Summer 1976

Grass Roots Women's Studies: South Carolina

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Recommended Citation

Todd, Leslie and Todd, Linda, "Grass Roots Women's Studies: South Carolina" (1976). CUNY Academic Works. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/175

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Although big industry is changing South Carolina's standing as a mainly agricultural state, its population is still generally rural—and conservative. Several major corporations have built plants in recent years; the attendant influx of upper middle-class families has created pockets of comparative wealth. Despite these new population clusters, however, the state's educational standards reflect a "small-town" ethos, particularly at the secondary level. Most of South Carolina's liberal arts colleges are located around its more densely populated cities: Columbia (the state capital, located in the center of the state; population approximately 114,000); Greenville (in the northwest corner, population approximately 62,000) and Charleston (on the eastern seaboard, population approximately 67,000).

In a survey sent to 23 colleges and universities around the state and 27 high schools in four large counties (Charleston, Lexington, Richland and Greenville), I asked for information in three areas of women's studies and resources: descriptions of courses, seminars or lectures offered which deal with the contributions or conditions of women in society; the availability of women's studies resources in the campus libraries and bookstores; and information on the medical and psychological services available to women (including career counseling, assertiveness training, crisis centers, gynecological services, pregnancy testing and abortion referral).

Changes in the curriculum take an unusually long time in this state, and it appears that women's studies has only begun to be considered at a few of the higher level institutions. The lack of response from the high schools was predictable; at the secondary level, such courses are still considered "trendy" and sometimes even radical. There is no strong, unified attempt to implement changes in the South Carolina school system—out of 27 secondary schools, only 10 completed and returned the questionnaire; of these, nine gave negative responses to every question (i.e., no courses or services are offered which are geared specifically to women). Only one—Airport High School in the Columbia area—is attempting such innovations. The library and guidance departments have been publicizing information on "new careers for women"; and a new world culture course called Great Women deals with the "roles of women, their successes and gains." In September, Airport High will offer coeducational physical education courses for the first time. Contact sports, however, will remain segregated. If these changes seem minimal, one should note that the Great Women course replaces one titled Petticoat Politics. As an Airport teacher wrote, "It's a long, hard struggle, but we are struggling."

The reason most often given for the secondary school's hesitation to offer women-oriented courses and services is that the current interest in them is "faddish." Why consider them when even such basics as math and English may suffer under restrictive budgets? Of the 23 colleges and universities polled, nine completed and returned the survey; of these, seven contained affirmative responses and two were wholly negative. A description of the programs and services offered at the seven "active" institutions are as follows.

Converse College, a women's college of 900 students, enjoys the first Women's Center in the state. Dr. Linda Brooks has geared the program to "life planning" rather than career counseling. Assertiveness training, seminars, referrals and information on job opportunities are available. Converse also offers regularly three courses which emphasize the contributions of women: Southern Literature, Topics in Women's Studies and Women's Roles in a Changing Society. A health program includes gynecological services and counseling.

Furman University recently offered an interdisciplinary course called Women: Roles, Rights and Responsibilities, taught by professors of English, philosophy, political science and sociology. Of major interest, in addition, is their new grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation. Begun in June 1976, a 30-month grant will be used to set up a program in career education and planning for women. It will provide released time for faculty education as well as funds to bring career women to campus as lecturers and guest speakers.

Lander College is small and its funds rather limited; but at least one significant step has been taken recently. The athletic department has awarded scholarships to members of the women's basketball team this year. This is the first time that Lander women have received athletic scholarships. While the academic curriculum does not include any women's courses on an ongoing, regular basis, Women in Contemporary Society was a recent offering. According to Tom Landrum of the college's Public Information Services, "There is a lack of specific programs for women that one might find on a large university campus, but there is certainly no feeling here that would preclude any such movements."

Limestone College offered an interim project this summer titled The Women's Liberation Movement: A Call for Justice which proposed to review the "herstory of the Movement" and to emphasize important contemporary writings.

Medical University of South Carolina reports a campus organization for female faculty, medical and graduate students called The Society for the Preservation of Women in Medicine. Dr. Karen Kreutner and Dr. Sandra Conradi have upgraded the community-oriented rape crisis center, originally organized by People Against Rape and now housed at MUSC.

University of South Carolina offers the only women's studies program in the state. Women's Studies is a cognate recognized by the College of Arts and Letters and the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. An interdisciplinary assortment of courses focused on women allows the student to plan an individual program of study for the bachelor of general studies degree. Courses include Women in Western Culture, Women in Society, Women Writers, Psychology of Women and Historical Perspectives on Women in America. According to Assistant Dean for Special Studies, Dr. Phyllis Fleishel, independent study may be arranged within various departments or ranging across several disciplines. The Women's Studies Program also brings in occasional speakers, for example, Virginia Spencer Carr spoke this spring on her biography of Carson McCullers, The Lonely Hunter. USC provides gynecological services at its infirmary, and several crisis centers and a Women's Services Center in Columbia provide free or low-cost medical and psychological help for women students.

Wofford College reports no specific courses or services, although the Association of Wofford Women "provides a forum for the discussion of women's problems on campus."

Linda Todd