Introducing High School Students to the Women's Movement

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Recommended Citation
Henricks, Sharon; Magnusen, Etta; and Wetzel, Jodi, "Introducing High School Students to the Women's Movement" (1974). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/110
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 center 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 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 turned 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.

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-
Introducing High School Students to the Women's Movement (continued)

We decided on the two-quarter sequence in order to prepare each undergraduate more thoroughly for the complex experience of teaching others.

During the first quarter the course involves lectures, such films as Make-Out, and readings from books, including Eve Merriam's Growing Up Female in America: Ten Lives and Konopka's Adolescent Girls in Conflict. Undergraduates research and discuss weekly such topics as: adolescent attitudes about sex roles, the history of women and women in history, the media's image of women as contrasted with reality, and the status of the current women's movement.

By the end of the first quarter, students have learned a substantial amount about the movement, and their interests have crystallized in one or more problem areas. By this time the undergraduates have completed the design of their interaction projects for use in the high schools. These projects are designed either individually or in small groups of two or three. A contract between the undergraduate, the faculty advisor, and the course coordinator is arranged, stating the project's objectives and the details of where, when, and how often it will be presented. The contract also includes how best to evaluate the student effort. The contract is necessarily flexible to meet the needs of both the University undergraduates and the high school students.

An ongoing interaction with students at the same high school is preferred (e.g., two hours a day for two weeks) since repeated contacts will promote more learning and attitudinal change. This method is not always feasible. Schools may not be receptive or may have scheduling problems which preclude such "seminar" arrangements. Many alternative contracts are possible. In the past, directed-study projects have included films, slide shows, videotapes of high school discussions, lectures, and skits. Students have focused on women as political activists, women in history, sex roles in interpersonal relationships, and socialization as it affects career choices. Discussions usually follow the presentations, and those discussions often jar expectations.

One key characteristic of the project is ongoing evaluation by peers, high school students, high school faculty, and the University faculty adviser and coordinator. Such continuing feedback is essential to clarify what content is being communicated and to improve communication skills. (Obviously, with some imagination, this project could be adopted for use in elementary and junior high schools.)

An evaluation sheet was developed by last year's project members, and was often used after high school presentations. Some sample questions and responses follow.

Would you like to see another (different) presentation on the women's movement? Why or why not? “Yes, because I really am interested in it and I think more people should be told exactly what is going on.”

Do you feel you now have enough information to tell someone else what the women's movement is and what it is working for? “No, I'm dumb.”

“Cause really it is a simple movement. For each woman it means different things.”

Did anything you learned from the presentation surprise you? If so, what was it? “It surprised me to see all these women taking security in this so-called movement. Talking all over the state and nation, making people aware, but after they are aware, you take no action. The Lord helps those who help themselves.”

“That you could do anything you wanted as long as you try.”

Did the presentation and discussion change your thinking about feminism? Explain. “I'd like to get involved in things, yet I'm not for a lot of the same things the movement's for. The discussion changed my mind about it.”

How could this presentation have been changed to be more meaningful to you? “Speakers were good but didn't seem quite sure of themselves. And if you aren't, how can I be?”

The stated objectives of the course are:
1. To enable undergraduates to learn about adolescent attitudes toward sex roles.
2. To become informed about the existence and degree of sexism in today's high schools.
3. To attempt to provide an educational experience for high school students which may act as a catalyst.
4. To provide an opportunity for undergraduates to do a community project for academic credit.
5. To enable the undergraduate and high school students to improve their knowledge of the women's movement.
6. To raise the consciousness of educators regarding sexism in their institutions.
7. To provide a more structured directed-study setting for undergraduates prepared for independent study.

The Minnesota Women's Center has made available a curriculum packet describing implementation of the project. The packet includes a sample syllabus, problem-solving mechanisms, pitfalls to avoid, and useful appendices (publicity, how to contact high schools etc.). The packet is available for $1.00 from Minnesota Women's Center, 301 Walter Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 55455.

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Note: The University of Minnesota has since initiated an academically-sound Women's Studies Program, responsive to students, staff and community. Three sequential courses are being offered this academic year: "Comparative Studies of Women" (in modern society, in primitive society, in politics); "Woman: Behavior and Biology"; and "Changing Modes and Images of Courtship." Other academic departments have responded to the suggestion that they should expand their curriculum to include women, with such courses as "Women in American History."