



I AM NOT A TROUBLEMAKER

Student Mobilization and
the Diversity Committee
at Smith College

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HST 383 Final Project



On April 5, 2002, a group of students of color at Smith College created the Students' Grassroots Organizing Group (SGOG) to protest racist incidents on campus. Between March and May, Black and Brown students reported bigotry and discrimination in their houses.

The housing system at Smith is unique in its close-knit community and individual house cultures, but the system is also historically white and affluent. For students of color, life in the houses became particularly dangerous and disturbing in 2002 because of the climate of the United States so recently after 9/11.

When the SGOG presented a list of their demands to the administration, the first was to restructure the Diversity Boards, a campus-wide house council position whose goal was to promote diversity and combat racism within the houses. Though the Diversity Boards date back to at least the 1990s, these positions were untrained, had little institutional support, and were often students of color putting in unpaid emotional labor to fix a bigger systemic issue.

This demand called for "a restructuring and expansion of all house diversity board programs, which would involve clearer definitions of these house diversity board positions, and would require training for these students."

Thus began a reimagining of the diversity representatives and a repeating series of student-led organizing groups to combat institutional racism at Smith College.



SPRING 2002

In the spring of 2002, two Latina residents of Cutter spoke out about several hateful acts of racism committed by student leaders in their house.

As a response, the Latin American Student Organization (LASO, formerly NOSOTRAS) staged a "brown-out", a type of protest for black and brown students exclusively, in the Cutter- Ziskind dining hall. In doing so, they found that students in Ziskind were also experiencing racism and xenophobia in their house "community".

On April 5, someone found a homophobic threat written on a bathroom stall in Gardiner House, which was the first of multiple instances that month. This prompted students to create a space to **"talk about issues, create dialogue, and mobilize around issues occurring on campus"**. That same day, the Students' Grassroots Organizing Group (SGOG) was born, and 156 people attended their first meeting.

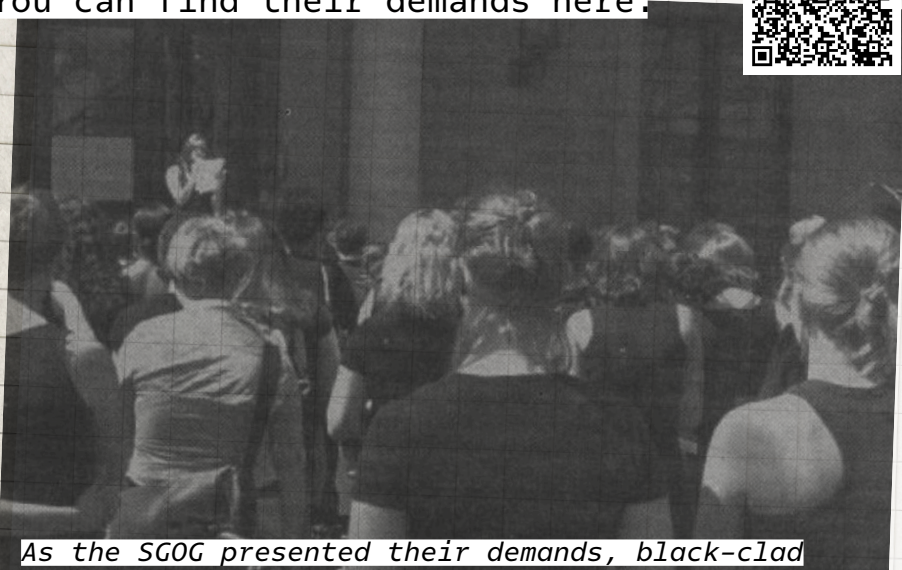


SGOG leaders at their first negotiation meeting with the administration. From left: Shea Rao, Carrie, Jenn, Roz Smith, Yvonne Tiger, Johanna Gutierrez

Remarkably, the SGOG were not the first students at Smith to face racism and feel unwelcome in their houses. Fourteen years earlier, a similar group of students called Concerned Students of All Colors (CSAC) organized a list of demands that called out the College's lack of institutional response to racism and bigotry in the student body.

On April 16, 2002, the SGOG presented their demands, which quoted the CSAC's work.

You can find their demands here:



As the SGOG presented their demands, black-clad students rallied at Neilson Library against racism and homophobia in support of their black and brown peers.

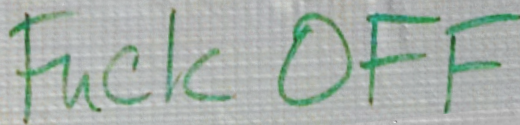
The SGOG noticed that many people, even some of their non-white peers, turned their cheek to the pervasive bigotry in the Smith community during this time. As Yvonne Tiger, a leader of SGOG, explained, **"We always seemed to have a good turnout, but it was almost always the same faces... allies show up, and the people who really need to be there aren't."**

The Students' Grassroots Organizing Group noticed several trends during this Spring '02:

1. In conflicts with white students, the non-white students were often the only ones disciplined.

"I am afraid of doing anything because I feel that I will be penalized... if a woman of Color does something to a white student, she will suffer the consequences, but if a white student does something to a student of Color, nothing is really done." -Cutter Resident, '02

SO AGAIN...Do NOT ask Yvonne, Clare, Sheela or Jennifer what the deal is, or what the incidences are. Go to a meeting or a rally and educate yourselves.



Fuck OFF

Section of Yvonne Tiger's poster, which she duct taped to her door and surrounded with the words "Fuck Off" after it had been ripped off multiple times by housemates.

2. Instead of attending SGOG meetings and educating themselves, white students consistently relied on the students of color in the SGOG to teach them about campus issues.

"Do not knock on my door and ask me about the grassroots organization, or what happened in our last meeting... You need to educate yourself, you need to come to a meeting... I've got work to do."
-Yvonne Tiger AC

3. Often, white students who considered themselves allies displayed superiority complexes and overshadowed the students of color during SGOG rallies and meetings.

"They were allies, and they were willing to help out. But when it came down to knowing... you could tell from the interactions that more white women were speaking, more than the women of color were."

"We understand that they are our allies, and they have to understand that they have the privilege and we don't right now."

- Johanna Gutierrez '04

4. Students in the SGOG were exhausted, physically, mentally, and emotionally. They didn't sleep, they lost friends, and they experienced severe burnout.

"It literally sucked the life out of me. People, friends, professors approached me and were like, 'you need to stop.' They were like, 'you need to calm down'. But I was so driven by anger."

"It was very stressful because we had to go to class and assume that we have normal lives, and in the meanwhile all this craziness was happening around us... So, all of us- all the women of color especially, were exhausted that year. We were drained."

-Johanna Gutierrez '04

Progress was not immediate. On April 23, the SGOG was appalled to find more racist and homophobic threats in another Gardiner bathroom stall. That night, concerned students rallied across campus and held a candle-light vigil on the Quad.

Yvonne Tiger recounts this night as an explosive turning point. **"It felt like people didn't have to hide their racism all of a sudden. That people had a right to their racism."**

For students of color in the SGOG, the work was never-ending. Throughout the rest of the semester, they held protests, occupied College Hall, and met with acting President John Connolly in an all-college meeting to discuss the campus climate.



Vigil on the Quad

Yvonne and her fellow SGOG leaders met with the administration time and time again to negotiate their demands and come to an agreement. **"We disrupted campus, we pulled people out of their classrooms, and we spoke, and we spoke, and we spoke, and we spoke, and we spoke. And we weren't popular for it. We became the stereotypes of the troublemakers and angry black and brown women."**

FALL 2002-'12

The SGOG's first demand, which included "a complete restructuring of house diversity board programs", pushed the student body to respond.

The following year, the SGA created a new Diversity Committee meant to support house Diversity Representatives and promote equity on campus. But the committee's short life revealed how shallow Smith's commitment really was. Diversity Representatives received no training and the committee had little institutional support.

Perhaps the clearest sign of the campus climate came during the first election for Diversity Committee Chair: not a single student ran. In the end, the Director of Student Engagement hand-selected a white student, Tobias Packer '05, whose persistent LGBTQ+ advocacy made him seem like a safe choice. As Packer later reflected, "there was no thought coming from the administration... or anyone outside of a handful of students who saw potential in it, to nurture leadership, facilitate conversation, and resource it as a position that mattered."

His comment highlights the pattern the SGOG had already identified, where the labor was always necessary, but nobody wanted to put in that work themselves. The college's call for change rested on the expectation that someone else would take responsibility.

The Diversity Committee Mission Statement (2007): to serve as a resource for students interested in promoting diversity; raise issues of diversity among the student body; and promote awareness in the student body by raising issues and creating spaces for dialogue to create safer, more accepting college committees.



First of several Race, Privilege, and Prejudice talks hosted by the Diversity Committee

Although the mission statement pledged these goals, the committee's early work rarely moved beyond surface-level programming. Acting SGA President Lindsey Watson '03 emphasized that the new body would unify house-level diversity efforts by creating campus-wide initiatives, and in its first years the committee hosted events on race, privilege, and prejudice. Yet despite these intentions, the committee quickly shifted toward symbolic celebrations rather than confronting systemic issues.

As former Diversity Chair Mac Hamilton (2012-2013) explained, the board became **"much more focused on celebrating diversity in Smith houses through events like cultural potlucks than... dealing with the very real conflicts and microaggressions that were rampant both in Smith houses and on an administrative level."** As a result, students (including those within SGA) grew increasingly frustrated by the board's limited social-justice impact during its first decade.



SPRING 2012

As archivist John Thelin (2009) explains, campuses like Smith are prone to "institutional amnesia," a recurring cycle in which collective memory fades as students graduate and leadership turns over every four years. This amnesia helps explain why, despite the SGOG demands and rallies of 2002, similar patterns of bigotry and student mobilization reemerged a decade later.

In the spring of 2012, student-led organizing arose in response to campus bigotry because the work from 2002 had been insufficiently maintained by the SGA's Diversity Committee and subsequently forgotten.

On February 23, alumna Anne Spurzem '84 sent a letter to the editor of the *Sophian*, pictured below. Spurzem condemned Smith's diversity of students in recent years, mourning the loss of **"white, wealthy, upper-class students from prep schools in cashmere coats and pearls who marry Amherst men."** This letter echoed the bigotry that students of color faced in spring of 2002.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor,

I am the president of the Smith Club of Westchester County. I enjoy reading the *Sophian* online because it helps me stay abreast of developments at the school.

I read your article about [President] Carol [Christ]'s resignation and it had some interesting statistics. It mentioned the percentage increase in the population of women of color and foreign students. The gist of the article was that one of Carol's objectives coming into the position was to increase diversity and the article gave statistics that showed that she did.

As someone who has followed admissions for many years, I can tell you how the school is viewed by students in Westchester and Fairfield Counties. First, these counties are some of the wealthiest in the country. The children have parents who are highly educated

and accomplished and have high household incomes. The children are programmed from day one to get into Ivy League schools.

To this demographic, Smith is a safety school. Also, very few of these students want to go to a single sex school. With the exception of Wellesley, it is not hard to get into the Seven Sisters any more. The reason why Wellesley is more selective is because it is smaller than Smith and in a better geographic location — Boston beats Northampton.

The people who are attending Smith these days are A) lesbians or B) international students who get financial aid or C) low-income women of color who are the first generation in their family to go to college and will go to any school that gives them enough money. Carol emphasizes that this is one of her goals, and so that's why the school needs more money for scholarships or

D) white heterosexual girls who can't get into Ivy League schools.

Smith no longer looks at SATs because if it did, it would have to report them to U.S. News & World Report. Low-income black and Hispanic students generally have lower SATs than whites or Asians of any income bracket. This is an acknowledged fact because they don't have access to expensive prep classes or private tutors.

To accomplish [President Christ's] mission of diversity, the school is underweighting SAT scores. This phenomenon has been widely discussed in the *New York Times* Education section. If you reduce your standards for grades and scores, you drop in the rankings, although you have accomplished a noble social objective. Smith has one of the highest diversity rates in the country.

I can tell you that the days of white, wealthy, upper-class students from prep schools in cashmere coats and pearls who marry Amherst men are over. This is unfortunate because it is this demographic that puts their name on buildings, donates great art and subsidizes scholarships.

-Anne Spurzem '84



In retaliation, students created a Tumblr blog called Pearls and Cashmere, **"intended to celebrate the diversity in our community and show how diversity strengthens the Smith community rather than weakening it."**

Students, alumnae, and the greater 5 college community shared open letters to Spurzem and images of themselves dressed in pearls and cashmere, highlighting intersectionality as one of Smith's most valuable assets.

Campus tensions, already heightened by the Spurzem letter, escalated when a Parsons student received anonymous hate notes containing racist and homophobic slurs that explicitly referenced the letter. As in 2002, students responded by mobilizing against what they identified as the college's ongoing failure to support marginalized members of the Smith community.

They held rallies and wrote an open letter to the Smith community, denouncing racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and classism. This letter highlighted the importance of administrative action: **"Student organizing is not enough."**

You can find the letter (and the archived Pearls and Cashmere Tumblr) here:



This time, unlike in 2002, the Diversity Committee already existed, and it functioned as a critical resource for student mobilization. As a chartered organization within the SGA, the committee received funding from Smith, enabling students to print hundreds of flyers and circulate messages to the entire student body.

Yet despite this access, the Diversity Committee remained structurally unable to enact institutional change. The continued lack of standardized training for Diversity Representatives revealed a deeper institutional failure. As Dean of Residence Life Hannah Durrant acknowledged, diversity training lacked any stable framework, with leadership changing between Residence Life, the Center for Spiritual and Religious Life, the Office for Equity and Inclusion, and even outside hires recruited by SGA. This inconsistency emphasized the administration's unwillingness to institutionalize diversity work.

In response, and following the legacy of the SGOG, the Diversity Committee issued formal demands to the administration, insisting that Diversity Representatives be recognized as "core" house council members and receive intensive leadership and diversity training. As in 2002, student pressure produced some adjustments, but never a complete structural overhaul as an institution.

They presented these demands in the following spring of 2013. You can find them here:



Soon after, the Diversity Committee was renamed the Social Justice and Equity (SJE) Committee, and house Diversity Representatives became SJE Representatives. The shift in language was intentional because "diversity" didn't capture the social justice work students were interested in.

As a direct result of the committee's demands, training for SJE Representatives finally became more structured. Representatives were elected in the spring semester, allowing them to move in early alongside other core house council members and participate in leadership and diversity training before the academic year began.

Unsurprisingly, however, these reforms fell short of students' hopes. As former Residence Life officer Annie Cohen later explained, many houses failed to elect an SJE Representative at all, delaying the position until the following semester. In practice, this often meant pressuring first-year students of color to fill the role, revealing how institutionalized "diversity" efforts continued to rely on the unpaid labor of marginalized students rather than systemic support.

Students had mixed feelings about the SJE Committee. 2014 SJE Chair, Nancy Chen, put it simply: **"We were a newer committee. People weren't really taking us seriously."**

*Screenshots from the anonymous
Smith Confessional website*

thoughts on smith's SJE board?



Oh. Dear. God. Another long and rambling email from SJE.



So who's excited to get back to Smith for SJE Rep training?



(first timer here, I am!)

people I don't respect: SJE reps who hold the title in their house and are incredibly aware, but do not engage and stay silent when people (their friends) commit microaggressions. I don't care about how "aware" you like to tout and advertise yourself as being. I am also aware that it is never the responsibility for POC to have to "educate others". But in this instance, it IS your job. Suck it up, and do your job, instead of then running off and bitching about the person behind their back. That's not progress. 0 respect for you.



the SJE system was kind of messed up, the student leaders had to do way too much unpaid work and the school provided little to no support for SJE reps even when they had trainings

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FALL 2014

Against the backdrop of the rising Black Lives Matter movement and nationwide police violence against Black men, the need for sustained social justice organizing at Smith persisted.

In September of 2014, the Smith College President at the time, Kathleen McCartney, moderated an alumnae panel on free speech during which Wendy Kaminer '71, a white woman, used the n-word and urged the audience to repeat it aloud: **"See? I said that, nothing horrible happened."**

Despite widespread student and faculty outrage, President McCartney neither denounced Kaminer's use of the word nor issued a direct apology, even in her subsequent email to the Smith community responding to calls for accountability.

To make matters worse, McCartney later sent an email to the student body addressing racial injustice after the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and signed off with the phrase **"all lives matter,"** further alienating students who were already calling for institutional accountability.

President McCartney's Email: Panel transcription:



In December, students of color and the SJE Committee organized No Happy Holidays, a week of action responding to ongoing police brutality against Black people. Throughout the week, Black and Brown Smith students led rallies and invited allies to join campus-wide protests in solidarity and mourning. While student organizers framed the moment as one of urgency and accountability, President McCartney (in her "all lives matter" email) pointed instead to the annual Vespers holiday concert as a space for communal reflection and grief.

Students rejected this reframing. During Vespers, protesters disrupted the event with banners reading **"No Happy Holidays because #ICANTBREATHE,"** demonstrating the difference between institutional gestures of unity and the lived reality of racialized violence.

Read the email here:



Top: No Happy Holidays protesters disrupting Vespers

Bottom: SJE representatives hosting a sit-in protest at Smith during the NYC Millions March.



2017-2020

Despite flawed training and the continued lack of support from the administration, the SJE continued its work each year.

This left many students of color with burnout and emotional fatigue. The (unpaid!) labor of being the face of diversity in student houses and bearing the responsibility of educating peers was unmanageable.

On the other hand, some SJE Representatives were well-meaning white students who weren't able to recognize (or call out) racism in their houses or among their friends.

The question arose: should this role even be an unpaid house council position in the first place? As Durrant put it, **"students of color should be able to just go home."**

In the spring of 2017, the SGA put the committee on hold and reconsidered the structure of the SJE Representatives entirely. After the world came to a stop when COVID-19 was declared a national emergency, the SJE Committee never returned to the SGA constitution.

LEAD CORPS

As an alternative to the SJE Representatives, the Office for Equity and Inclusion and the Wurtele Center for Collaborative Leadership came together to create the LEAD Scholars Program. The program consists of two semester- long classes focused on social justice, equity and inclusion, and leadership skills.

LEAD Students are taught to think about their social identities and how those identities shape their leadership and relationships. With this framework, students learn how to guide their peers through difficult situations regarding social justice and equity.

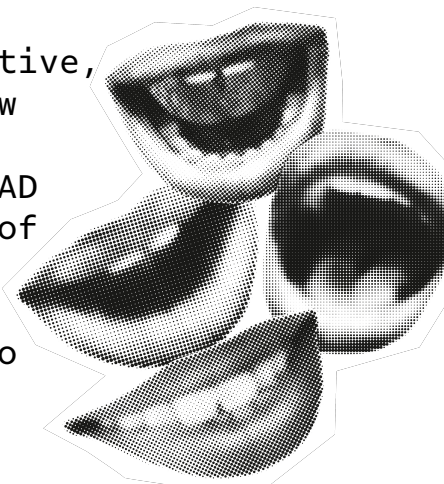


After completing a year of training, students may apply to join the LEAD Corps, a paid work-study program that now fulfills the roles once associated with the SJE Committee. Although LEAD Corps Co-Director Annie Cohen emphasized that the program was not designed to directly replace the committee, its institutional support and paid structure have effectively removed the need for the SJE Committee.

Today, houses, clubs, teams, and other campus groups can request LEAD Corps members to facilitate workshops, conversations, or responses to moments of conflict. After meeting with the LEAD Corps, students are expected to carry their new skills back into their own communities, redistributing the labor of equity work across campus.

In contrast to the SJE Committee, the LEAD Corps offers consistent training and institutional backing for students committed to social justice. LEAD responds to a long-standing student demand that equity work be treated as skilled labor rather than unpaid volunteer work.

However, what was once collective, student-led organizing has now been turned into an institutionalized service. LEAD may fix some of the failures of earlier models, but it's lost the power of the unchartered student mobilization groups to challenge the administration.



METHODS

This project is part of Professor Elizabeth Pryor's "History of People of Color at Smith College" class. The bulk of this research was conducted with the Weaving Voices Archives, a large collection of history focused on students of color and racial history at Smith created by students. Lots of this research also came out of the Smith College Archives.

I conducted several interviews with Smith College staff and alumni to gain a better perspective of the true student experience. Interviews with Smith staff were mostly conducted in person and I took notes to remember key details. Interviews with alumni were conducted virtually and recorded and transcribed.

Most of the alumni I spoke to were recommended to me by the Director of Student Engagement during our interview. She provided me with the names of a few prominent SGA members who were heavily involved in the Diversity/SJE Committee.

I reached out to Yvonne Tiger online after discovering a scrapbook in the Smith College Archives of newspaper clippings, photographs, and flyers from 2002, put together by Yvonne herself. In 2005, another student interviewed several other SGOG members as part of a research project. I used her interview transcripts for more insight into the SGOG story.

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