Spring 1979

From the National Office

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Recommended Citation

Reuben, Elaine, "From the National Office" (1979). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/376
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By Elaine Reuben

In lieu of my usual quarterly report on the work of the National Office—some of which is reflected in the news of this issue—it seemed appropriate in this pre-Convention column to share the substance of one activity. The following statement made on behalf of NWSA was my response to a request from Senator Harrison A. Williams, Jr., for testimony before the Senate Committee on Human Resources. This sort of public presence is one aspect of NWSA’s function as a national voice for and about feminist education. Our purpose as an organization is not only to share experiences and information among ourselves but to educate and exert influence upon a larger community. Similarly, our Convention will in its totality provide the opportunity to express to ourselves and to others the state of our art and our concerns.

The National Women’s Studies Association is pleased to submit this statement to the Senate Committee on Human Resources, to supplement oral testimony given January 31 - February 1 before your oversight hearings entitled The Coming Decade: American Women and Human Resources Policies and Programs.

As a member of the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, NWSA has endorsed the statement presented to you by that group. We would like, at this time, to expand upon it briefly.

The National Women’s Studies Association is a membership organization of individuals and groups involved in feminist teaching and learning: the pursuit of knowledge about women and the development of knowledge for women. We support and promote feminist education at every educational level and in every educational setting.

The history of women’s studies in the past decade has been one of creative struggle to evolve knowledge, theory, pedagogy, and organizational models appropriate to a world free not only from sexism but from racism, ageism, class and hetero-sexual bias. Breakthroughs in knowledge and consciousness, an explosion of research activity in all fields and disciplines, a remarkable proliferation of courses, programs, projects, and groups, catalyzed by the women’s movement in the late ’60s and early ’70s led to the founding of this Association.

“Women’s studies” is commonly used as the term to describe postsecondary programs whose curriculum develops from the new scholarship on women, and/or to describe that research and critical theory itself. In 1978, the survey of women’s studies programs compiled annually by The Feminist Press and NWSA included 300 such programs, more than half of which offered minors, undergraduate majors, or graduate degrees.

We would call your attention to the Report of the National Advisory Council on Women’s Educational Programs entitled Seven Years Later: Women’s Studies Programs in 1976, and to the recommendations offered there for federal action.

The development of women’s studies programs was not part of federal educational initiatives, nor, with the exception of small grants (notably from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Women’s Educational Equity Act), has there been federal funding directed to their support. In the coming decade of general retrenchment in higher education, such support will be vital.

The Advisory Council’s report must be read against the background of data you have in testimony, detailing the status of women as faculty and administrators in higher education. While feminist education is an enterprise that can and does engage both women and men, it would be naïve to imagine its being sustained on a given campus or in a given department there without the active presence of female faculty and administrators.

Others have detailed weaknesses and failures of federal policy and enforcement in educational employment matters; we need here only note that the percentage of women on American faculties has not increased in this past decade of so-called affirmative action, and is likely to decline in the coming decade, as competition for tenured positions becomes severe. Discrimination against female faculty, unthinking or deliberate, has not been eradicated, and is likely to be most harsh on those women whose scholarly and pedagogical interests involve women and equity issues.

Federal policy is ambivalent about seeming to move directly into matters of research priorities and curriculum development. Both are areas that are, nonetheless, affected by the activities of, and the grants, contracts, and awards made under, the programs you oversee. The very issues you chose to address in these hearings require data gathering, theory development and testing, and the translation of both into curriculum to train a next generation of persons who can understand and act upon them.

We understand, already, that the “hidden curriculum” of educational institutions, like the mores of the workplace, acts as a barrier to women in their attempts to avail themselves of educational and employment opportunities.

Others have testified about the various support services needed to enhance and maintain access to education and employment. One such, in higher education, has been the campus- or community-based women’s center, itself offering and/or coordinating referrals to counseling, child care, legal services, health services.

Women’s centers may themselves offer noncredit courses; they provide a meeting/learning place in which women can share with and support one another. Such a service will be increasingly vital as the student population increasingly includes part-time, working women students and older, “returning” students who do not have access to the informal support system.
found in undergraduate dormitory life or graduate student culture. Women's centers have often been the locus of collective discussion and lobbying activity on institutional policies affecting women, and particularly on those matters—like sexual harassment—not comfortably discussed or easily legislated upon.

Like women's studies programs, women's centers are often unfunded or underfunded, or are reliant on a fees-for-services structure which does not adequately allow for planning and development of services. Federal support for such centers might take several forms. One, on the model of campus counselors for veterans provided through the Veterans Administration, would be a cost effective program for development by HEW or the Women's Bureau.

Those who work "in the field," whether in women's studies programs, campus or community women's centers, free-standing feminist educational projects, or as individual researchers, are at a disadvantage in the competition for what federal funds do exist for work in the area of educational equity for women. The very structure of access to most federal grants and contracts reinforces the very discrimination some of those funds might be used to combat.

Un- and underemployed female academics, community educators, women's groups of all sorts, do not have easy access to The Federal Register and Commerce Business Daily; don't have ready access or liaison to funding agencies, or the resources for speculative (and complex) grant writing equivalent to those of educational institutions, associations, and consulting firms; don't always have the sort of "credentials" or "track record" that is suitable for review at a distance. When these barriers are overcome, stipends calculated on current salary reinforce unequal pay scales, and less traditionally established groups cannot claim the "indirect costs" that sustain major contractors.

Thorough and sensitive examination of these policies and procedures is called for. More imaginatively, much could be accomplished to improve access to federal programs and to impact on the issues at hand through decentralized funding of various sorts. State-based Humanities Committees, e.g., have demonstrated greater sensitivity to feminist issues than has NEH.

Funds from the underfunded Women's Educational Equity Act Program are, loosely, awarded with regard to national distribution, but less complex and more accessible regional competitions in addition to the national grants ought to be developed. Perhaps what is really called for is a Women's Project Administration, with a Women's Educational Project that allowed for the local talents and vitality of feminist educators as did the Federal Theatre Project.

Such a Project would have a major impact on public education. Despite the several legislative mandates that would seem to call for major review and revision of the actual and hidden curriculum of the public schools, very little seems to be happening on a national scale to begin the difficult and complex task of educating girls and boys for the '80s, a world in which work and family life will be quite unlike that pictured in most textbooks. This country's commitment to science education or language study or the new math was not a volunteer effort, but most of the innovative work done to begin eradicating sexism in our schools came from parent groups, women's groups, and feminist educators.

There is desperate need for enforcement of the laws that exist, but that enforcement will itself require an educational process for those involved with teaching, administration, and certification of educational competencies. There are no simple answers to some of the questions you have posed for your hearing, but we do know enough about the insidious nature of sexism in the classroom and curriculum that we could, with clear policy and fiscal support, be at least further along towards its eradication by the end of the coming decade.

Report from the February 1979 Coordinating Council Meeting

By Elizabeth Baer

As regional and caucus representatives gathered for the opening session of the semiannual NWSA Coordinating Council meeting on the College Park campus of the University of Maryland on February 15, they were asked to respond to two questions in introducing themselves: "What is your vision of the future of NWSA?" and "Have you and/or your program paid your 1979 dues?" Juxtaposed, the questions reflected the experience of the organization in its first two years—encompassing the idealism of NWSA's founding and the pragmatic exigencies of supporting a national organization. The questions, asked and answered on Susan B. Anthony's birthday, began a meeting at which Council members worked at both visionary and administrative tasks, believing with Susan B. that "failure is impossible."

Reports on the business of the Association since last May's Maiden Rock Co-ordinating Council meeting—from regions, caucuses, the National Coordinator, the Steering Committee, the Treasurer, the Secretary, and the Conference Coordinators—were presented to Council members as background materials for each day's meetings. Thus, Council members were able to devote full time to discussing strategies and recommendations. The Steering Committee—Chris Bose, Barbara Hillyer Davis, Jan Meriwether, and Billie Wahlstrom—established an agenda and presented a format for conducting meetings. The format, despite occasional breakdowns, worked reasonably well: presentation of issue; question and answer period; discussion; decision; assignment of implementation.

Much of Friday morning's meeting was given over to discussing and, in the main, approving recommendations made in the Steering Committee report. These included