



Association of International Education Administrators
Leaders in International Higher Education

A World College for the World's Women

Carol T. Christ, President
Smith College

The world is strikingly different than it was when U.S. colleges established their study abroad programs, starting in the 1920s. Today, we arrive in Europe in eight hours, not eight days, and we communicate cheaply, in seconds, by e-mail and text messages, not by letters typed laboriously on onionskin paper and shipped across the Atlantic. Borders shift and blur as the once voiceless can now reach millions instantaneously, and we have seen the political fruit born by a global community more deeply connected and yet vehemently divided.

At Smith College, our mission is to educate women of promise who will change the world. The challenges we face in doing so grow in depth and urgency as the world becomes increasingly “flat.” Colleges and universities need to educate their students to understand the perspectives of other cultures, and to develop in their future leaders a commitment to international understanding. Our students cannot succeed in a world they have not broadly lived in, and they cannot lead across borders they have not themselves crossed.

A global education begins on our own campuses. Our colleges and universities must become both of and for the world, manifesting explicit commitments to internationalism in our student bodies, curricula, and ethos. International and intercultural studies must become a compelling intellectual focal point for students and faculty across the disciplines and across the curriculum. At Smith, one of our most resonant messages to prospective students is the guarantee of an education that is global in scope, in which every student, regardless of her major or her means, graduates with a transformative, sustained experience of other cultures.

Increasingly, women are recognized as the hope of nations. Around the world, governments, NGOs and businesses are realizing that educating women and girls is the most powerful way to fight poverty and extremism and strengthen civil society. And yet, in too many parts of the world, girls and women still receive an inadequate education or no education at all and are restricted from full participation in society. Making progress in addressing this gender gap requires intelligent women from many nationalities and socioeconomic backgrounds, who are globally educated and prepared to lead. As a women's college, Smith holds a central role in speaking directly to the growing global need for women's access to high quality, transformative, global education.

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It was a bold act for Smith to send a group of young women abroad to Paris in 1925; to Madrid and Florence in 1930 and 1931; and to Geneva in 1946, to a Europe just beginning to recover from the war. The first generations of students studying in Europe saw momentous historical events. Our Madrid program was housed at the International Institute, whose library was one of the few sources for foreign books in Franco's Spain. When the first Florence class visited Rome, a representative of the group had a private audience with Mussolini. The first class to go to Geneva traveled to the American zone in Germany, observed the preparatory Commission of the International Refugee Organization at the Palace of Nations, home to the new United Nations, and witnessed Eleanor Roosevelt conducting the first meetings of the Commission on Human Rights.

Today, more than half of our students undertake learning experiences abroad or away, through Smith-run programs, through consortial programs we run in partnership with other institutions, and at universities and colleges on nearly every continent. They teach children's dance in Cambodia; they develop locally sourced products to address the needs of a Nicaraguan community; they study the philosophies of India at the Sorbonne; they learn tectonics and the history of physics the Universität Hamburg; and they analyze climate change in the cloud forests of Costa Rica.

As a pioneer in bringing women into STEM fields, we are expanding our students' options for studying science and engineering internationally, and even doing academic internships in international labs, countering the stereotype that study abroad is limited to the humanities and social sciences.

When Eleanor Roosevelt spoke at Smith in 1949, she described the world situation in words that apply today: "How well prepared are we to live in a world that has constantly grown smaller and where we must rub shoulders with people of different cultures, of completely different customs and habits and religions, who live under different legal systems, whose languages are different?" I think we have to answer, more than 60 years later, that we are not as well prepared as we should be to live in this increasingly small and volatile world and that other countries may understand more about us than we do about them. Students need the cultural fluency that enables them to work across different cultures, both within their own countries and around the globe.

As colleges and universities grow to meet these demands, we face new realities and opportunities. The concept of an international education is quickly moving beyond study and work abroad programs, beyond the established paths and timelines of a four-year undergraduate education. As our pool of potential students diversifies, so must we: through growing strategic partnerships with universities, schools, government agencies, corporations and NGOs, and through a rethinking of how and where we can foster, inspire, and challenge the next generation of global leaders.

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From its inception, Smith has embraced its responsibilities as a college of and for the world. As the demand for higher education increase around the world and as more countries recognize the importance of educating women, Smith and other U.S. women's colleges expect to enroll more international students, as well as underrepresented U.S. populations. All of these students require and deserve the opportunity to acquire a global and multicultural perspective. They are the women of promise who will transform our world.

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