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Integrating Women into the Liberal Arts Curriculum:
Some Results of "A Modest Survey"

By Ann Froines

In 1978, the Women's Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts/Boston initiated a survey to examine the impact on the liberal arts curriculum of the new scholarship on women. We were looking beyond the courses offered by Women's Studies, since one of the goals of our program, like others, had been to promote the transformation of the male-centered curriculum. During much of its first decade, Women's Studies had focused on developing its own courses and scholarship. By 1978, the Women's Studies Program offered annually ten courses taught by its own faculty, as well as cross-listing another twenty courses regularly offered by departments. We assumed that the faculty teaching the departmental courses would have felt the impact of new feminist scholarship. But what about those faculty who were uninterested in the program, or negative toward its goals? We saw the survey as the beginning of a new and systematic effort to bring feminist critiques and new knowledge about women to arts and sciences departments and disciplines.

The survey was carried out by a college-wide Committee on the Status of Women, authorized by the Dean. To introduce the survey constructively, the Women's Studies Program prepared and distributed to all heads of departments and curriculum committees a fifteen-page report called "Resource Guide for Women's Studies at UMB," listing bibliographies, reference tools, and periodicals available in the Women's Studies Resource Center and the UMB library. We also offered the program's assistance to faculty interested in finding new scholarship on particular topics relating to women. Accompanying the 'Resource Guide' was a note from the Dean, announcing that the survey was about to begin and asking for the departments' cooperation.

The faculty questionnaire sought (1) to discover the faculty's general attitude about materials on women in the curriculum; (2) to elicit specific information about materials on women in use; and (3) to record information about problems in finding such materials and incorporating them into course-offerings. We planned to compile a list of resources within each discipline that might be helpful for those wanting to revise courses. Because we were asking all faculty to participate, at least by filling out a survey form, we decided to issue results in broad, disciplinary areas, not by course or instructor.

Despite our sensitivity to the feelings of the faculty, only twenty percent returned the survey forms. The content of these responses also indicated that almost all of them were sympathetic to the goals of the survey. We were hearing from the already converted. Forty of the forty-nine respondents listed...
some materials on women they used in their courses. Thirty faculty members listed several different topics or readings on women they now used regularly in their teaching. Overall, the responses indicated that there had been more progress in some departments—English and philosophy, for example—than in others, such as political science and art.

The survey did provide us with a list of materials used, as well as a sense of the obstacles to integrating materials on women. Some faculty mentioned the paucity of particular materials in a field—urban politics, for example. Several felt that materials available were not "appropriate." Some said that students' attitudes were a problem, and reported such students' complaints as, "This isn't a course on women's studies, so why are we focusing on women?"

The returned questionnaires hinted at a problem faced by departmental faculty members interested in women's studies. Their needs are paradoxically in conflict: on the one hand, their courses would benefit directly from more active efforts to transform the male-centered curriculum; on the other hand, their futures depend on becoming accepted by senior (mostly male) faculty. Hence, keeping their jobs may conflict with their ideals of eliminating sexism in the curriculum.

Three areas for further work were suggested by the faculty responses, as well as by the low level of participation itself. First, curriculum evaluation projects should attempt to involve, as part of their core group, members of departmental faculty, in order to increase the impact on departmental courses. Second, bibliographical research needs wide circulation among faculties; and workshops need to be organized to discuss the new materials, the problems related to transforming one's perspective from a male-centered one to a nonsexist or feminist one, and resulting new teaching strategies. Third, on many topics within particular fields, resources need to be developed.

In addition to the faculty survey, a student questionnaire was used, with a somewhat different purpose. Male and female students were not asked about specific courses. Rather, they were asked to summarize general impressions of the extent to which materials on women or new perspectives on women had been incorporated into their courses. Students' responses indicated that (1) more materials on women have been integrated into upper-level courses than into introductory courses; (2) courses in English, psychology, sociology, and history included more materials on women than those in economics and political science; and (3) materials on women were added most commonly in lectures and class discussions, rather than in additional readings or through the use of special textbooks or chapters. In general, students' responses indicated that, while information on women was being included in some courses in small amounts, most instructors have not added women as topics on syllabi or assigned substantial readings about women.

Students were also asked about attitudes in the classroom toward women. Substantially more students than not (58:37) felt that their classmates responded with indifference rather than sympathy to materials on women. Not unexpectedly, more women than men felt that they had heard derogatory remarks about women in the classroom, although only half the women reported having heard such remarks.

In general, these survey results point to a basic problem in eliminating the sexist bias of liberal arts courses. The attitudes of instructors and students toward women and men affect what is learned, even when materials on women are made available. In the women's studies classroom, one expects to find differences, debate, and even conflict—though constructive, of course. One also expects to hear an affirmation of women's experience in all its diversity. In traditional classrooms, however, instructors who understand feminist critiques of the curriculum may still have had little experience in teaching the issues and evaluating the classroom process from a feminist perspective.

Thus, several patterns may prevail that do not support the ultimate goals of transforming the liberal arts curriculum. First, the instructor may simply give an obligatory lecture or two, without challenging preconceptions about women and men, and perhaps even continuing to make sexist comments in the classroom. Second, the instructor may fear polarizing the class around attitudes toward women's liberation, and may thus avoid discussion of essential topics. Third, a few outspoken, hostile, or condescending male students may effectively silence other students. Fourth, feminists in an unfriendly environment may overreact or become defensive, thus also silencing other students. Both the survey results and subsequent discussions with colleagues and students suggested that all these problems existed.

On the basis of our extended effort to complete and analyze this survey, we have concluded that these problems can only be addressed in certain limited ways within an institution when the evaluating group is relying on volunteered time and energy. Perhaps a modest survey like ours can be undertaken as a first step toward sifting the problems and finding support for the necessary changes in the curriculum. But one immediate problem is follow-up. A survey like this one needs funds, as well as institutional support, to sustain the ongoing work, which should be planned in several stages and through two or three years.

The limitations of our findings notwithstanding, the survey and subsequent discussions have helped to sharpen several critical questions. How can women's studies promote the issue of equity in the curriculum as a national educational concern? In the course of efforts to integrate women into the curriculum, will women's studies sharpen its understanding of the distinction between adding women to the curriculum and transforming the curriculum using feminist perspectives and pedagogical principles? Will women's studies not find itself calling into question the very definition of the disciplines? Finally, since there are varieties of feminist critiques of the disciplines, what process will we devise for debating among them? Possibilities for expanding the scope of the new knowledge about women seem unlimited, provided that women's studies can maintain its political and intellectual strength and its financial support within academe.

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