Evaluation: Perspectives of Students and Graduates

Christine Bose
John Steiger
Philomina Victorine
Wilson suggested, that is often the context in which evaluations and reviews are conducted. In light of this, I think we need to develop guidelines for how to evaluate in politically-charged situations.

There is, however, a larger question. The essential impetus behind women's studies is educational, not academic. Women's studies' educational goals are not necessarily, certainly not exclusively, academic, even in four-year institutions. For economics and other reasons, more and more women are entering community colleges. Before community colleges are judged, much work needs to be done to find out what is going on in them and why; and the first step might well be the collection of many self-evaluations from many different kinds of institutions.

Christine Bose, John Steiger, and Philomena Victorine

**Evaluation: Perspectives of Students and Graduates**

Women's studies, now in its second phase, is making its presence felt within institutions, developing a new curriculum, and building a new body of intellectual knowledge. Women's studies' original purpose continues: to change the sexist and other biased values, practices, and structures within and outside traditional educational spheres.

How much change has occurred? Impact within colleges, high schools, and women's centers is easier to judge than effect in other arenas. Outside educational institutions, impact may be observed through two channels: first, the ties which programs explicitly make with community groups; second, students who graduate and choose not to continue their formal education. Although we assume that students are changed by their women's studies experience, we often do not know what happens to them after leaving. Do they become involved in social change? Or do they feel their education has not influenced what they are now doing? The answers to these questions measure the strengths and deficiencies of women's studies and provide one solid basis on which to build the curriculum during its second phase.

Working on this premise and as part of a larger self-evaluation project, we asked Women Studies Program* graduates and current students at the University of Washington about the effects of women's studies on their lives. Although the University of Washington's program may not be typical of all women's studies programs, the responses are instructive for curriculum development in other university-based, social science-oriented, research/teaching settings.

During the spring and summer of 1975 we interviewed 21 women's studies majors and 32 other students taking women's studies courses. In most instances, the opinions of these groups coincide. Almost all report a positive change in self-image, an increased awareness of their own needs, and more faith in their own ability to fulfill those needs.

Course content questions indicate that most students feel they either worked about the same (46 percent) or harder (42 percent) for their women's studies classes than for other courses. This extra work is undoubtedly rewarding, since a majority (74 percent) mention that women's studies courses are always more intellectually exciting than their other courses. On the other hand, although most (80 percent) of the nonmajors are satisfied with course content, a majority (56 percent) of the majors are not.

The majors, who have taken many more courses than the other students, express two predominant concerns. First, courses need more depth. Students report a tendency for each course to use similar basic material. Second, such aspects of social change as job survival skills and ways to change institutions need to be included more regularly in the curriculum. On the whole, of course, students say the program meets or exceeds their expectations for consciousness-raising and for factual information which helps them understand women's lives and social roles. Thus, any lack of satisfaction students express is based on a need for skills which will be "salable" on the job market.

**Poll of Graduates**

Would the opinions of former students agree with those of more recent ones? To find out, we interviewed 18 women who had graduated from our program between 1971 and 1975. All of the graduates made positive comments similar to those expressed by more recent students, indicating that the program's strengths in consciousness-raising and substantive areas had also been present earlier in its development. The graduates' positive feelings about women's studies are so strong that, were they undergraduates now, most would again choose a women's studies major—although 11 women would choose a double major. Many also would come back for further women's studies training were it available through our program. Almost half (8) of the women say they would enroll in an interdisciplinary Master's program in women's studies, if financially able.

Although the teaching of job or social action skills is not perceived to be the primary goal of women's studies, graduates also had hoped to gain more in these areas than they actually had received. Women's studies influenced job plans of most of the graduates, primarily through developing an awareness of jobs newly opened to women, helping to assess skills realistically, improving self-concepts, and providing a new understanding of power structures within jobs. Women's studies, students indicated, had little impact on their acquisition of jobs—in such areas as providing job listings or developing new skills for particular careers. Only 5 of the 18 felt helped here.

Even so, students were able to make use of their women's studies degrees in the job market. Their jobs can be classified as follows:

6 graduates: Supervisory or managerial (retail management, restaurant owner,
feminist counselor, etc.)

4 graduates: Traditional women's job (waitress, cashier, typist, housecleaner)

2 graduates: Nontraditional job (deck hand, law clerk)

2 graduates: Job directly related to Women Studies Program

5 graduates: Graduate student (course work pursued not specified, except for one seeking a Ph.D. in English)*

1 graduate: No job held since degree received

Without comparable data from non-Women Studies Program liberal arts majors, we cannot easily ascertain how different these jobs are from those of other women college graduates. Yet we do know that 61 percent of all U.S. women with four-year college degrees are in the paid labor force. In contrast, 78 percent of the Women Studies Program graduates hold jobs.

Further, we suspect that the finding of 33 percent of the women holding supervisory or managerial jobs is higher than average. In these ways our graduates are moving away from traditional sex roles.

On the other hand, 22 percent of the graduates hold traditional women's jobs which do not require a higher education. Since 23 percent of all women college graduates are employed in clerical, sales, private household, and service work, our graduates appear similar to others in this respect. However, three of the four people holding these jobs mention that they prefer jobs where women are their co-workers. This attitude is not traditional, although the jobs seem sex-typed.

Sixty-four percent of the employed graduates hold full-time, as opposed to part-time, jobs. This figure is slightly lower than the 70 to 75 percent of young women workers who on the national average hold full-time jobs. We explored several explanations for this result. Although fully one-third of the Women Studies Program students are involved in activist women's groups, this involvement is not related to their higher incidence of part-time work. In fact, graduates who are employed full-time are more likely than others to participate in such groups. Lack of child-care facilities is more likely to impair the ability to hold a full-time job. Sixty percent (3) of the five women who have children are full-time employees or students. Comparatively, 70 percent of those without children work full-time. This parallels the effect of marital status: single and divorced women are more likely to work full-time than are married women.

On the whole, then, Women Studies Program graduates show an increased participation in the labor force, in nontraditional fields or with new reasons for traditional choices. At the same time, such factors as the need for child-care facilities still limit women's options.

Half of the graduates feel their jobs are compatible with their women's studies education, because they work either with or for women. This is true of women who hold both traditional and nontraditional jobs. Three feel their jobs are neutral in relation to women's studies, and only one feels that her degree raises a "red flag" of antagonism to her co-workers. While few believe they have gained concrete skills through the program, others work at jobs which represent new interests discovered via women's studies activities or jobs which fit in with their women's studies interests. The compatibility is far from perfect, since 10 of the 14 job holders report that they often or sometimes must compromise their feminist principles on the job, a not unreasonable figure, perhaps, given the occupational structure. Obviously, however, the graduates do not consider a women's studies degree a liability. Five thought their degree helped in finding a job, five thought it had no effect whatsoever, and three, that it had been a drawback. Graduates report that potential employers do not understand what women's studies means and often ask for more details on the nature of the training and credentials. Presumably, as our national visibility increases as a discipline, this will be less of a problem.

Summary of Findings

In summary, Women Studies Program graduates either have entered traditional women's jobs with positive attitudes about possibilities of organizing for social change or they have taken nontraditional and supervisory jobs. Students' needs for training in concrete job skills, for fieldwork experience, and for labor market credentials remain problems—possibly for many undergraduate programs. Students expect women's studies to provide them with skills also for living an independent life and working for social change. Most of the graduates maintain an interest in feminist issues, and one third are currently involved in women's groups. They see women's studies as an arm of the women's movement and have high expectations for immediate applications of the things they learn.

The implications of our study for curriculum development to meet students' needs in women's studies are clear. We need to retain a dual focus on substantive material and on personal growth. At the same time we need to develop sequences of courses which build on each other: Psychology of Sex Differences followed by Psychobiology of Women, for example, or Sexist Language in the Schools and Women Studies Curriculum in Public Schools. Courses need to be richer and deeper in content, and materials for various courses, particularly introductory ones, should not overlap. (This is particularly true of materials on Third World women where we need much more research and better materials.) Further we need skills courses and fieldwork placements in such areas as teaching women's studies in high schools, feminist counseling, or women's health care. An integration of theory and practice will strengthen our education and will help students to find jobs.

At the University of Washington, we have begun, with students' help, to develop sequences of courses in several areas, and we are also developing areas of concentration (education, social change, etc.), each with a fieldwork component. The results will lend strength and sophistication to our program. Thus we may also conclude that surveys of women's studies graduates are useful for curriculum development. When conducted on a regular basis either by individual programs or by such representative, coordinating bodies as the National Women's Studies Association, such surveys should continue to be valuable.

*Two of the five students also hold supervisory jobs, and thus are counted twice here.