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Florence Howe

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EDITORIAL

Wellesley College/Center for Research on Women

Toward Women's Studies in the Eighties: Part One

In this and the next issue, we will celebrate accomplishments of the first decade of women's studies and outline new challenges. In the Winter 1980 issue, we will publish the new list of declared women's studies programs, now well over 300. We will also publish an annotated list of more than 21 research institutes for the study of women. We will continue our feature on graduate programs and our reporting on women's centers.

The omissions from these reports indicate the gaps in our knowledge as we approach the eighties. We do not know, for example, about the hundreds of colleges, including Wellesley College, that offer more than a dozen women's studies courses, but that have not declared themselves host to a "program." More importantly, we have no detailed portrait of women's studies courses or programs in elementary and secondary schools. Who will take on that major task in the eighties?

As we look toward the eighties, we see two trends that bode ill for women's education, unless women's studies practitioners begin to take bold initiatives. We are thinking of the increased emphasis in schools on "basic skills"; and in colleges, on "general education." They are educational efforts to turn the clock back to "basics," not without good intentions, but without a feminist perspective, and hence, with special dangers for women.

It is impossible, on one level, to argue with advocates of "basic skills." Certainly children must learn to read, write, and cipher if they are to lead interesting lives, work productively, and serve as valuable citizens. Nor would anyone deny that the humanities are important for college students: they must learn to read critically, to understand the past as well as the present. Those who care about human-centered education, and who are most idealistic about the value of learning for human dignity, would not take issue with these general goals.

On the other hand, one does not teach reading, writing, or ciphering in a vacuum; indeed, one may use texts that are harmfully sexist or racist. One does not teach social analysis in a vacuum: omitting gender, for example, fails to prepare students either to live in a patriarchal world or, more importantly, to change it.

And so, one agenda for the eighties as important as continuing to develop women's studies courses and programs and research on women is the infusion of general education and basic skills programs with women's studies itself. *The center of a curriculum demanded of all students should be coeducational: should include females and males and should focus on gender.* Here are five reasons for establishing a coeducational curriculum on gender:

1. The topic is *unifying* and *interdisciplinary*. One can construct a unified set of questions on gender with which to approach most disciplines and most areas of study: how is it to be female or male in history, biology, learning, employment, behavior, aspiration, identity? Factors of race, religion, ethnicity, and class would be important to such study.
2. The topic is *debatable*. Despite a growing body of knowledge, many questions have not yet been answered. The curriculum demands critical skills rather than rote learning.
3. The topic offers a *problem-solving* approach to learning, which makes education absolutely essential, rather than either "good medicine" for students or baby-sitting.
4. The topic offers a *value-oriented* approach to education. Nothing we teach is value-free. This topic would openly focus on values of being female or male.
5. The topic is *socially useful*. The "problem" of being female in a male-centered society needs solution for the health of society; for the health of students—especially women—even as they are studying; and for the health of the world, since women are still the most exploited and illiterate group in all Third World countries.

There is a sixth reason that may be used especially with historians and teachers of literature: such study of gender sends students *willingly* back to historical sources, including literature. This reason may prove ultimately of more pragmatic use to a bold initiative than the ideals above.

Florence Howe