Living/Learning in Women's Studies

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LIVING/LEARNING IN WOMEN'S STUDIES

You may never have heard of Capital University (2500 students, affiliated with the American Lutheran Church), but I can introduce the character of our campus very quickly: located in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, founded 125 years ago and drawing the majority of its students from Ohio. Befitting its location in this conservative area of the Midwest, the campus too is highly conservative. Nevertheless, in this environment a sustained and dedicated effort has been going on for the past four years to bring a feminist perspective to our campus, to encourage and keep feminist students and to develop a solid core of women's studies courses. Despite some faculty and alumni opposition, we now offer a number of women's studies courses on a regular or semi-regular basis in a variety of departments, taught from a variety of approaches, but all incorporating a recognition of the feminist viewpoint. Our most innovative program, considered extremely experimental on our campus, will go into effect this fall: a three-term (two semesters, one interim) living/learning experience in women's studies.

A sister faculty member and I (representing the English and ethnic studies departments), in cooperation with the student life and counseling staffs, have arranged for one small corridor of a new women's dormitory to be designated the Women's Studies Corridor. Seventeen women can be accommodated and 17 have signed up. Additionally, we allowed a small group of commuter students to register for the course, and following a number of calls from off-campus women, have determined to maintain an open class. Faculty and student women from nearby campuses as well as women from the community will be welcome to sit in on as many sessions as they wish and to contribute to the learning/sharing environment. For the convenience of off-campus participants, most of our classes will be held evenings in the corridor itself. There will also be a browsing library on the floor; we have ordered several feminist newspapers and periodicals, plus a varied selection of the most important feminist books. One of our decisions centered on whether the corridor should be one which is physically closed off or one which joins the rest of the dorm. For better or for worse, our consensus was to choose a closed corridor, our reasoning being that this might stimulate greater closeness and community among the women. Indeed, building a sense of women's community on campus is a major goal of the program.

Will this corridor create an academic ghetto? One needs to comprehend the peculiar nature of our campus to understand the need for such a program. Many of our feminist students have, with justice, complained about the lack of support outside the classroom and about the separation of interested women as they are scattered among several dorms on campus. There are other reasons which will prevent ghettoizing: the women come from three undergraduate classes and they have many close friends who are not living on the corridor; each semester they will be taking a number of other courses in the traditional academic structure; and among the 17 women, there are 13 different majors represented.

First semester, the course will be a general introduction to women's studies, multidisciplinary, team and group taught, and will include assertiveness training, films and tapes, as well as readings on such topics as racism/sexism, the older woman, women and work and life styles. The optional interim term (month of January) will consist of a series of field trips to investigate other women's studies programs in the state, at large and small, public and private, community and technical schools. Second semester, the students will enroll in a course entitled Survey of Modern Literature, which will be taught from a feminist perspective and will engage many different resource people. Among other things, we will be using our own loose-leaf textbook for the course, since no current anthology meets the specific needs of this group.

Despite some overt hostility toward the program, much of the response has been positive. Several faculty members are excited enough to have volunteered their services (i.e., a 45-year-old woman wants to discuss what it means to be middle-aged in this youth culture, a male psychologist wishes to explore his expanding awareness of the different psychology of women): the student life staff is exuberant; my team teacher and I are excited about the possibilities for the emergence of a strong women's consciousness on campus; the off-campus community response has been enthusiastically supportive and the students are highly energized.

Judith Ann Sturnick
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GRASS ROOTS (continued)

range goals for cultural change. In all of the planning meetings and regional or statewide events I have attended in the past two years, the sense of shared purposes has enabled us to transcend the usual barriers caused by differences of age, philosophy, artistic training and professional roles.

WWIA's strength lies in diversity. Because of it, we can work collectively on several levels at once: to achieve financial support for women artists, to provide a testing ground for ideas and works, to share knowledge of creative processes, to broaden the base of appreciation for our works. But there are also difficulties in diversity. Weavers, painters, actresses and writers often have separate personal/professional needs, and WWIA has not yet found a way to serve the function of, say, a professional association of weavers at the same time it plays its unique role in supporting all Wisconsin women in the arts. There are also practical difficulties involved in travelling up to 50 miles for a regional chapter meeting in below zero weather on a thick carpet of snow. Nonetheless, the organization has proved its soundness by the projects it has generated and if it can survive the transition from its shelter in the UW-Extension to total financial independence this fall, it could be an historic achievement in a movement to enlarge the spaces for art and women in society.

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