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What Happened at the Convention?

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On that second evening after the concert, the convention met in an extraordinary session to continue debate on the constitution, and it did so, with more than one hundred and fifty people attending to the details of the document until 2 A.M. The key question for debate that evening, and the following morning as well, was the function of regions and caucuses in a national organization. That evening, the debate also focused on who could attend and vote at future national conventions. Arguments were advanced in favor of an entirely "open" convention; other arguments emphasized the need for a representative constituent body responsible for policy-making at the convention each year. (As the constitution indicates, a decision was made by the founding convention to continue the practice of representative decision-making. The delegate assembly of the next national convention will consist of three representatives from each academic program, women's center, or educational project that joins the association; of one hundred twenty elected regional delegates; and of fifty elected caucus delegates. Any estimate of the possible size of such a delegate assembly depends on the number of programs, centers, and projects that will join the association, and on the number of delegates that they can afford to send to the convention. It is likely to be at least the size of the founding convention.)

The founding convention also affirmed the need for an annual educational program open to all who wish to attend and rich in useful workshops, panels, and discussions about the state of women's studies. While the principal purpose of this convention was the establishment of an association, a few workshops ran concurrently with morning plenary sessions, and afternoons were entirely devoted to workshops. Thus, on Friday afternoon at 1:30, participants could choose among the following: a panel—of political and legislative speakers—called "Advocating the Concerns of the Association"; a panel—of funding officers from two private foundations and one federal agency—called "Grantsmanship"; a discussion called "Evaluation of Women's Studies Courses in Post-Secondary Institutions: The State of the Art"; a panel called "The Movement in the Schools: An Overview" that focused on higher education, but that included as speaker Susan Groves, the director of Berkeley's women's studies program in the elementary schools; a panel called "Working Through Your Consortium to Promote Women's Studies"; a workshop called "Communicating Research in Progress: A Task for NWSA"; and a panel reporting on "Action Programs to Combat Math Avoidance." At 3:30 P.M., another group of workshops convened.

While workshops, panels, and discussions could be—and were—planned in advance, plenary sessions were filled typically with the unexpected. Thus, the first morning was spent on the question of male participation (affirmed), and the second morning, on the creation of caucuses for representation in the association's governing bodies.
and at the annual convention. Such sessions provided the drama from which most news stories reporting the convention were made. The outcome of debates was to create an association as inclusive as possible. So far as could be determined, differences expressed on these and other issues were settled by voting and without “splitting” the organization.

A correspondent to the national office wrote almost immediately afterwards that it had been “an exciting and exhausting meeting but one which helped me see the need for the broad base of involvement which was present in token form only at the meetings themselves.” Joanne Casto, a fourth grade teacher from Ashford, Washington, said that the most important part of the convention for her was meeting other women also working on feminist curriculum in elementary schools. Rosie Doughty, director of secondary instruction and affirmative action officer for Lorain, Ohio, who had come to the conference only to observe, left, she said, with a feeling of “new hope.” Shirley Harkess, coordinator of women’s studies at the University of Kansas, formally reporting to her institution on the convention, quoted the constitution’s preamble and its purposes, and described in detail the workshops she attended where she “col­lected several leads for outside funding.” information about the state of women’s studies and about the “features thought to characterize feminist research.”

The conference planners and facilitators, many of whom had also run mimeograph machines and typed sections of the constitution, left exhausted but cheered by the energy of the convention. All of the plenary sessions were chaired by Shauna Adix, director of the Women’s Resource Center and the Women’s Studies Program at the University of Utah. Floor facilitators included Jeanne Ford, coordinator of the Women’s Center at the University of

Gayle Graham Yates

Women’s Studies in Its Second Phase

A personal statement written for the pro­gram at the University of Minnesota and presented at a brown bag lunch.

Women’s studies is in its seventh year nationally, its fifth year here, at least under that title. It is appropriate to take stock now and ask why women’s studies? What is it about? Where is it going?

Women’s studies was born out of the women’s movement, is still a child of the women’s movement—the academic branch of that family. The women’s movement is in what I would now call its fourth stage; women’s studies is in a parallel second stage.

At the first stage, women’s studies needed the politics of grassroots organization; needed all the community and academic charisma that it could muster, needed to organize as a women-only enterprise; needed to launch out into areas of exper­i­ential education that had not been tried before; needed to get a curriculum under way that was somehow acceptable to the college administration but was at the same time faithful to the feminist perspective or the array of feminist perspectives out of which it was conceived.

The point of departure for a second stage—after establishing a program and establishing its acceptability as a bachelor’s degree-granting unit—is the less glamorous but essential phase of settling in: of making our presence felt as a potent and viable power within the university; of developing a more sophisticated curriculum that combines the experiential learning that we are gaining with new research that we are doing; of making a new discipline—not necessarily a “discipline” in university parlance of a department, but discipline in the sense of rigorous intellectual activity that must be taken into account by the university and by the society.

We need to put to rest for good that tiresome argument: if androgyny is really the goal of women’s studies, then oughtn’t it work itself out of business? That is close to the argument Mary Daly disclaims in Beyond God the Father—of those who want to jump over the essential step of feminist rage at women being left out to a plateau of “human liberation.” Women’s studies need not think of working itself out of business, for there is at least 25 years of research to be done on questions that have already been raised out of the embryonic feminist perspective: Where are the women? Where were the women?

What were the women doing? What are the women’s points of view? What about female experience, female psychology, female culture? What would physics be like if women had thought up how to do it? There are several more stages after that set of questions is pursued.

While women’s studies aims to provide courses and to do research from the point of view of women, it also intends to move toward fundamental change in the university, as Adrienne Rich describes in “Toward a Woman-Centered University” (Women and the Power to Change). We want women to exercise power in the institution, but also to create a place where the power of female experience is acknowledged and carried out. It is a truism in education that education is for the transmission of facts and values. Women’s studies seeks to trans­