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Debate on Graduate Women's Studies at George Washington University

I. FROM STUDENTS AND GRADUATES
By Rosemary Beavers, Carol Bros, Patricia McDonough, Terry Savage, and Lois West

The M.A. program in women's studies at George Washington University is undergoing dramatic changes in focus and structure. As students and graduates, we believe these changes raise questions about the quality of our Women's Studies Program, especially its lack of feminist focus and content.

A radical feminist believes that women are a distinct group, restricted by custom and law from complete participation in society. Moreover, feminists believe that women's lives—and the female experience—have worth and should be preserved. Therefore, feminists strive for equity, recognition of the importance of the female world, and fundamental change in the social order.

What is women's experience, both individual and collective? The curriculum known as women's studies attempts to answer that question. Women's studies should serve as a revolutionary force in a university, providing new ideas and methods for developing feminist consciousness. Women's studies should have a clearly stated point of view. Obviously each individual has her interest, but the inherently female experience that we share must be included. Women's studies must be taught from a feminist perspective, must use feminist research methods and feminist procedures to implement the program. Tillie Olsen has called this "coming to one's own voice."

Unlike the fifteen Women's Studies Programs described in Florence Howe's report, Seven Years Later: Women's Studies Programs in 1976, the Women's Studies Program at GWU was an outgrowth of an off-campus counseling course, Developing New Horizons for Women. The program was organized by the developer of that course, an administrator in the off-campus division of the university. This administrator recruited several interested faculty members to serve on an advisory committee to the Dean of the Graduate School. Thus, the program was created outside the feminist movement; furthermore, community feminists were not consulted. In essence, the GWU Women's Studies Program was created in a vacuum.

The first students in the program were graduates of that same counseling course, Developing New Horizons for Women. By and large, these women had reared their families and were now interested in reentering the world of paid work. The content of the first group of courses reflected a basic lack of understanding about the nature of women's studies. In addition, few departments in the university were interested in expanding their course offerings to accommodate interested students.

By the spring of 1975, and despite the limitations described above, almost one hundred women had enrolled in the new graduate program. A new Dean appointed to head the Graduate School decided that the program needed a full-time academic director. After a six-month search, an academic feminist and activist was hired for the newly created position.

The new director, in her brief two-year tenure, began to recruit feminist students to the program and worked to expand the curriculum. In spite of this progress, personality and political conflicts developed between the director and members of the Women's Studies Committee. When the director's appointment came up for review, she was not rehired, despite prior reassurances from the Dean of the Graduate School. Vehement student protests against this action had no effect, and the director left in June 1977. The Dean then split the director's responsibilities. Without a search, he appointed a "Special Assistant to the Dean for Women's Studies," to be responsible for program development, funding, and administration. This woman had been a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and was known to members of the Women's Studies Committee. As a three-quarter-time appointee, she earns considerably more money than either the previous director or the Academic Coordinator hired to share her job. She had no previous connections with women's studies.

After a two-month search, in which students were only superficially involved, an "Academic Coordinator" was selected to teach courses and advise students. This woman was painfully aware of her predecessor's fate (the alleged reason for the first director's dismissal was that she had failed to develop a coherent purpose and direction for the program). She spent the next nine months developing a new purpose and direction. Again, as when the program first developed, student and community feminists were not involved in discussions. In September 1978, the program's new direction was announced:

The major goal is to provide a center to develop theory, research, and policy options in three areas of concern to women: family, education, and work. At the same time, the goal is to help students to develop as researchers and policy analysts in these three areas.

The program seeks to attract students who are already working or who intend to work in governmental or organizational positions involving public policy issues relating to social equity for women.

Many of the problems of this Women's Studies Program reflect realities of George Washington University. Interested in maintaining solvency and overemphasizing profit-making, the university is unresponsive to students' needs and concerns. The GWU Graduate School offers degree programs which capitalize on the presence of government workers needing professional development. Such motivation for the expansion of graduate education has not been helpful to
programs as they attempt to develop solid academic and research foci.

The Women's Studies Committee, charged with making curricular decisions, has followed the university's lead. The committee has not concerned itself with developing a solid interdisciplinary program; nor have most of its members been involved in teaching either women's studies courses in the program or courses on women in their own departments. They have been only peripherally involved in advising students and in contributing to the growth of the field of women's studies. When falling enrollments signaled some curricular problems in the Women's Studies Program, the committee sought to change the focus and hence the student constituency.

Students have no formal voice on the committee that administers the program. Even informally, the opinions and ideas of students are generally not solicited, and, when offered, have largely been ignored. We fear that studies in the humanities will not thrive under the new public policy program.

While the problems described here may seem specific to GWU, there are implications for other programs. We believe that since knowledge is power, education and its institutionalization in this society are necessarily value-laden and political. Our concern is with naming: how does the title "Women's Studies" characterize a graduate program? What does it say to prospective students? What is its vision of the future? While differing individual and collective perspectives are necessary, we need to be aware of where persons, courses, and programs fall within the feminist political spectrum. What is a program's feminist focus? Is it possible for feminism to interact with public policy at GWU?

We must also be critical of our own roles as graduate students and graduates. Are we educating ourselves only to become another elite within the women's movement? Will we perpetuate differences based on class and race? While it is necessary for all of us to develop strengths and skills, can we avoid such negative aspects of graduate education as elitist attitudes and the acceptance of hierarchical decision-making? We hope that as we truly learn to understand and practice feminist education, we will begin to transcend these limitations. But we must first acknowledge the nature of women's studies and then critically and carefully think through its political ramifications.

Rosemary Beavers and Carol Bros are graduates of the program. Patricia McDonough is a graduate student at GWU. Terry Savage and Lois West are writing their M.A. theses in the program.

II. FROM THE ACADEMIC COORDINATOR

By Phyllis M. Palmer

As the current Academic Coordinator of the graduate program in women's studies at George Washington University, I would like to consider two issues raised by the students' analysis. The first is the intellectual content of women's studies. The second is the organizational issue of how programs have been, and can continue to be, established within the framework of collegiate institutions.

The first issue to develop is how feminism interacts with public policy, a speculation that has been raised but not explored by the students. It is an important question in general and must be answered for evaluation of the current GWU program in particular. Women's studies courses have quite successfully laid the groundwork (and more) for recovering women's private experiences. What we need to do now is to analyze how public institutions—legislatures, courts, corporations, educational institutions, and religious bodies—have shaped and limited these private experiences. As women's studies has revealed, part of women's oppression originates in dichotomizing private and public life. Both to confront that dichotomization and to examine the public forms it takes, we must undertake an examination of public sources of oppression and the links between private experiences and public behavior.

Studying public life and the formation and implementation of policy is more treacherous than studying private experience. It necessitates mastering the social science disciplines that were formulated as adjuncts to the developing bureaucratic orders of state and industry. These viewed human beings as machines, which operated according to discoverable principles of exactly the same sort that governed machines. Consequently, they divided humanity into component parts and then specialized in studying only the pertinent part—economic man, political man, social man, family man, physical man. (I use the term "man" advisedly, since the disciplines did not look at women's economic, political, social, and physical status.) The disciplines emphasized the split between various parts of people's lives and minds, and made it "unscientific" to look at persons as total human beings. The disciplines also were dependent on "objective" data: information could be quantified and calculated. For this reason, women's studies' attempt to critique dominant knowledge has required both interdisciplinary and supradisciplinary studies, as well as attention to those disciplines that still depend on nonquantitative data and that see humanity more completely, i.e., history, religion, philosophy, literature, and occasionally psychology and sociology.

This humanistic base for the development of feminist analysis, which must exist in all programs, constitutes the basis for the development of a critique of public behavior. We must especially confront the academic separation between subjective and objective knowledge which underlies the conflict we feel between private and public life. Since these dichotomies are fundamental paradigms of women's oppression and pervade both academic disciplines and academic structures, they must be confronted in all disciplines. Since a recovery of women's experience requires a holistic comprehension of public structures and intimate forms, women's
The study of public policy.

The second issue to be addressed is an organizational one: what are the proper setting, curriculum, student population, governance structure, and professional goals of a Women's Studies Program? Although Florence Howe's report Seven Years Later has provided a coherent summary for considering these questions, it describes a variety of possibilities dependent upon the particular campus and constituency. My remarks, therefore, are an assessment of the situation at GWU, intended to enlarge the discussion of what problems and possibilities exist for graduate training in women's studies.

The GWU program developed, like many others, because a handful of concerned women faculty used the prospect of substantial student demand to bargain for recognition and funding from skeptical administrators. The GWU faculty women were largely established professionals who were in the process of changing their traditional academic interests to more obviously political and feminist ones. The student demand was not from young undergraduates, who remain quiescent on most D.C. campuses, but from concerned and committed older women like the majority of women's studies majors and minors Howe found on the campuses she investigated.

The oddity of the GWU program is that it began as a graduate program within the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. This was due to an institutional accident: the Graduate Dean was willing to give a trial to such a program, and most of the reentry women already had B.A. degrees.

While location in the Graduate School was fortuitous, starting as a graduate program entailed problems and questions that other women's studies graduate programs have, problems that are surfacing now in undergraduate programs as well. The most prominent was and is, "What responsibility does a graduate program have to offer professional skills and credentials comparable to those provided in other graduate-professional programs?"

The answer to this question at GWU has been that graduate students must be provided with the opportunity to develop skills for professional jobs, even if the degree does not (yet) have general recognition as a professional credential. Combining the goals of a substantial social critique with competence in particular areas of political activity and public interest, the program seeks to integrate a humanistic-feminist analysis of current theory and contemporary policy, with substantive knowledge and social science skills. The goal is to enable graduates to work effectively on the formulation and implementation of policies on the basis of a recognition of the uniqueness and worth of women's experiences.

As Howe notes in Seven Years Later, "The chief criticism of Women's Studies Programs raised generally by student majors [is] that programs lack curricular focus on job skills, field work, and credentials." Some of those students Howe surveyed who were interested in careers solved the problem by going on to graduate or professional schools, which offered recognized, conventional credentials. We would like, at the least, to provide a professional program that allows students to pursue work on women directly and that answers the needs all our students have: how to move from college to work and how to reconcile working for women with making a living.

As a final note and to clarify remaining points, the present Women's Studies Committee includes a philosopher, a religion professor, and an historian, all of whom are committed to the usefulness of their disciplines in the new focus on public policy. Second, while we have designed a program so that a terminal M.A. degree is a meaningful credential, many students have prepared for Ph.D. programs by doing a portion of the M.A. course work in the relevant academic discipline. Finally, the program has offered a coherent set of courses for Ph.D. candidates in other GWU schools and departments who want a women's studies minor. Currently students from education, psychology, American civilization, and history are choosing women's studies as a cognate field.

The women who established the graduate program at George Washington University were willing to take risks, giving much time and energy to the creation of the first university graduate degree program in women's studies in the United States. Without them, there would be no program now. They merit our appreciation. It is their effort that makes possible the program's extension into a new area: analysis of public policies affecting the lives of women. The need to train feminist policy analysts has been recognized by many in this university and elsewhere. The GWU program now has a policy focus, but one broad enough to accommodate a wide range of interests and ideologies.

Phyllis M. Palmer is Academic Coordinator of the Women's Studies Program at GWU.

Individuals, groups, and programs wishing to continue the debate are invited to submit articles for publication in the Summer issue (deadline: early June). Or briefer, informal responses may be sent to Readers' Speakout (similar deadline).