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"Going National" Together

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Discerning math anxiety, the presenter pointed out that performance suffers typically at about junior high school age, when female and male sex roles solidify and girls start to "see" mathematics as "unfeminine." In contrasting a multicultural perspective on women's history with the alternative view, a panelist remarked: "Teach how the West was lost, not how it was won." A panelist on nonsexist curriculum design suggested: "Tell your students you want them to unlearn something"; and, in a session on fairy-tales, the question was asked: "How would it affect preconceptions and in what basic ways would the story change if, in Snow White, the Queen were to get a face-lift, join the Grey Panthers, and draft the dwarves to operate a Meals on Wheels program for senior citizens?"

From specific examples of teaching methods used, picked up at different sessions, it was possible to derive what may be a promising general strategy: teaching rooted in the practicalities of a given situation. Instead of being told by the teacher, or having outside reading assigned (which allows the material so introduced to be seen as supplementary and therefore less important), students are able to arrive themselves at insights directly from their own circumstances and the materials they deal with. In kindergarten, both sexes wear aprons and wield mops in the context of water-play. In junior high school, students generate their own evidence about job segregation and its educational underpinnings by discussing their favorite toys, the adventures of boys and girls in comic strips, the occupations of women and men in the stories they read compared to those of people they know. Through oral history projects, appropriate in a variety of courses, students get a personally convincing picture of differences in goals and opportunities between women and men, and the effects on them of class, racial, and ethnic background. A discussion of the events listed on any conventional time-line can open the door to questions about why those are the events considered historically significant, whom they are significant for, and who it is that decides what is, or is not, historically significant: why the Peace of Tilsit rather than anaesthesia childbirth?

There is something of the pack-rat in all convention-goers. PreK-12 teachers, who routinely have limited access to publishers' brochures and examination copies, are perhaps even more eager to amass materials and information than most. Opportunities for doing so existed at Lawrence; most sessions offered hand-outs, ranging from copies of entire papers to summaries, sample exercises, and bibliographies. Their usefulness tended to vary inversely with their length; serendipity determined their applicability at the precollege level.

Among the numerous displays, exhibits, and stacks of flyers, a search for preK-12 materials yielded a dozen items. They included a quarterly journal; NWSA's annotated list of films (most of which could be previewed at the Convention); two publications for teaching about sex roles at different levels; two high school books for teachers and students in women's history; a bibliography; an anthology of high school women's writings; three catalogues that offered several items each, both print and audiovisual; and the publications of The Feminist Press.

As a final illustration of multistability, it is worth looking at these offerings first in terms of preK-12 teachers' presence at the Convention; then in terms of potential impact on fifty million students. On the whole, perhaps, the class was half empty; it should, and could, be full — but not without people to carry the water.

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"Going National" Together

By Ann Fitzgerald

...At the Bernice Reagon/Meg Christian concert on Friday evening, a young KU woman sitting beside me asked, pointing to the audience: "Do you all teach women's studies?" I hesitated, choosing my words carefully: "We are all women's studies educators with both of those terms taken in the widest sense. We represent..." I stopped, realizing that I could not say that we represent the various professions, though in a technical sense some of us did. I stopped, because in the aggregate it was not true; most of us had not come together to represent either professional or institutional affiliations. I was beginning to see NWSA as a political Association for the first time.

I thought back to San Francisco: the debates on the floor; the unremitting efforts of each group to establish its voice. I began to realize the ways in which NWSA was different from other professional associations. The Convention was closer in format and feel to the various women's groups of which I have been a part. I saw that we had come together to advance feminist ideology, to affirm and refine our relationship to the movement, to share our resources, to "go national" together. We owed no allegiance as a body to any particular discipline or institution; we were in Kansas because we shared, however pluralistically, a common political vision. Education was our primary strategy for change, binding us and providing a common reason for participation.

But my recognition was not all of a piece. Earlier in the day on Friday, I had attended a discussion-dialogue with three women from the People's Republic of China. When they asked what organizations we represented, I confronted the fact that ultimately I did not represent Denison University though it had paid for my entire trip. If I represented anything, it might be the potential for the growth of NWSA. My affiliations with those at the Convention were stronger than I had anticipated. I mentally traced my organizational feminist affiliations searching for a
similar feeling, but there was something different about NWSA. It was not merely an umbrella for those of us involved in local or professional feminist groups. It was different in scope, program, and intent. It was not a simple matter of seeing NWSA as the darkened area of a Venn diagram. It struck me that the Association was devoted to systematic and systemic change. As Charlotte Bunch said in the closing panel on Sunday morning, our goal was "to take the feminist revolution out of the subculture and into the mainstream."

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Many feminists have expressed the need for a marching melody for the contemporary women's movement. One of NWSA's founding members, Alison Bernstein, acted to meet this need. On behalf of her collaborators, she offered "Sing We Sisters" to NWSA for its first performance. The eight verses and refrain were sung by a quartet of Kansas women (Deb Holmes, Kathy Buehler, Sharon Helmick, Holly Fisher, with Tammy Perkuhn on drums) at the opening session of the National Convention. A souvenir edition of the songsheet produced for the Convention can still be purchased from the NWSA National Office (see page 28).