

**Summary Report with Recommendations  
Presented to the  
Alumnae Association of Smith College  
Board of Directors Meeting**

**Task Force on Clubs and Groups  
Northampton, Massachusetts  
April 18, 2009**

## Introduction

The Task Force on Clubs and Groups was formed in February 2008 and charged with studying alumnae club structures and other local connections. The Task Force is comprised of six members and a paid external facilitator. Of the seven, four are alumnae, and two serve on the Alumnae Association of Smith College (AASC) Board of Directors, including the Task Force Chair. This report summarizes the methods, the results, and the recommendations, which are presented for review and consideration.

## Formal Charge to Task Force (February 2008)

This task force will evaluate the current alumnae club structure, purpose, and effectiveness. Using interviews and surveys it will investigate and recommend the best way for clubs to connect alumnae to Smith and each other at the local level and what type of support will be needed from alumnae volunteers and the AASC.

The task force will:

1. Examine the volunteer structure to optimize its utility and relevance to the alumnae, the AASC, and the College
2. Survey club volunteers
3. Survey peer institutions
4. Plan travel to meet with club officers in person
5. Conduct focus groups
6. Devise structure and support needed for redefined groups to move forward and make recommendations to the AASC board

While the charge was crafted by the Task Force in early 2008, the information collected and analyzed over the next twelve months broadened to more than “club” structures. With input from alumnae and peer institutions, it became more important to understand and create a number of opportunities for them to connect with other alumnae and with Smith College locally. This report reflects the broader perspective.

## Methods and Recommendations:

### Methods:

The Task Force's recommendations are the results of a nine-month analysis of the current Smith Club structure at the local level, which included the following information-gathering methods:

- An on-line survey sent to 24,000 alumnae (approximately half of all alumnae), with 4886 completed responses (roughly 20%)
- Phone interviews with 13 presidents of local clubs (both working well and experiencing challenges)
- Facilitated conversation with five seniors
- Facilitated work group meeting with the Regional Club Coordinators (RCCs)
- Attendance at regional meeting and webinar with peers
- Review of benchmark studies
- Interview with researcher on women and connections

### Recommendations

The key finding in the Task Force's analyses was that clubs are only one of many ways alumnae want and do connect locally. For the purposes of this project, "locally" was defined as "having geographical proximity where face-to-face meetings are possible." This includes connections such as Smith Europe and New England where "local" includes broader geographical areas.

The following recommendations are organized around three themes, two of which tie closely to two goals in the current 2009-2014 Strategic Plan for the Alumnae Association of Smith College: Connections and Leadership. Goal one states that connection means to "provide and strengthen connections among alumnae that foster greater engagement with Smith." <sup>1</sup> The second goal, leadership, means that the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://alumnae.smith.edu/strategic\\_plan/goals.php](http://alumnae.smith.edu/strategic_plan/goals.php)

AASC “models effective and exemplary leadership in support of alumnae relations.”<sup>2</sup>  
The third theme tied to these results is Engagement.

### **Recommendation 1**

To **connect** alumnae to each other and the college, clubs need to:

- a. Promote links to clubs as one of an array of options for making Smith connections. Other options for connecting include affinity groups, communities (such as LBGTQ, MBA, Chorus), online discussions
- b. Find creative ways to reach alumnae locally and “push” more effective on-line communication that will encourage them to get involved and engaged more regularly
- c. Teach alumnae how to get connected and stay connected at the local level and with the AASC
- d. Partner with the AASC in the role of facilitator, encouraging alumnae to connect and contribute, using broadly defined metrics
- e. Coordinate events that involve faculty lectures, cultural and civic activities, social opportunities and career networking
- f. Cultivate both intergenerational opportunities (book groups, lectures, civic events) as well as generational and more specific interest groups, such as young alumnae, mothers, and specific professions

### **Recommendation 2**

To **engage** alumnae as volunteers, local leaders and the AASC need to:

- a. Collect up-to-date data on all alumnae, and exchange these demographic data with one another on a regular basis when they change

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<sup>2</sup> [http://alumnae.smith.edu/strategic\\_plan/goals.php](http://alumnae.smith.edu/strategic_plan/goals.php)

- b. Reach out to alumnae regularly using all forms of available technology (email, networks, online tools) to encourage them to keep their contact information current and to invite them to get involved
- c. Allow local structures to develop which are flexible to meet a variety of local needs, creating many models or ways to connect, such as social groups, admissions-focused teams, lectures, networking events, etc.
- d. Learn from clubs with longstanding success about signature events, leadership models, and flexible
- e. Revise and update any print materials (policies, procedures, the club President's Handbook) to create more flexible structures
- f. Offer volunteer roles that link alumnae to those they want to meet or who might help them develop new skills
- g. Connect alumnae through being part of a team and/or assign them roles that are task-specific and less time-consuming

### **Recommendation 3**

To attract alumnae to volunteer and **lead**, the AASC needs to:

- a. Provide advice and guidelines, local web support, and event planning assistance (in priority order) to local volunteers, including training on organization, delegation, communication and leadership
- b. Partner with the *Alumnae Quarterly* more effectively as a communication tool for clubs and groups. The Task Force recognizes its strength and value as a tool to “push” or “pull” alumnae to connect and engage through the Web site with other alums, clubs, groups, volunteer roles and other Smith College opportunities
- c. Position Smith as a leader among its peers in studying alumni issues around clubs and groups, particularly for colleges in the liberal arts and for those that are all female

### Related Issues for the AASC to Consider:

First, the Task Force recognizes that the data access and related recommendations above are tied to a much larger issue of Web site infrastructure and resources needed to achieve the highest functionality for all users. These recommendations support the work that others are doing to promote a fully-functional set of Web tools and resources for alumnae seeking connections.

Secondly, the issue of money is a complex one. Further exploration is recommended. To that end, the Task Force suggests that a different committee or task force be charged with exploring issues around dues, club fundraising, event planning and fee collection at the local level, as well as club finances and the applicable legal ramifications.

Thirdly, women and their connections to Smith College are linked to their emotional identity -- a finding learned through conversations with a Smith faculty member who researches women and connections. These connections to Smith are predicted to intensify when alumnae link events or information to their desires for intellectual rigor/continuing education, their personal connections based on house affiliations, their respect for Seven Sister traditions, and/or their commitment to broader women's issues. The exact content and methods of communication are beyond the scope and expertise of this Task Force. However, the importance of the research warrants further attention from those with expertise in communication.

Finally, the survey yielded rich data from more than 4,800 alumnae. Going forward, the Task Force thinks it makes sense for AASC staff to continue examining the responses received from this survey to identify additional opportunities to help alumnae make connections with others, locally, regionally and virtually. In reviewing the "write-in" comments allowed for on the survey, some alumnae clearly identified themselves and their needs (access to database, desire to make a local connection). Whenever possible, members of the Task Force have and will work with the AASC club staff to make those connections and resolve their issues.

### Summary and Action Plan

The results of this work recommend that clubs are one of an array of options for alumnae to connect locally and virtually. The RCC representatives are the team best positioned to work with these data closely to structure a process of alumnae and volunteer leader training, communication, and technology: to 1) support accurate and timely exchange of alumnae data among the College, the AASC and the alumnae, and 2) create opportunities for alumnae to connect face to face in ways that are meaningful locally. It is well understood that those connections build long-lasting and positive relationships which promote volunteer service and financial support to Smith College.