Planning a National Women's Studies Association

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GRASS ROOTS WOMEN’S STUDIES: SOUTHERN MISSOURI
by Betty Burnett

[With this article, we begin a series of reports written by Contributing Editors, responsible for particular regions they have chosen to cover. Additions, corrections and other remarks responding to this report will be welcome. If you are interested in becoming a Contributing Editor—and writing such a report—see the Spring 1975 Women's Studies Newsletter.]

Missouri is a conservative state, and southern Missouri is its most conservative area. The ERA has been defeated twice, and mainly through the efforts of women. Last spring during the ERA campaign, a lot of bad feeling was aroused and a lot of hysterical talk was heard. People are still afraid of “women’s” anything.

Southern Missouri (south of the Missouri River or I-70) is mainly small town rural, but without the large wealthy farms of northern Missouri and with large, chronically depressed areas. In several Ozark counties over one-third of the population lives below the poverty level and the median school years completed ranges between eight and nine. Literacy programs and vocational training have priority over women’s studies.

The largest city in southern Missouri is Springfield (pop. 120,000). There are 15 college level schools in the area: an extension of the University of Missouri, three state universities, one state college, three district junior colleges and seven small private colleges, six of which are church-affiliated. Fundamentalist religion is very influential in this region, and three of the four fundamentalist schools are determined to hold on to tradition. The fourth, Evangel College, is the most liberal and most receptive to change. Its women—while not feminists in a NOW sense—are aware of women’s potential and importance; they are questioning roles, values and traditions in a quiet, deliberate way. Twila Edwards actively crusades on the Evangel campus and in the fundamentalist community for equality in social relationships, especially in marriage.

In general, the administrators at state colleges are not supportive of women’s studies because, they say, not enough faculty and students are interested, not enough money is available (no one can afford to expand right now), and they don’t feel they can

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each area. Sybil Weir and Elsa Greene chose initial regional representatives from among those who had volunteered help in response to the circulation of the San Jose proposal. Since neither one knew more than a few of the correspondents, they were free to be random about the particular individuals they selected. They did, however, choose so that a wide variety of programs, including those at community colleges, would be included.

The conveners asked each predesignated representative to contact all of the programs and individuals in that region who might be interested in contributing ideas and nominating an additional representative to the Philadelphia meeting. Numerous problems arose: The "regions" turned out to be awkwardly arbitrary; time pressure, out-dated mailing addresses, vacation schedules and budgetary pressures compounded the difficulties of regional communication. Among those contacted, third world women were underrepresented. A number of committed individuals volunteered to attend the meeting at their own expense and were dissuaded in the name of maintaining regional balance. Each woman who was to be present came to realize that a hundred others could as well have come in her place.

Despite complications, when the 30 representatives finally assembled in Philadelphia—from Henniker, Missoula, Cincinnati, Miami, St. Louis, Albuquerque, Brooklyn, Pittsburgh and Pomona—they did, indeed, reflect much of the diversity of women's studies. Each report given at the opening session on Saturday night focused on the particular concerns of each region. But the results of a poll of those who could not attend showed two dominant ideas nation-wide: an insistence that any planning communication. Among those contacted, third world women were underrepresented. A number of committed individuals volunteered to attend the meeting at their own expense and were dissuaded in the name of maintaining regional balance. Each woman who was to be present came to realize that a hundred others could as well have come in her place.

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By Monday afternoon, the planners arrived at virtual consensus on a design for the National Association—one which mediates some of the tensions among our diverse interests and reflects our concern for inclusive, democratic process. All of the quotations and paraphrases that follow are taken from rough drafts generated during workshops and approved in principle at Monday's plenary session. They are offered here as a beginning—to invite critical comments and suggestions for revisions. A coherent, elaborated, amended draft of the working paper will be printed up and circulated well in advance of the national convention. For clarification, for further discussion or to add your name to the planners, contact a person from your region who participated in the meeting. The names of all participants are listed at the end of this article.

THE ASSOCIATION

Purpose: "As a national women's studies organization our aim is to provide and encourage nonsexist, nonracist feminist education in traditional and nontraditional areas of education."

Program: Activities to implement the overall purpose will include: communications (perhaps through a bimonthly newsletter, a quarterly journal and annual conferences); strategies for changing traditional curricula, programs and institutional practices (dis-
"Preliminary to this first National Conference... most of the potential regions are not yet clearly defined by existing organizations, although regional affinities are acknowledged both by tradition and informal network.

"Therefore, the [Workshop] on Regions and Delegates has drawn up 12 temporary regions to be used for the purpose of selecting by lottery the 144 special (students, primary-elementary-secondary) teachers, minority women) and 156 at-large delegates who will participate in conjunction with the approximately 200 [delegates] representing the existing programs identified preliminary to the national planning conference. Each program is to be represented by one delegate... who may be a student, staff person, faculty member or administrator."

Feminist Travel Pool: Every delegate to the meeting at San Jose will be assessed an equal amount for travel costs, wherever she/he happens to live. The common fund will cover travel expenses for everyone.

Conference Agenda: Mornings of the three-day meeting will be given to work on the National Association. The afternoon program will consist of workshops on issues concerning women's studies development—one day on curriculum, one on administration and one on funding. Time and space will be provided throughout the three days for meetings of special interest groups and for spontaneous workshops and caucuses. In addition to elected delegates, some foreign observers may be invited to attend the proceedings.

Voting at the founding conference will be limited to matters concerning the design and functions of the National Association. Election of representatives to the Coordinating Council will take place subsequently in the regions. Until after this first meeting, San Jose State University's Women's Studies Program will collect information and direct planning for the conference and the Association.

Much remains to be done before the conference takes place and the Association becomes a reality—practical planning, fund raising, further communications, principled discussion of issues. But what was six months ago only an idea is now a concrete plan. And if the good feelings generated at the Philadelphia meeting happen to live. The common fund will cover travel expenses for everyone.

Charter Membership in the National Women's Studies Association is open: Programs $50; Individuals $25; Students and Unemployed $10. Checks are to be made payable to the National Women's Studies Association and sent to: Sybil Weir, Women's Studies Coordinator, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA 95192.

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