Evaluation: Reflections of a Program Consultant

Nancy Porter
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When Florence Howe was in Portland last winter on her Advisory Council project to review women's studies programs, she made the distinction between a review and an evaluation: a review seeks information that can be quantified, an evaluation presupposes a standard against which a program may be judged.

Had I been more than just casually aware of the distinction last spring when, with another woman, I set out under the auspices of the Northwest Women Studies Association (NWWSA) to review a local community college's women's studies offerings, I might have "done" differently. I am not sure, however, which is one reason for sharing with other women's studies people an account of my first experience as a "program consultant" (as you will note, terminology and practice both become confused) and some reflections on what it was like to be a consultant whose work was in turn reviewed. As women's studies goes about developing and implementing models for program assessment, for internal (self-study) and external (review or evaluation) purposes, some aspects of my experience may serve as an alert to problems in the process that I do not believe are only semantic. Observations and interpretations are my own and may not represent the views of anyone else involved, including my colleagues.

The report itself is the property of the reviewed institution. An official request for help in conducting this community college's review of its Women's Studies Program was made to the Northwest Women Studies Association in February 1976. The request resulted from several previous written and personal communications between members of NWWSA and the college administration. Although I was not in on the beginning of the process, my reading of the correspondence suggests that the reports of a pending review prompted the Association to offer assistance by designating several women in the region as qualified by their experience in women's studies to act as consultants.

When the offer was accepted, the Association nominated two community and two four-year college faculty who were also acceptable to the women's studies group at the college. The administration wanted at least two consultants to come from colleges into which their students transferred. Of the three faculty who were finally chosen, one had to cancel at the last minute. The team thus consisted of two NWWSA members: Gisela Taber (at that time Director of Women's Studies at Lower Columbia Community College, Washington) and I (teacher of women's studies at Portland State University in Oregon).

The Procedure

The review was conducted in May 1976 and consisted of a day-and-a-half campus visitation during which the team was asked to consider ten areas of evaluation worked out jointly by the college's administration and women's studies teachers:

- Objectives of the Program
- Student and Community Needs
- Teaching Methods
- Working Conditions (Including Space Allocation)
- Hiring Practices (Qualifications and Interviewing)
- Structure of Women's Studies
- Grievance Procedures (Faculty and Student)
- Relationship with Administration
- Transfer Credit
- Future of Program

The schedule of the day on campus was established by the college and included: an hour of orientation and organization with administration and the voluntary women's studies coordinator; two hours of meeting with a self-selected group of students and staff (past, present, potential); an hour-and-a-half meeting over lunch with the women's studies teachers; and an hour meeting with the two administrative officers immediately responsible for the program. The previous afternoon I had observed the class about which there was a question of granting credit transferable to four-year institutions. We had been scheduled to write our report with a college administrative representative. Needless to say, we were not prepared to do so. We spent the time sifting through our various impressions, a process that intermittently occupied the next two months.

Why so long, particularly since we were compensated for only our day and a half on campus? A series of unscheduled crises in our respective work lives hampered us, but, for me at least, other factors were
operating, the nature and implications of which I did not fully understand.

Gisela Taber and I met once and consulted by phone a number of times as we worked out what we wanted to say and how to say it. The only model of a review by a women's studies person we had in hand was an “evaluation” conducted by J. J. Wilson (of Sonoma State University, California) for a university in the region. The document proved useful, for organization of materials and for philosophy. In her report Wilson emphasized that she did not wish to impose on the visited program either her experiences fashioned in her own different setting or her ideas of what women's studies is supposed to be. Wilson noted the rarity of evaluating a program when it was running “smoothly.” “Most evaluations are done under the gun,” she wrote, “and observations cannot but be tainted by such a crisis atmosphere.”

Difficult to Find the One “True” Image

Gisela Taber and I faced writing a report about a program that had been in hot water at various times in its four-year history. Although the review was deemed a “normal” evaluation of a new program, we felt the presence of past crises and present unease. Moreover, our visitation spawned a considerable amount of data, much of it conflicting, most of it “soft” (opinion), too little of it anchored in documentation. We did not have much written material to work from: course descriptions and syllabi (in a few instances there was conflict between the approved course description and the actual syllabus), an outdated description of hiring procedures and qualifications (which made it difficult to ascertain practice), but nothing in writing about program objectives, and no statistical information about class enrollments and program size, except as had been incidental to the preliminary correspondence. Faced with the dramatically conflicting points of view we heard expressed by each interviewed group on most issues (areas to be evaluated), we decided we could not judge the “truth” in each case or choose the one “true” image of the program.

We thought, though, that we could produce a document that would promote trust among the groups and facilitate the process of self-study on the part of the college. To this end we tried to reflect back to the institution as accurately as possible what we had heard, from what we hoped was our “impartial” perspective. We also decided to offer recommendations based largely, we thought, on “input” gathered from the various individuals and groups who had told us what changes they wished to see in curriculum and organization. We stipulated that the recommendations were but suggestions to be discussed, modified, adopted, or discarded as seemed best to the people involved. The report ran 34 pages, including appendices, and was critical directly and by implication of some of the practices of administrators and teachers alike.

The official reaction to our report came from the administration: “excellent... thorough and unbiased,” a demonstration of the Association’s commitment to women’s studies in the Northwest, a “good jumping-off point” for the college to complete its own review, the letters read.

Objections of the Women’s Studies Faculty

The women’s studies faculty, on the other hand, although allowing that the report was “objective” and that it “legitimatized” women’s studies as a subject area in the eyes of the administration, found a number of faults with both process and product, which I determined when I sought out the group’s reactions. (By this time, Gisela Taber had left the area for a new job in Washington, D.C.) Some of their unhappiness was directed at the reviewing conditions, with the recommendation that “next time” the Association should dictate some of the terms of a good review. Under this heading they felt that the group had been given inadequate lead-time to prepare for the review (difficult because so much of the operation of the program outside teaching is volun-
tary labor, but they wished at least to collect student course evaluations from previous terms); that too few of us had done the reviewing; and that the review team shared an “academic” bias which was not informed about or overly sympathetic to the self-educational objectives of their community college view of women’s studies. They also felt our sample of opinion had been small and random, controlled by who had turned up that day, a vocal group of women students and faculty/staff who felt their various needs were not being met by the program.

With respect to the written report, the women’s studies group was distressed by the hedged and ambiguous language of some of the recommendations. They wished we had accompanied our “objective” narration with a “subjective” commentary. They had hoped we would air the report with them, for clarification of difficult points and interpretation of some of the views reflected, before we wrote the final draft. Above all, the women’s studies teachers feared that the proportion of negative to positive “input” reflected served to create a negative impression of the program. As the coordinator said in the post-report session I had with some of the group: “You made it sound as though we weren’t doing anything right.”

They Hoped to Be Rescued

I began to have some of the same thoughts about our report. Why had we gotten such different reactions? I comforted my shock for a while by reasoning that women’s studies, after all, was just a small part of the male administrators’ job; for the women involved in the teaching, the program was a vital part of their political, social, intellectual lives: hence criticism directed toward them would hurt more. Disquieted equally by other analyses I could come up with, I began to resent the women’s studies faculty. The resentment, which was the feeling of a difficult effort unappreciated for its difficulty, became my clue to look deeper, which brought me back initially to rereading the report.

From this distance, it seems that our goal of providing information for self-study that would satisfy everyone was not realizable in a public document, at this time and in that situation. In the first place, we made 28 recommendations, far too many for any one person or group to assimilate. The sheer number seemed to suggest much was wrong that needed attention. In the second place, although we liberally claimed to have based our recommendations largely on the college’s own “input,” some of the recommendations to promote accountability on the parts of students, faculty, and administration were drawn directly from our own experiences and implied, in some instances, “standards” against which the program’s curriculum and operations had been judged. Despite J. J. Wilson’s warning, we had used our experiences and, I am willing to say, our professional sense of women’s studies as markers, knowing no other way to chart the waters. In the third place, although we encountered and in turn assumed good will all around for strategic purposes, the waters rippled with submerged currents.

I talked yet again with one of the community college’s women’s studies group in private conversation. “What was it you wanted?” I asked, hoping I was not sounding like a petulantly baffled Freud. After a pause came the answer, “I’d hoped you would rescue us.”

My respondent understood sadly that the expectation of rescue was unrealistic, and that it had never been articulated in the review process. With the statement, however, for which I was grateful, several other issues became clear. I believe I knew all along that the women’s studies teachers wanted to be rescued, even that the administration wanted to be rescued—after all, the review had been precipitated by a series of conflicts between administration and women’s studies faculty—but suppressed the knowledge in the name of impartiality. Also, I began to see that much had been taken for granted in the interview with the women’s studies faculty, particularly that the reviewers would know what the program wanted to do and why, without having it spelled out, simply because we were all women’s studies people together.

Although our report included a statement recognizing the vulnerability of all parties in the evaluation—reviewers and reviewed alike—I believe that 1, at any rate, let the desirability of being acceptably “objective” outweigh and suppress my understanding of the nature of the vulnerability the women’s studies people experienced with respect both to their own institution and to us as reviewers. They wanted their hard-earned version of women’s studies defended as valid for them and their institution; and suggestions for change must have appeared very much like conditions of acceptability in the women’s studies “profession,” not guides for helping them better accomplish the educational goals specific to their setting and resources. The administration, of course, undoubtedly felt that some of their notions of academic standards and control had been vindicated.

The Need to Develop Guidelines

I worry about the establishment of a hierarchy of judgment, in which some programs will be deemed acceptable (and hence funded) by appearing more academically evolved, while others will be denied vital support, or asked to change direction, because they appear less so. Development of “professionalism” in women’s studies, of which reviews and evaluations are one evidence, raises some serious problems. In future years, we will decide what constitute good conditions for reviews and evaluations, what kinds of information are usefully collected, and what models we need to develop. In that regard, clearly the “review” I participated in should have been more professional in the sense of valid: factual data should have been prepared in advance; program objectives should have been defined (preferably in writing); teacher and course evaluations should have been gathered from all classes; more classes should have been visited; and assumptions that were inaccurate should not have been made. However, I think it unrealistic to suppose that conflicts around women’s studies are unique, for, as J. J.
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 economic 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—even though 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,