

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Women's Studies Quarterly

Archives and Special Collections

---

1974

### Feminism at a Rural University: A Report from the University of Idaho

Cheri Register

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsqa/109>

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)



## Feminism at a Rural University: A Report from the University of Idaho

Moscow, Idaho, the dried pea and lentil capital of the world, is situated between Potlatch and Genesee, 85 miles southeast of Spokane, Washington. Its population is 13,000, a figure that must include a good share of the 7,000 students at the University of Idaho. It is not listed in national feminist catalogs—a lack that is due less to the failure of local feminist efforts than to the urban bias prevalent in the women's movement.

In my two years with the University of Idaho Women's Center, I watched—and, I hope, helped—a new spurt of feminism take hold in Moscow. I spent the first year trying to transplant my urban feminist experience in alien soil and the second trying to learn what form feminism ought to take in a rural environment.

The Women's Center does have some contact with the outside world, mainly because I came in from Minneapolis with my own store of information. That is not a boast, but, rather, a recognition of Moscow's isolation, which does dampen spirits. Many women look to the Women's Center as their only source of emotional support. If it is not in tune with their own interests and goals and lifestyles, they have nowhere else to turn—no women's health collectives, no feminist bookstores, no lesbian resource centers, nothing like the proliferation of small groups in urban areas. Without that diversity, we miss one of the benefits (yes!) of factionalism: the mutual criticism that leads to self-examination and a clarification of goals and strategies. The Women's Center can easily become a tightly-knit enclave of undefined feminism which meets the needs of some women at the expense of others—just another sorority on a campus that already has ten thriving chapters.

Our urban counterparts occasionally send us surveys asking the usual questions: How do we deal with the gay/straight split? Are minority women involved in our center? Are we aiming for a women's studies department or an interdisciplinary program? Do we offer job placement services? These are the wrong questions. The gay women in Moscow are still in the closet and minority women are nearly invisible. Building *any* women's studies program is difficult when the standard liberal arts departments are underdeveloped. We can't offer job placement with no jobs. The relevant questions would be these: How do you reduce a drop-out rate of 51 percent among female undergraduates? (The male rate is 3 percent.) How do you keep women in school when their only role models are typists with B.A.'s and M.A.'s? Should you promote women's studies when the routes to power in the state are agriculture, forestry, and the School of Mines? How do you appeal to Mormon women without threatening to crumble their

value systems? How do you overcome self-declared feminists' unsisterly hostility toward sorority women? What do you do for "faculty wives," the captive unemployed, trained for jobs that don't exist in the region? How do you reconcile the needs of newcomers, exposed to feminism "back East" or in California, with the needs of women who spent their first 18 years in Bovill or Salmon or Jerome? Where do you direct your zeal when you have no big, impersonal enemies? How do you build a stable feminist organization with a transient population?

The last two questions are the crucial ones. The zap actions, guerilla theater, and protest demonstrations that provide urban feminists with a sense of involvement and accomplishment are seldom applicable in Moscow. University politics are an intricate maze of casual personal favors and repayments, far more frustrating and harder to fight than the politics of the larger urban universities I am familiar with. The legislature is in Boise, more than 300 miles away via US 95, the only federally numbered goat trail in the country. The Mormon church has functioned as the bogeyman in the past, to little avail. Unless rampant sexism can be found in wheat farming and Appaloosa horse breeding, Moscow feminists may have to be content with less dramatic actions. The Women's Center has done well at encouraging individual efforts. Mary and Debbie,\* accounting majors, integrated the local chapter of Alpha Kappa Psi, the business fraternity, which consequently lost its charter and reconstituted as a coed professional organization. Mary then defeated a macho opponent for a student seat on the Faculty Council. Carla sent back her diploma because it read, "Be it known to all men . . ." The President immediately ordered a new supply with the offending line deleted. It even made the Paul Harvey news! Gretchen is now showing her favorite photographs, which she had previously kept hidden because her male instructors didn't appreciate their feminist message. Karen is a promising young writer of feminist speculative fiction in search of a market. As the wife of the highest-ranking ROTC officer on campus, Isabel is automatically in charge of the auxiliary. Rather than refusing her "social duties," she is using the opportunity to show younger women the unromantic aspects of military dependency. Betty and Colleen, who have rediscovered their athletic interests, are coaching a girls' softball team at the junior high school. Joan, a 40-year-old freshman woman turned or by Virginia Woolf, is peddling women's literature to her friends.

\*In this section first names only are used in order to preserve anonymity of the individuals.

(continued on page 8)

### INTRODUCING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

*But every time I got into an argument with either a chauvinist male or a chauvinist female, I found I lacked the arguments to support my point. I found that some people don't believe that discrimination is wrong or that everyone should have an equal chance. This class gave me good, solid arguments.*—a college student.

For the second year the Minnesota Women's Center (MWC) and the Living-Learning Center (LLC, a part of University College) at the University of Minnesota are offering a directed-study project, "Introducing High School Students to the Women's Movement." Two main goals of the two-quarter, six to eight-credit sequence answer the needs of high school students for information and education about the women's movement, and provide undergraduate women at the University with research and development training in women's studies.

Last year, the Minnesota Women's Center and other feminist agencies were inundated with requests from high schools for speak-

ers to discuss the changing roles of women. In turn many students scraping together their own "women's studies" programs from the meager supply of opportunities on campus at that time were eager to interact with the community. They turned to the Living-Learning Center which acts as a liaison in obtaining academic credit for community learning experiences. Joint funding and intra-staff cooperation resulted in a successful pilot project during the spring of 1973, with fifteen undergraduates participating.

The students' experiences with each other and in solving problems of interacting with the high school students produced ideas for improving the course this year. Undergraduates were at varying levels of feminist consciousness when they began the directed study project. Both student and staff evaluations of the pilot project suggested that one quarter was not sufficient for learning about feminism *and* about how to share that learning with high school students.

(continued on page 13)



## Feminism at a Rural University (continued)

Stephanie is not only preparing herself for a career in forestry, but is investigating the U.S. Forest Service, to prepare it for an influx of women.

The problem of transience, of course, afflicts all universities, but it is compounded in Moscow by other factors, not the least of which is the phenomenal drop-out rate. Once a student drops out, there is nothing for her to do in Moscow. Unlike Berkeley or Hyde Park in Chicago, Moscow has no community of hangers-on. The University is primarily an undergraduate institution, so few students stay more than four years. There is an annual influx of disenchanted urbanites seeking culture-in-the-mountains—a new, less crowded Boulder, Colorado. The picture books of Idaho don't prepare them for the treeless wheat and lentil fields and the dry, dusty summers. Many of them move on. The faculty is also transient, since the younger ones are generally looking for better jobs elsewhere. Of the five people who taught women's studies courses in 1973-74, three have left to take new jobs (myself included).

Women's studies has not yet caught on at the University of Idaho, but I think its time is coming. In September 1973, in connection with a moderately successful Women's Week, I tried to launch a campaign for women's studies. The few people interested were the same ones who show up for everything, and women's studies was not their priority. I redirected my enthusiasm to the regular programming in the Women's Center. We ran at least two lecture-discussions a week, many of which drew wall-to-wall crowds. Other groups offer free kegs of beer to get such audiences! I also got the English Department to hire me to teach a full, three-credit "Women and Literature" course which was very successful. Unfortunately, it won't continue. I also team-taught a two-credit course cryptically titled "Women's and Men's Roles in Society." It was a dismal example of how not to team teach. Jolene Ramaker, a teaching assistant who has since moved away, taught a one-credit satellite course on sexism in education. Nancy Mendoza offered a short speech course called "The Rhetoric of the Feminist Movement" which she plans to repeat. My hope is that the pressure for women's studies at Idaho will come from the students whose appetites have been whetted by these few courses and the Women's Center programs.

Just as I pulled out of town, a new project got underway. Several of the Women's Center volunteers were working on a grant proposal for a study of the rural feminist tradition. Anyone curious about the project or willing to help define "rural feminism" should write to Corky Bush, c/o Women's Center, Administration Building, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho 83843.

Moscow feminists need to find a place within the larger feminist movement, and communication with sisters elsewhere is essential. What is needed, though, is realistic advice and support, not condescension. I am sure that the new coordinator, Celia Banks, will relish hearing from you as much as I have.

Cheri Register

*Sisterhood is Powerful  
Everywhere (see page 2).*



## Any Change in Sexist Texts? (continued)

*English and social studies classes. The study showed the quality of textbooks to be impaired consistently by repeated patterns of sex-role stereotyping.*

*Given this conclusion, what were the prospects for improving American textbooks during this decade? Specifically, how were publishers planning to ameliorate the biases in their texts? Were there any new plans to produce supplementary materials about women's achievements?*

*Education publishers were approached directly with these questions, in an attempt to assess the current climate of the industry in relation to the prospects for nonsexist education.*

*Prior to the study, it was anticipated that some publishers might be threatened by the feminist labels of the interviewers. However, all the publishing representatives were cordial, though not necessarily sympathetic to their point of view. Occasionally, Mss. Froschl and Arlow met with hostile remarks: "Feminists want to put books through a sterilization process and come out with something anti-septic." At other times they were challenged: "What do you want to do, get rid of Hemingway?" and, "Isn't this book-burning?"*

*Whatever its motivation, each group spent a great deal of time with the Feminist Press representatives who took part in large and small meetings, formal discussions with management, and moving personal talks with feminist editors. In a few cases, they later learned that their appearance may have helped stimulate feminists to organize committees or establish guidelines to begin eliminating sex bias from texts.*

*Generally, the editors and publishers exhibited some awareness of feminist issues and some sensitivity to sexism in texts. Early pressures on the marketplace—generated by test cases in Michigan and Texas and a new law in California—have apparently begun to make publishers listen to feminists and others in a position to select or reject textbooks. It may no longer be possible for publishers to deny that textbooks contain sex bias. On the other hand, they apparently do not consider it to be in their interest (financially) to take a strong initiative in the job of eliminating that bias from their books.*

*Although every company claimed that feminist issues were a top priority, the interviewers found many levels of consciousness, and these attitudes apparently dictated the house reaction to criticisms of its books.*

*Despite the sympathies of even the most enlightened editors interviewed, few plans were reported for new texts based on original research, and none for supplementary materials about women. (Explanations offered were economic: all publishers' backlists represent large investments; textbooks take at least ten years to produce, etc.)*

*Evidently, the publishing industry as a whole is not yet committed to fundamental change. At present, most publishers appear to be satisfied with little reforms: the shift in pronoun usage, for example,*  
(continued on page 9)

## Seattle Schools Clean House (continued)

the rapid elimination of sex bias. But in the Seattle schools, with or without administrative support, a momentum of change has been firmly initiated. Inevitably that movement will force the reluctant male-dominated systems to clean house.

*The author is a member of CESS and a graduate student in curriculum at U. of Washington. This past year she initiated and co-taught the Seattle Public School staff development course, "Sexism in Society and Schools."*