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Emily Abel

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The Academic Job Crisis: Some Possible Responses

By Emily Abel

The following article is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the Second National Women's Studies Association Convention in Bloomington, Indiana, and at a meeting of the Pacific Southwest Women's Studies Association. The Pacific Southwest region introduced a resolution at the 1980 Delegate Assembly calling for NWSA endorsement of policies beneficial to part-time faculty (see Women's Studies Newsletter VIII:3 [Summer 1980], p. 23); the resolution was passed.

I wish to suggest a perspective from which the National Women's Studies Association can discuss the current retrenchment in higher education and the job crisis in particular. Above all, it is vital that we view these issues as a collective concern of this Association, not as a personal problem of some unfortunate and possibly unworthy individuals.

None of us is immune from the effects of the "job crunch." Many of the women in this Association have been unsuccessful in finding any academic positions at all. Their participation in our annual Conventions and their contributions to feminist scholarly journals represent a form of unpaid labor from which the rest of us benefit. Those of us who hold only part-time or temporary jobs are well aware that retrenchment reduces the chances of having our salaries raised and our working conditions improved, and increases the precariousness even of temporary positions. The few women who have secured permanent faculty appointments are shielded from the immediate impact of the unemployment crisis, but they are affected in many indirect ways. For example, several have stated that their tenured slots may well diminish in value when they find themselves once again isolated as the only feminists on campus. Students in women's studies programs recognize the implications of the job crisis for their own lives when they are bombarded with advice directing them to the more "sensible" courses that can help them prepare for careers in business. Finally, there are effects on women's studies programs themselves. Directors and faculty cannot plan curriculum when they fear that funding may diminish or disappear entirely and when they are prevented even from contemplating the hiring of new faculty. Perhaps more serious still, teachers without secure employment find themselves competing among themselves for a dwindling supply of resources despite their allegiance to the values of cooperation and mutuality.

Although I am focusing here specifically on the job crunch in academe, the issue for this Association is even broader. Many of our members are community workers who are affected by the same economic and political factors responsible for the diminishing number of academic positions. Others are elementary and secondary school teachers who have discovered that the route to job security does not lie in the demand that women's studies be an integral part of the curriculum. Thus, what we need to address is the whole problem of unemployed and underemployed feminist educators.

The standard response of traditional academic associations to the crisis in their midst goes like this: Yes, there does appear to be a dwindling supply of jobs and that is certainly regrettable, but it is clear that the solution lies in reducing demand in two ways. First, they suggest, the number of departments which train scholars and teachers should be cut back, and those remaining should be more selective in their admissions policies and should award degrees only to the most deserving students. (Because of the smooth functioning of the meritocracy, this approach will serve to raise the "quality" of the profession, or so we are assured.) Second, the unemployed and underemployed academics should be encouraged to remove themselves from the job hunt by finding alternative employment in business and industry. After all, their plight allegedly results from an unwillingness to consider anything but teaching and scholarship as suitable work. (This solution, of course, has a familiar ring to it: the individuals who are victimized by social problems should improve their attitudes.)

Neither of these responses is appropriate for the NWSA. The first is impossible for us as members of a new area of study, which is currently at the exciting stage of developing new concepts and discovering new sources of information. Moreover, although we may be told that decisions to cut women's studies programs or reduce the number of their faculty positions will be the inevitable result of immutable economic and demographic factors, we should also be aware that political considerations may be thinly disguised in economic rhetoric.* While it is certainly true that the halcyon days of the sixties have ended, and that many institutions are suffering from financial constraints, we also have to ask why the first programs to be eliminated would need to be those serving women, minorities, and low-income people, thus wiping out the gains made by these groups during the 1960s. Why must cuts be felt disproportionately by faculty at the bottom of the academic hierarchy? In other words, we should recognize the extent to which attempts to cut women's studies programs may serve as a means of subverting our ultimate goals: to gain a legitimate place in the college curriculum for the study of women and to increase the proportion of university professors who are women.

The second proposed solution — that disappointed job-seekers find alternative employment in business and industry — is more widely endorsed by professional associations, but it is even less suitable for us. First, there are social implications in the channeling of many teachers, students, and scholars into careers in these fields; for example, the very people who might adopt a critical stance toward society are encouraged to become its defenders. Also, this solution places the burden of dealing with the job crisis solely on the unemployed themselves. Of

*Editorial note: We know of no cuts of this sort that have been attempted successfully.

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course, many of us would be foolhardy in the extreme if we refused to consider the "marketable skills" we possess that can be transferred directly to other, more remunerative fields, and we expect help from our more fortunate colleagues in this endeavor. But as a group, we must also think about solutions that take into account the social need for the kind of education NWSA members can provide.

The standard response of academic associations can be interpreted as a means of defusing a potentially volatile situation and of deflecting attention from the proper targets. These associations have a substantial stake in convincing people not to dwell on the disparity between their aspirations and the reality of their work lives but rather to leave academe quietly and gracefully, and seek other employment commensurate with their skills, education, and/or social origins. It is also possible that the privileged sector of the academic profession that dominates traditional professional associations wishes to discourage the asking of certain questions: What does the shortage of jobs in academe tell us about American society? How does it relate to larger problems of unemployment and work in America? And they seem not to want to seize on one obvious, but rarely mentioned, solution: job-sharing.

What response, then, should NWSA take toward the problem that is affecting us all? For one thing, it is important to recognize that struggles against cutbacks in higher education are highly relevant to the concerns of this Association. On individual campuses we should form coalitions with ethnic studies programs, which have been subjected to similar pressures. We should also work with faculty unions and attempt to broaden their aims, so that they address the needs of part-time faculty, the unemployed, and clerical and maintenance workers. In addition, we should support those women who have taken upon themselves the burden of suing a university for sex discrimination in employment. After all, despite the individualistic nature of many of these cases, their primary benefits are enjoyed more by other women on campus than by the grievances themselves.

But the fact remains that even if we succeed in obtaining equal treatment of faculty women and improving the position of women's studies programs, most of us who are currently unemployed will be unable to find academic jobs during the eighties. Thus, it is important to look for ways in which we can use our skills outside of universities. Two suggestions have been presented in recent discussions within the Pacific Southwest Women's Studies Association.

First, some members have pointed to the National Congress of Neighborhood Women as a useful model for those academics whose primary interest is teaching. The Congress was established in 1975 in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn by a group who recognized that even community colleges remained inaccessible to most working-class women. Many women did not have the time to travel to institutions outside their neighborhoods, and if they did, they found the atmosphere of a traditional college campus alien and the curriculum irrelevant to their lives. Because the program of the Congress is affiliated with La Guardia Community College, students can obtain an AA degree after fulfilling standard requirements. But the educational program of NCNW departs from that of the traditional college in significant ways. Classes are offered in such local facilities as churches and day-care centers, and the course material and teaching methods are shaped by the concerns of the students and the needs of the neighborhood. Although some students hope to obtain an academic credential as the means to a better job, others are community activists motivated by a desire to acquire skills and knowledge that they can use in collective work on behalf of their neighborhoods.

In many instances, going to college is an activity that must be incorporated into lives already burdened with full-time jobs and child-care responsibilities. The students thus form support networks, exchanging services and providing one another with practical help and encouragement. The Congress also offers support services to community women who may not be students; such projects as a battered women's center and a legal services center supplement the work of the community-based educational program. In addition, the staff of the Congress have assisted in the formation of similar projects in seventeen other cities on the East Coast and look forward to the establishment of programs in other areas of the country.

Certainly academics who try to adapt the model pioneered by the NCNW need to be wary of imitating the least attractive features of the settlement movement: acting out of a sense of noblesse oblige and seeking to impose their own concerns and culture on working-class communities. The founders of NCNW, women who had spent their lives in those communities, caution outsiders engaged in similar programs to work closely with grassroots leaders. But the success of their program and of the satellite projects in other cities also testifies to the demand for teaching that responds to community needs and exposes the falsity of much of the talk about "surplus teachers."

Members of the Pacific Southwest Women's Studies Association have also spoken of the possibility of looking to the Institute for Research in History as a model for those academics whose interest lies primarily in research. Founded in New York City in 1975 by a group of historians who were looking for a practical response to the academic job crisis, the Institute calls itself "an independent community of scholars engaged in historical research, writing, and discussion." Some of its over two hundred members are unaffiliated with any academic institution; others hold marginal academic positions in city universities and colleges; and still others are academics on faculties. All members are required to participate in at least one of the constituent research groups, and the Institute staff facilitates grant-writing for foundation support. For 1980, $450,000 has been raised for various projects. While some projects are focused on fairly traditional research, others are so innovative that they would never have satisfied the narrow definitions of scholarship imposed by many tenure committees. One group is currently producing a film on working-class consciousness; another recently prepared a photographic exhibit of the places of origin of immigrants to New York between 1830 and 1914, which will be displayed at various sites throughout the city. It is possible to envisage feminist research centers that
include community activists as well as established academics on their executive boards so that directions of research might be shaped in part by the concerns of groups directly involved in the women's movement.

The aims of both the Congress and the Institute are closely allied to the goals of many members of NWSA: to make accessible scholarly information and to bridge the gap between academics and activists. I hope that other suggestions will be presented in future issues of this Newsletter.

Emily Abel teaches women's studies at California State University, Long Beach.

Women's Studies: The Case for a Departmental Model

By Madeleine J. Goodman

The underlying premise on which we in women's studies have campaigned, and campaigned successfully, for the augmentation of academic curricula by a new and multifaceted field of studies during a period of relative austerity and even retrenchment in the academic world is the recognition of the serious effects of long-term neglect of such studies by the established disciplines. History, we say, and have demonstrated, has not been the history of women. Literature studies have not heard the voices of women, and studies of art have not seen through the eyes of women. The prevailing models of human evolution have been models of the evolution of males, and many of the dominant psychologies and sociologies that take the place of mythology in our day have been founded on antifeminist presumptions and preoccupations. Our task in women's studies intellectually and morally has been a far larger and more complex one than the mere demand for equal rights or fair treatment. As researchers and as teachers we have begun and still have before us the immense work of creating and diffusing the scholarship, insight, and understanding which will bridge over a chasm carved out by centuries of intellectual apathy and neglect.

The mission of women's studies in the academic context, however strong our commitments to the women's movement globally, and indeed because of the strength of those commitments, must not be confounded with the quest for equal opportunity academically, or in general, or with the need for consciousness-raising, that is, the diffusing of home truths about women's situation and the female condition. New knowledge is to be won, and new insights are to be reached, articulated, and shared. This is the central goal of all higher education and research, and it is the necessary agenda for those committed to higher education and research in women's studies. The inculcation of attitudes, even correct attitudes to the extent that we feel capable of defining them, can never be sufficient. The faith on which all scientific and other intellectual inquiry is founded is a faith that greater understanding of things as they are, not just as we might wish to have them, is a goal of incalculable value intrinsically, and a source of incalculable strength instrumentally. Our goal, then, is not merely to show women's concerns "in the right light," but to shed new light on all areas relevant to those concerns, in full confidence that the better understood the realities affecting women are, the more potential there will be for the betterment of women's condition and the human condition at large.

Over the past six years I have been a member of the women's studies faculty at the University of Hawaii, on a regularly funded full-time appointment, split with the General Science Department, where my tenure is based. For the past two years I have directed the Women's Studies Program. Over this period our program has grown from three to seven faculty members; our offerings have increased from a handful of courses to over thirty courses enrolling as many as 500 students in a semester. We have founded our own journal and reading room, established firm research and curricular relations with other academic programs and departments, and, this past year, won approval from our Board of Regents as a regular, i.e., permanent, program within the College of Arts and Sciences. I am convinced that these achievements, in which all our faculty and students have taken part and from which all have benefited, could not have been possible had the Women's Studies Program been a paper entity, constituted of the willingness of faculty already committed to other appointments merely to lend their names to a concept, and would not have been possible had the focus of our program been a rap center, a counseling center, or a women's activities center.

Our program has hardly been a ghetto. Students seek out our courses and seek the advice of our faculty members and community with other students quite regardless of whether they are women's studies majors. Faculty in other programs seek to cross-list their courses germane to our concerns, and we collaborate actively in research with the members of other departments. Such collaboration, the dynamic integration of our program into the university community, would be impossible if our faculty did not have the credentials and the capabilities of active professionals in the disciplines pertinent to our interdisciplinary concerns. This is not a matter of elitism, but of professionalism. Those students who have chosen women's studies majors have been encouraged to concentrate as well on the specialized courses necessary to prepare them for professional careers. Women's studies for them has been not a rarefied preparation to teach women's studies once again, but a vitally useful background from which scientific skills, social insights, and humanistic perceptions can be carried forward with direct relevance to the problems they will confront as professionals and as human beings. Our faculty members, all trained in established disciplines and experienced through their