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## Wednesday Communiqué, 3/21/2012

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## WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUE

March 21, 2012

**Welcome back!** I hope that you all had a restful Spring break and that you are ready to get back to teaching and learning! I spent last week in Italy with my family, visiting some friends in Rome, Tuscany, and Naples and attending a workshop in Rome for a retiring colleague.

**Academic Plan Series:** Dr. Carol Christ, the President of Smith College, and the former Executive Vice Chancellor of UC Berkeley will be our third Academic Planning series speaker. Her talk, “Selective Forgetting and Innovation in Higher Education” will take place on Monday, March 26 at 3:30 p.m. in the Centennial Engineering Center auditorium. Dr. Christ has focused recently on issues such as women’s careers, civil discourse and the expectations and demands of accountability in the academy. Under Dr. Christ's leadership, Smith has made significant commitments to international and intercultural studies and to global outreach and recruitment. Fifteen percent of the Smith class who entered fall 2011 are citizens of countries other than the United States.

**Opinion Fitting:** In statistics and machine learning research, there is often the problem of the lack of data or more appropriately the lack of information, even when data is abundant. I have noticed that this is also the case when dealing with non-technical complex situations, where we tend to make our minds up before we have had enough data to draw a conclusion, or that we tend to seek opinions that often match ours. There will obviously be a shortage of information as we reinforce our biases and become more fixated on supporting our initial conclusions as opposed to allowing the data to surprise us. Even experts in the scientific method tend to disregard opposing views in politics and other beliefs.

**Who graduates from College?** A recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education provides a tool for measuring and comparing college graduation and completion rates in the US (<http://collegecompletion.chronicle.com/>). The data on college completion is disturbing but I have also found that some universities (such as Arizona State University and San Diego State University) have made great strides in recent years and should be carefully examined and copied.

**Do Rankings matter?** *US News & World Reports* has just released its 2013 graduate school rankings. A number of UNM’s medical programs are highly ranked (second in rural medicine, fifth in family medicine and 31st in primary care, while the School of Nursing Midwifery Program is ranked fifth in the U.S). Many of our other programs did not fare as well, but I personally believe that rankings are one of the windows to the quality of our graduate programs. They are especially useful for attracting graduate students, and while we should not play to the rankings, they have their place in recruiting graduate students who are not already aligned with a specific faculty adviser.

**Interesting Books:** One of our faculty colleagues suggested that I read the book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, by Rebecca Skloot. I must confess that I had never heard of this wonderful book until then, and that I am enjoying reading it. During the Spring break, I did finish the beautifully written book, *House of Stones*, by Anthony Shadid, the NY Times reporter who died recently of an asthma attack while covering the conflict in Syria. This book hit close to home for me, but many will enjoy learning about the Levant and recent events in the Middle East from Mr. Shadid’s book.

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Sincerely, Chaouki Abdallah, Provost & Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs