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Betty Burnett

Grass Roots
Women's Studies: Kansas City, Missouri

Well over one million people live in the Kansas City, Missouri/Kansas City, Kansas, metropolitan area. Kansas City, Missouri, (with echoes of Main Street boosterism) prides itself on being progressive, economically dynamic, democratic, and sophisticated. Lately, it's started singing the "Big City Blues"—crime, poverty, pollution, anomie. Memories of Mrs. Bridge, Evan Connell's wealthy matron who felt useless and incompetent, haunt the Country Club Plaza. But if Mrs. Bridge still lives in Kansas City, and if she can't find anything meaningful to do or any way to open her mind today, she's got her eyes closed.

Kansas City feminists are an active, diverse group, involved both in community action and education. The Kansas City Women's Liberation Union (WLU), organized in 1969, is "dedicated to the struggle to end sexism." In so doing, it works "against racism, capitalism, and imperialism." Ideological and strategical differences have caused some conflicts within the Union; lately, burned-out activists, a shortage of funds, and disagreements in the areas of concentration have drained it of much of its energy. Nonetheless, it marches determinedly forward. Some of its activities: a quarterly bulletin, Women as Women as Women; "Womankind," a weekly radio program; the New Earth bookstore and Sister Moon art gallery; the Lesbian Alliance; a Symposium for Battered Women; Gaytalk, a counseling service; legal referral; abortion referral; rape crisis center.

Conservative and moderate feminists who did not feel comfortable with the principles and practices of the WLU broke away several years ago. Many became involved in the strong ERA coalition, in the several NOW chapters, and in mainstream politics. A group of such women founded Kansas City Woman, a slick, well-edited magazine with copious advertising. Where Women as Women as Women has a strong undercurrent of anti-male, anti-society anger, Kansas City Woman encourages women to work within the social system and highlights women who do so successfully.

The Women's Center for Theologizing also grew out of the WLU. It, too, has been disturbed by a lack of harmony, but still has an active core group. Mainly made up of ministers and theology students (most from St. Paul's School of Theology), the group encourages women to enter active church work, especially the ministry, and gives emotional support to those who do.

Educational opportunities for women are numerous. On the Missouri side of the state line, there are 13 institutions of higher education: six liberal arts colleges (three private, three metropolitan community colleges); three technical institutes, three theological schools, and the University of Missouri/Kansas City. While most of the liberal arts colleges have had at least one academic course on Women and Literature or Women and History, only one, Avila, has an organized Women's Studies Program. Avila is a small college (about 1850 students) founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. The great majority of students are women: almost 70 percent are nontraditional, that is, over 22 years old. The mean age is 34. Two programs have evolved for the nontraditional student: Considering the Leap is a day-long orientation program for those wanting to return to college after an absence of several years; WINGS (Women in New Growth Studies) is a student-initiated program that provides reentry support for those who need it. Daily child care is provided and there is an active counseling program geared to the older woman. Free tuition is offered to students over 60.

Dona Neuman of the sociology department initiated the Women's Studies Program in 1969. As early as 1967, while teaching a course on Women's Roles, she recognized that neither one course nor one discipline could include all information regarding various aspects of women's lives. The Avila administration agreed to experiment with her concept of an interdisciplinary Women's Studies Program, but stipulated that teachers would not be paid for the experiment—a consideration that did not deter teachers. Now the program is thriving, and teachers are paid for participating.

All courses are one credit hour (except one psychology course) and run for five weeks. A total of 18 hours is offered (a recognized minor) and the program involves some 11 departments. Courses include Biological and Genetic Considerations of Sex Differences, Philosophical Perspectives of Women, Females in the Male Church, Women in Other Societies, Women and Ageing, and the Theater, Women in French Literature, and
The more usual courses in history, psychology, and English. The Continuing Education Program also offers such courses as Home Repair for Women and Automobile Maintenance for Women.

Dona Neuman is pleased with the program. The response from students has been good, particularly from nontraditional students who find the program relevant. Neuman is committed to Women's Studies as a separate academic field and sees for it a moderately bright future. The Avila program is evaluated and reassessed periodically, staying flexible and responsive to students' needs and teachers' creative urges. Courses Neuman would like added some day include Women in Art, Women in the Professions (especially math and science), Legal Rights of Females, and Male-Female Relationships.

Rockhurst College, a small coeducational Jesuit school, offers a unique Women's Internship Program. The brainchild of Marcella Womack, Women's Center Director, the Internship Program is funded by a Women's Educational Equity Act mini-grant. Less than one year old, it has been a tremendous success and has a great potential for expansion. The purpose of the program is to place women "in the career exploration process" with women professionals in nontraditional fields, so that they will be able to test their career choice and at the same time have an encouraging and sympathetic model to look to. For the initial period, only white collar professionals were chosen as supervisors, representing the law, veterinary medicine, corporate management, higher educational administration, television production, politics, broadcasting, and advertising. Eighteen interns were placed in mid-February 1977, selected from 150 applicants; the average age of interns is mid-thirties. Some had never worked outside the home; others had been underemployed for years. Interns need not have been Rockhurst students or graduates. The program was widely advertised in the community, and the response was mostly good. (Contact Jill Adams, Project Director WEEA, Rockhurst, for more information.)

The University of Missouri/Kansas City (UMKC) does not have plans for a Women's Studies Program, but does have two special facilities for women: the Women's School at Communityville and the Women's Resource Center. Communityville, held at UMKC, is a "free" university—courses call for a $1.00 donation. Partially funded by UMKC student activity fees, it is open to the community on a drop-in basis. Courses are meant to be nonstructured, nonacademic, and relevant. The Women's School division offers a wide array of courses for women only, including, for example, Vertical Rock Climbing, Bisexuality, Feminism and Mothering.

The Women's Resource Center at UMKC "provides assistance with school entry or reentry (for those beyond traditional age); research on sex roles and social changes, women's issues, legislation concerning women; workshops, seminars, rap groups; assessing future directions; independent study projects; living a multidirectional life." It maintains a resource library of books, periodicals, brochures, papers, and clippings by, for, and about women. It offers career counseling programs that draw women from all over the midwest. It also offers noncredit self-help courses, focusing on personal growth. In addition, the student-run Feminist Union acts as a support group for traditional students.

There are countless Adult Education opportunities at colleges, community centers, extension centers, and churches in the Kansas City area. Many of these programs are especially geared to women. Ottawa University's College without a Campus has a Women's Program directed by Rhonda Holman which is totally responsive to the needs of community women. Ottawa, Avila, UMKC, and Rockhurst offer day-long seminars from time to time on such topics as Financial Management for Women or Career Advancement for Women.

An awareness of Women's Studies is filtering across to secondary and elementary schools, although major programs have not been initiated. Young women's sports programs continue to gain strength and career counselors in high schools no longer automatically steer students into traditional roles. Despite discouragements and setbacks (the defeat of ERA was demoralizing to all Missouri feminists), the women's movement is strong in Kansas City and a lot of women are determined to make it stronger. □

Florence Howe

Control of the Curriculum and Standards

The following short excerpt from Seven Years Later: Women's Studies Programs in 1976 by Florence Howe raises questions of particular importance today. We print it here to inaugurate a series of articles on Evaluating Women's Studies. Howe's full one-hundred-page report will be available free in the fall from the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs, 1832 M Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Long-range, perhaps the most controversial and critical question in women's studies will concern control of the curriculum, particularly with respect to standards. That this should be a question at all suggests how quickly women's studies has achieved a certain level of legitimacy. Seven years ago, it was risky to associate oneself with women's studies; hence, those who did so were, for the most part, a self-selecting group who welcomed all comers. Today, both inside and outside programs, there are questions about what makes a particular course a women's studies course, about the standards for such a distinction, and about who controls the standards.

From the outside, standards have to do with the credentials of faculty (their holding doctorates or writing dissertations) and the academic quality of requirements in courses and for majors. By and large, programs have satisfied their institutions with regard to those two matters. Again and again, administrators outside the program expressed approval of the women's studies faculty both as publishing scholars and excellent teachers, and of the curriculum as intellectually demanding of students.