More Bad News from Virginia

Suzette Henke
MORE BAD NEWS FROM VIRGINIA

Dear Professor Howe:

As you may recall, I wrote to you describing the state of women’s studies at the University of Virginia in the summer of 1975 (Women’s Studies Newsletter, Vol. IV, No. 1). Since that time, there has been almost no perceptible change in the administrative policy at Virginia; things seem to be getting worse rather than better. In the last two years, the university has denied tenure to all female and black assistant professors under consideration. The statistics I will quote are almost exactly the same as those cited in 1975.

As of Spring 1978, the University of Virginia had about fifty women faculty teaching in the College of Arts and Sciences, a figure that represents approximately 10 percent of the College faculty of 550 members. (The figure has risen from 45 in 1975.) There are, however, only ten tenured women and over three hundred tenured men (in comparison to the 1975 figures of nine tenured women and three hundred tenured men). As you can see, the university has gained only one tenured woman in the past four years, though two females were hired in laterally in tenured slots. (One tenured woman, a full professor and chairperson of the German Department, resigned her post in protest against the policies of the university.)

In 1976, five women came up for tenure in the College. Three had published books with university presses and had written between five and ten scholarly articles each. All five women were superbly qualified; all were denied tenure, either at the departmental or the dean’s level. In the fall of 1977, five women were again eligible; one was denied tenure after an initial three-year period of service. Nor do they indicate the number of women faculty who have resigned their positions early, either in protest or as a survival strategy.

These statistics reveal only half the story. They do not include the startling number of women and of minorities who have resigned their positions after suffering the discrimination and harassment that come with untenured status.

In 1976, the Association of Women Faculty at the University of Virginia, along with the Women’s Alliance, a student group, filed a class action complaint with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Because the university was being considered as a recipient of a one-million-dollar federal grant, HEW agreed to investigate this spring. The results have not yet been recorded, but women faculty are not sanguine. Both the faculty and the student organizations lodged complaints with the Board of Trustees, but did not initiate legal action.

In the spring of 1976, the Women’s Alliance petitioned the university for the establishment of a Women’s Studies Program. At that time, we were able to identify the women faculty members teaching courses in women’s studies; we concluded that there were seven faculty teaching nine courses that could serve as the basis for a concentration in the field. After a year’s study, the university recommended the use of “internal resources” to initiate a coordinated Women’s Studies Program. However, the recommendation involves a Catch 22. Some of the women teaching women’s studies courses have been fired or have left the university in protest. At the time of this letter only a few courses remain, and it is not clear how a women’s studies concentration would be implemented.

The university claims that all of the women fired in the past two years were simply not sufficiently well “qualified” for promotion and tenure. In 1976 and 1977, the dean opened a new tenured line to be reserved for a woman hired from outside the institution. This seems, however, little more than a belated and token gesture.

The Board of Trustees now claims to be looking for qualified women and minorities. But those who come here as junior professors do so at their peril. The dean argues that those fired always get “good positions elsewhere.” (This, however, is not true; some are living on unemployment or have left the profession.) One wonders if junior faculty would not be wise to go “elsewhere” first and spare themselves six years in an atmosphere of entrenched conservatism.

Suzette Henke
Department of English
SUNY/Binghamton

NO LONGER “JUST US CHICKENS”

Dear Women’s Studies Newsletter:

We read the Summer issue (Vol. VI, No. 3) with real interest and enthusiasm, gleaning vital information about NWSA events and organizational meetings and enjoying the longer articles and reports, especially Hester Eisenstein’s piece on the Barnard Women’s Studies Program.

We are writing out of deep concern, however, that the pages of the Women’s Studies Newsletter—and other feminist news sources—not be limited to the retelling of our success in feminist areas, and in women’s studies in particular. It has become clear to us, as it is to all of you,