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The Sarah Lawrence Summer Institute in Women's History

Amy Swerdlow

In the summer of 1976, 43 high school teachers from 16 states across the country participated at Sarah Lawrence College in an intensive three-week Summer Institute on the Integration of Women's History into the High School Curriculum. The Institute was conceived by the Committee on Women Historians of the American Historical Association, sponsored by the American Historical Association, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and co-sponsored and designed by the Graduate Program in Women's History at Sarah Lawrence.

Responding to a need among high school teachers for training and materials in women's history, which has proven to be one of the newest and most stimulating perspectives in the writing and teaching of history, the program not only helped teachers correct the biases and omissions of outdated history texts and lesson plans but also stimulated in them, and ultimately in their students, a deepened appreciation for the relevance of historical study.

The major aim of the Institute was to assist high school instructors to assimilate the scholarship and methodology that have emerged at advanced levels of research and education in women's history by providing an intensive learning experience combining course work, workshops, and tutorial projects conducted and guided by outstanding scholars and educators in the field.

The major results can be summarized as follows:

1. All but two of the teachers have begun to integrate women's history into their conventional history and social studies courses, and many have succeeded in initiating new or expanding already established special women's studies courses in their high schools.

2. Nine curriculum packets have been created and are now being edited for publication and dissemination by the American Historical Association to high school teachers across the country in 1978.

3. Over 70 percent of the teachers have been able to share the ideas and materials acquired at Sarah Lawrence with their colleagues and administrators through lectures, inservice courses, or discussion sessions.

4. Many of the teachers are also reaching their communities through lectures and talks at a variety of women's and educational organizations and through interviews and articles in their local newspapers.

The Institute has set in motion a dedicated network of teachers, inspired and energized by their introduction to women's history, who will go on for years sharing with their students, their colleagues, and the community at large their newly found appreciation for women's role in American history and their reawakened appreciation for history in general.

"Caliber and Intensity" of the Experience

The forty-three teachers described the impact of the Institute on their lives in a signed letter to Ms. Magazine published in November 1976:

We will never be the same after three weeks together. The caliber and intensity of this experience have not only enormously expanded our knowledge of the role of women in American history, but, more importantly, they have affected how we view that role and ultimately ourselves and each other. None of us has been untouched or unchanged.

What were the factors that shaped the “caliber and intensity” of the experience at Sarah Lawrence? One was the conceptual framework for the study of women's history that was offered. Another was the teaching method combining lectures, seminars, and workshops aimed at encouraging and accelerating individual learning and group interaction. The third factor was the collective process by which the program was developed. The cooperative interaction among the Institute teachers, graduate student assistants, and the director of the program fostered a nonhier-

Needs Will Not Be Met

Without distinct Women's and Ethnic Studies Programs we see no chance for meeting the need to educate teachers and administrators as to the nature of sexism and racism and the need for educational equity; to develop instructional materials designed to meet the needs of all students and to assist all students in developing a positive self-image and positive career and life goals; to intervene in the socialization process of children, thereby providing a basic educational objective of assisting individuals to become what they are most capable of becoming. These needs will not be met by a consultant here and there. It is imperative that these programs be a full-fledged part of the instructional program.

The authors of this report are all members of the Women's Studies Program staff.
archical spirit of shared educational work, which proved helpful in narrowing the gap between high school and college teachers. The fourth and perhaps most important factor contributing to the success of the Institute was the intelligence, energy, and motivation of the high school teachers. They proved to be such an exceptional group that three weeks of intensive work for the Institute staff became three weeks of great pleasure and gratification—an outstanding educational and human experience valued by all.

Focus on United States History

It was decided early in the planning that the Sarah Lawrence Institute would focus on women in United States history. This decision was made because American history is more widely taught in public schools than European, Asian, or African history and also because the MA program at Sarah Lawrence concentrates on United States history.

The women's history program at Sarah Lawrence College has grown out of the conviction that a male-oriented conceptual framework has dominated the questions and issues by which the past of humankind has been organized and that women's history is more than a collection of missing persons and facts to be inserted into texts in some compensatory fashion. In order to reconstruct the female experience, which is legitimately half of United States history, one must ask new questions and use new sources.

The series of questions developed by the staff of the Institute under Gerda Lerner's direction gave the teachers a methodology by which to develop their teaching units for high school classroom use. These questions, which also shaped the lectures and seminar discussions, were:

1. How did women live and what did they do?
2. How did women relate to other women?
3. What were women told to do? What did they really do?
4. What did women do that men also were doing? What different things did women do?
5. How did women see their world?
6. How did women's sexuality affect their lives?
7. How did motherhood affect the lives of women?
8. How did women respond to their subordinate status, and what were the consequences of their response?
9. How did individual feminist consciousness develop into a collective consciousness? How was it manifested?
10. What events and institutions have been particularly significant for women?
11. Why have women participated in their own oppression?
12. What has been the experience of women of different classes, races, or religious and ethnic groups in terms of the above questions? Can we explain the similarities and differences?

Curriculum Packets

Around the 12 key conceptual questions each group defined a topic, located suitable reading material, developed teaching strategies, invented games and questionnaires, and even made slides, all within a three-week period. They produced nine curriculum packets on the following topics:

1. Family History: A Method for the Study of Social History;
2. Women and Work Outside the Home: Protective Legislation at the Turn of the Century, a Model Packet for the Study of Controversial Issues;
3. A Curriculum Outline for a Unit on Housework;
4. Space and its Effect on Women's and Men's Worlds;
5. The Future of Women;
6. Feminism from Suffrage to Women's Liberation;
7. The Diary and Letters of Kitty Wilding Jacobson (a fictional diary representing the everyday life of a typical woman of the nineteenth century);
8. Deviance in the Nineteenth Century and the American Woman;

How did the teachers use the curriculum packets they created? Most teachers reported that the packets they used had to be adapted for their particular classroom needs. Criticism of the packets indicated that they were too long and often above the reading level of many students. Instruc-
tions to the teachers were either insufficiently clear or unfocused. At the conference it was decided that each published packet should have a brief introduction which would state clearly the rationale for the packet, the significance of the material included, the teaching objectives, and the concepts and skills offered. All the teachers agreed that although the packets needed revision, they are eminently worthy of use and will be appreciated by thousands of teachers throughout the country.

High School Student Response
Most teachers reported positive student response to the new materials and new methods they presented in their classrooms as a result of the Sarah Lawrence Institute. Young women, however, responded more enthusiastically than young men, though the latter did respond favorably if the material was presented in a way which made it seem relevant to their own lives and interests. One teacher advertised on the school radio and through posters with a special pitch, “Men! Wouldn’t you like to know as much about women in American history as women know about men?” Her class was oversubscribed with 20 boys and 13 girls. A course on Changing Sex Roles in a Changing World attracted 25 students at Western Reserve Academy in Cleveland, a very respectable number for this private school. The course was of equal interest to men and women. Some teachers reported a defensiveness on the part of boys and even mothers who objected to “sissy” courses, but another teacher claimed that her male students were sensitive and open-minded and were engaged in collecting materials from newspapers and magazines exhibiting stereotypes of or discrimination against women. The only male teacher at the Institute reported “no noticeable difference in the reaction of my students to the Sarah Lawrence College ideas on the basis of their gender.”

Second Summer Institute to Be Held at Stanford
The second Institute in Women’s History for Secondary School Teachers, sponsored by the American Historical Association, will be held at Stanford University from June 25 to July 15, 1978, under the general direction of Amy Swerdlow, former Project Director of the Sarah Lawrence Institute and will direct the 1978 Stanford Institute.

Conclusion
It is clear that the effect of the Institute will not end with this pilot year. All the high school teachers urged that others be given an opportunity to participate in similar programs. They agreed with the proposal of the AHA’s Committee on Women Historians that new institutes be established to cover other modalities in women’s history and to reach new populations representing other regions of the country, other racial and ethnic groups, and a greater number of males.

The Sarah Lawrence pilot program gave 43 high school teachers the opportunity to study women’s history with dedicated and outstanding scholars. The Institute also gave the scholars an opportunity to deepen their understanding both of the educational process and of the potential of women’s history as stimulus to historical study. The Institute developed a core of high school teachers dedicated to women’s history who have upgraded their own professional status and become agents for history and for change in their schools and their communities.

Forty-three teachers are a small group, however. The need and interest still remain to create a large nucleus of teachers able to introduce women’s history into high schools across the country.

Amy Swerdlow was Project Director of the Sarah Lawrence Institute and will direct the 1978 Stanford Institute.

Emphasis on Family, Chicana History
The Stanford Institute will emphasize family history as well as women’s history, and in so doing introduce teachers to the use of demographic techniques and quantitative methods. A unique offering will be the study of Chicanas and the Chicano family, of special interest to teachers in the Far West. To meet these goals, the Institute will use not only Stanford’s resources, but also those of the Hoover Institute, the Center for Research on Women, and the San Francisco Bay community.

The Stanford Institute in Women’s History for Secondary School Teachers was conceived and initiated by the Committee on Women Historians of the American Historical Association. It will be conducted by the Department of History at Stanford, under the direction of Carolyn Chappell Lougee. Members of the Institute faculty will include Estelle Freedman of Stanford and Renate Bridenthal of Brooklyn College. The Institute will also be planning, for the summer of 1979, a major conference on the teaching of women’s history in the high schools.

Stipends covering tuition and travel are available for the 1978 Summer Institute. For further information, write immediately to Professor Carolyn Chappell Lougee, Department of History, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305.