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Grass Roots Women's Studies: Chicago

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The women's studies offerings on college campuses in the Chicago area seem, at first glance, disappointing. The University of Chicago has no courses in this field; neither Northwestern University nor the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle allows an undergraduate major. But despite such inauspicious indications of a general lack of commitment to women's studies in the Second City, there are still a number of more or less established programs available. For example, both Chicago Circle and Northwestern, although they give no degree in women's studies, do staff courses that would almost allow one. At Circle, approximately 80 women each quarter take an interdisciplinary core course such as American Women Today, Women in History, Literature, and Art; or Women in Other Cultures and the Future. These courses (one is given each quarter) are taught collectively and often utilize guest lecturers. Chicago Circle also offers, in various departments, a number of other courses which focus on women. Thus, through the Student Designed Curriculum option, an individual can put together a program which emphasizes women's studies. Inquiries may be addressed to Sandra Bartky of the Philosophy Department.

Northwestern's nondegree Program on Women is somewhat newer than Chicago Circle's and differently organized. A special pamphlet lists every course of interest to women that will be given each term (generally ten to sixteen offerings taken by four or five hundred students per quarter). Clearly, there is a good deal of student interest in these courses. In fact, a Women's Studies Committee under the direction of Arlene Kaplan Daniels, is currently investigating the possibility of a formal degree program. Also of note at Northwestern is The Women's Collection, an excellent resource center containing serial publications, books and topical files. Sarah Sherman is in charge of this library collection which also publishes a newsletter detailing holdings and occasionally announcing events of interest.

A broad selection of essentially feminist courses is also available at both Northeastern Illinois University and Governors State University in Park Forest South. The first of these two schools lists some 50 women's courses in its catalog. Approximately two dozen are offered on a regular basis each year. At Northeastern Illinois, Blanche Hersh coordinates the program which has now been in existence for almost five years and operates through the school's Center for Program Development. Although there is currently no regular undergraduate major, a student can put one together through experimental options approved by the university. A graduate student working for a master's degree in social science can, however, major in women's studies. Northeastern Illinois also plans to open, in the next few months, a Women's Studies Resource Center which will provide a reference room for students and faculty doing research in women's studies.

At Governors State University, Harriet Gross coordinates a women's studies program which currently has 33 majors. This interdisciplinary program sponsored by the College of Cultural Studies offers either a "specialization" or an "orientation" in women's studies on both the bachelor's and master's levels. Furthermore, since Governors State is committed to flexibility and innovation, it encourages any interested student to put together her own individualized, competency-based major. Such personalized programs can include academic courses as well as experiential and practical work in the Women's Resource Center. In operation since October, the Center provides referral services, hosts meetings and sponsors monthly speakers. Eventually it will also provide job counselling and personal therapy for community women and students.

A number of women's studies electives can also be found at Roosevelt University even though it does not have an official major. According to Roma Rosen, Dean of the Graduate Division, approximately eight or ten women's courses are taught at Roosevelt each semester. These are departmental courses, such as Women in Literature or The Psychology of Women, that are generally given at the graduate or senior undergraduate level. A special women's group, comprised of faculty, students and other interested persons, also meets for monthly luncheons to discuss issues of concern to women and frequently features guest speakers.

Other schools in the Chicago area—most notably, College of DuPage and Oakton Community College—evince a commitment to both continuing education and women's studies. College of DuPage, for example, lists in a special brochure, Focus on Women, those courses offered each quarter of particular interest to women. These courses, some ten to twelve each term, range from Sexual Roles in Literature to Women of the Americas to Design for Single Living, and one, New Directions for Women, is specifically designed to explore the problems faced by older women who are attending college for the first time or are returning after lengthy absences. Career and interest testing and counselling services are appropriately incorporated into this class. Betty Coburn, coordinator of Focus on Women, or Adade M. Wheeler, Professor of History, could be contacted for further information. Wheeler also teaches another women's studies course that merits mention. Jointly sponsored by Illinois Benedictine College and the Educational Service Region of the County of DuPage, this class is specifically designed for elementary and high school teachers who wish to incorporate women's studies materials into traditional history or literature courses.

At Oakton Community College, Pat Handzel directs a women's program which features classes designed specifically for women over 25 years of age. These courses, like those at College of DuPage, are often given in convenient off-campus locations and at hours best suited to the schedules of community women. Ten sections of Psychology of Personal Growth are designed for and limited to women students over 25 years of age. About 1500 women take these courses and comprise nearly one-quarter of the student body at Oakton. Oakton also gives noncredit courses on such topics as legal problems and assertiveness training. A resource center, open to students and community, provides job and counselling facilities.

Moraine Valley Community College offers team-taught courses that are also designed for women returning to school. Barbara Yocum, director of the school's Adult Career Resources Center, notes that these particular courses are intended to explore human potential and provide career counselling. And at William Rainey Harper College, a similar women's studies program also serves the needs and interests of the community.

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Two women's colleges, Barat and Mundelein, offer courses that provide a special focus on women. At Barat, these are taught in virtually every department. Mundelein also has a number of courses available on the departmental level (about six each semester). Moreover, a student at Mundelein can pursue a topical major, a student-designed interdepartmental course of studies, with a women's studies emphasis. To help prepare students for positions in the business world, Mundelein offers a comprehensive Women's Management Program.

Two other schools might be briefly mentioned. George Williams College offers three to six credit-bearing courses in women's studies each year as well as a number of noncredit courses. Chicago State University has about the same number of courses and also sponsors six to eight-week seminars on topics such as Counseling for Women. This year Chicago State is also co-sponsoring with the Illinois Humanities Council a nine-part series, Women and Work. This series of lecture/workshops is open to the community and addresses problems relevant to working women: labor unions, health issues, political and economic implications of work. A number of women artists, filmmakers and writers are conducting some of the workshops.

A few other area colleges deserve note. St. Xavier College, for example, will present this spring a number of public lectures and group discussions that center on the question of women in the church in which Chicago-area feminist theologians will participate. And at Loyola University, a course called Mary and the Church: Woman's Status is offered on a semi-regular basis. Also, the City Colleges of Chicago, although they are not specifically commissioned to staff any comprehensive women's studies programs, do offer, on certain campuses, a few women's courses. In the Winter 1976 issue of the Women's Studies Newsletter, for example, Rebecca Anne Sive-Tomashefsky reported on the Women in Print course at Loop College. At Illinois Benedictine College, a formerly all-male school, women have made increasing progress and gained greater official recognition in the past year. At Lewis University, a Women's Law Caucus is working towards developing a women's center and has already established itself as an informational and supportive center for women.

Jean Gillies of the Art Department at Northeastern Illinois, now serves as Chairperson of the Chicago Consortium for Women's Educational Programs. This Consortium was started last year in an effort to bring together women's studies personnel in the area and to foster the exchange of ideas and resources. Bi-monthly forums address topics pertinent to those involved in women's studies. The meeting in March, for example, was devoted to nontraditional educational programs and their possibilities for women. In May, the topic was Part-time Teaching: Is It a Viable Alternative for Women Or Is It Exploitation? Anyone interested in joining the Consortium should contact Jean Gillies. Membership fees are $20 for institutions and $3 for individuals.

Cathy N. Davidson

Relevance in history today is often identified with the discovery of the history of the nonelite classes, those men, women and children of the past who belonged to the vast but inarticulate majority. With the aid of the computer, the scanty evidence: birth, marriage and death dates in town, county or church registers; addresses in city directories; and entries in hospital, prison and census records is yielding information on the economic and social conditions, geographic mobility, and marriage and child-bearing patterns of the lives of those who hitherto have been silent because they left no traditional written sources for historical research. Yet, despite sophisticated analysis, the poor and the middle class, the minorities, the women and the children, the sick, the law-breakers, indeed all except those few men, and fewer women, who won fame, fortune or notoriety, remain statistics or composite constructs without life or personality.

One exception to the usual anonymity of the nonelite woman is Maimie, whose letters are preserved at the Schlesinger Library. After the murder of her prosperous Philadelphia Jewish merchant father when she was 13, Maimie became a morphine addict and prostitute. By her early twenties, she had been an unwilling or helpless resident in eight institutions from reformatories to hospitals. A serious infection which resulted in the loss of one eye and the kindly intervention of a social worker, Mr. Welsh, led to Maimie's reformation and to the initiation of a remarkable correspondence with Mrs. Mark A. DeWolfe Howe (Fanny Quincy Howe) of Boston.

Maimie and her dog, Poke.

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