DFAB) individuals, regardless of current gender identification, while other members recommended that Smith consider only those individuals who currently identify and/or live as women. Both these interpretations of Smith's mission support a welcoming stance to trans women. Both interpretations also recommend that we should *not* consider gender nonconforming DMAB individuals for admission to Smith.

We present the rationale for both points of view for your consideration and will be asking faculty members to offer an advisory vote in favor of either Policy Option A or Policy Option B outlined below.

#### **Policy Option A.**

Our charge to consider admission policy for transgender students was made in light of our mission as a women's college. We understand this mission to serve those who currently identify as women, or were DFAB. We view the mission as affirming and supporting gender diversity, openly acknowledging the full range of experiences available to DFAB individuals, as well as recognizing that trans women belong at Smith College. Therefore, we recommend the following policy for admission:

Policy:

**Smith should consider for admission all who currently live and/or identify as women, and all DFAB individuals regardless of gender identification.**

This policy makes explicit its welcoming stance to trans women and gender nonconforming DFAB individuals as well as trans men. Trans men and gender nonconforming DFAB individuals are expected to check female on the application form if they find "female" an accurate reflection of their legal or social status or a more accurate fit for their gender identity than "male." The College should revisit this expectation if the Common App is revised to include more than two categories of gender identification. Given our broad understanding of gender, our focus on women's education means that we should consider for admission those woman-identified and DFAB individuals who seek entrance into a community dedicated to educating women of promise.

**Policy Option B.**

Our charge to consider admission policy for transgender students was made in light of our mission as a women's college. We understand this mission to serve those who currently live and/or identify as women. We view the mission as asking all applicants to accept and embrace the college's call to educate women, and at the same time as compatible with gender diversity. Therefore we recommend the following policy for admission:

Policy:

**Smith should consider for admission all who currently live and/or identify as women.** This policy makes explicit a welcoming stance to trans women and asks gender nonconforming individuals who were DFAB to accept the female classification on the Common Application form if they see themselves as fitting within Smith’s mission as a women’s college. While we have a broad understanding of gender, our focus on women’s education means that we should consider for admission only those woman-identified individuals who seek entrance into a community dedicated to educating women of promise.

The distinction between Policy Options A and B is that policy Option A welcomes applications from *all* DFAB individuals regardless of current gender identity, and Policy Option B affirms current admission policy which expects that candidates identify as a woman.

- **Motion 1: Smith should adopt one of the following policies for admission:**

**A: To be considered for admission candidates must live and/or identify as a woman or have been designated female at birth, regardless of gender identity.**

**B: To be considered for admission, candidates must live and/or identify as a woman.**

**Question 2:** Is self- identification of gender identity sufficient for admission consideration, or should any additional documentation be presented in order to be considered for admission to Smith?

**The study group believes that self-identification of gender identity is sufficient for admission consideration.**

As the study group began its work, we were reminded that both society and the law is evolving in its understanding of gender identity and expression. There is inconsistency at the state level regarding who and how one can update one’s legal gender markers. Trans youth find varying degrees of support in their homes, their schools, their faith communities and their circles of friends. Considering these many challenges, the study group was reminded of guidance received from the College’s legal counsel that recommended “In light of these laws, private colleges should adopt fair and well-reasoned policies regarding the admission of transgender applicants that will best fulfill the institution’s core mission. The policies should be clear, easy to apply, uniformly enforced, and readily available for review by all applicants.”

It is this guiding principle that informs the study group’s recommendation. The simplest way to ensure Smith’s policy is clear and easy to apply is to require a candidate for admission to select “female” on the application form.

Smith has long been an institution that believes in the power of a woman’s voice; we feel strongly that in this decision our track record and behavior should be no different.

If the college decides to consider for admission DFAB individuals who identify as men or as gender non-conforming or non-binary (Option A under Motion 1), those applicants would be expected to select “female” on the Common Application form, as a reflection of their legal or social status, or a better fit for their gender identity than “male”. We anticipate that at some point in time, the Common Application may offer a third category of gender identification (i. e. Other). In light of this potential, the College may need to reconsider this policy yet again.

- **Motion 2: To be considered for admission to Smith College applicants must select “female” on the application.**

### **Supporting transgender and non-binary students now and in the future:**

This occasion to review the Admission policy has underscored for all study group members that we do and will continue to have a range of gender expressions present in the Smith community. Together, we have both the opportunity and the obligation to support those individuals. In the spirit of building a culture that listens and responds to its members, we strongly recommend the establishment of a working group to identify barriers to inclusion for our trans community members.

Downstream considerations were not within the scope of the Study Group’s charge, yet in the majority of conversations the question of who we admit was inextricably linked with how we welcome those individuals. From our conversations with members of the student affairs staff, students, alumnae, faculty and staff, it became clear that community engagement, education and planning were required to ensure the necessary cultural shift on campus to lower harassment and raise inclusion and acceptance. While not exhaustive, the following represent the potential areas for exploration:

- Campus climate
- Classroom experience
- Curriculum
- Athletics, physical education and recreation
- Preferred name, name change and technology systems
- Housing & residential life
- Public Safety
- Healthcare
- Facilities and access
- Recruitment and retention of transgender staff and faculty

Smith is a college committed to the belief that diversity in all aspects of the educational environment is necessary for achieving the highest level of academic excellence. Supporting transgender and gender fluid students through their inclusion in the life of campus and ensuring positive educational experiences is important to fulfilling this belief in the value of diversity and allowing every student to participate fully in the Smith experience.

- **Motion 3: The president should establish a working group charged with developing a comprehensive approach to support all transgender and non-binary students at Smith College. This group should begin its work in fall 2015.**