Fall 1980

Women's Studies: The Case for a Departmental Model

Madeleine J. Goodman

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/423

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
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
long-term commitment to the employment of those disciplines in behalf of women's studies and vice versa, are sought after by other researchers and proponents of intellectual programs, for their expertise, for the fact that they come prepared with insight, scholarship, skill, and information, not just a set of potted, doctrinaire perspectives.

Our sociologist evaluates the performance of the Honolulu Sex Abuse Treatment Center; our anthropologist studies the life histories of Asian and Pacific immigrant women in the community; our historian researches the history of women's involvement in the Hawaii labor movement. As for myself, I am principal analyst of the Hawaii Breast Cancer Screening Program data and co-principal investigator of a recently funded project to study the women hunters of the Agta Negrito people of the Philippines. Professional background and professional commitment are necessary preconditions of these and the many other research and service activities carried out by the members of our program. Here we and our counterparts at many other women's studies programs can be effective not just as holders of votes or economic and social interests, but through the full resources of our professional competence and disciplinary affiliations. What we advise has the credibility of our disciplines behind it, and our findings have the standards of those disciplines to back them up.

Aims such as these, it might be argued, could be achieved without the establishment of distinctive women's studies departmental units, without commitment of the permanent faculty positions, separate space, overhead, and secretarial expenses any autonomous academic program requires. The key word here, I think, is commitment. What kind of commitment to women's studies as a nexus of interdisciplinary concerns does a university express by "allowing" faculty to offer courses and students to design programs on an ad hoc basis, overseen, perhaps, by a coordinator or committee, rather than planned and developed as the central professional responsibility of a group of individuals hired and evaluated as professors of women's studies? The experience surfacing from many institutions where one or the other model has been tried is that continuity in women's studies offerings is most reliably guaranteed via an institutional foundation.

GENERATIONS OF WOMEN: PRIVATE LIVES — AN EXHIBIT OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Women shown here, left to right:
Sarah Butler Bonner, a rural school teacher, Eaton, North Carolina, 1908 (collection of Denise Small); May Mullins, 1914 (collection of Carol Taglieri); Elon Churchman, a cook, Washington, D.C., 1927 (collection of Stephanie Harris).

"We looked in attics and basements, in closets and secret corners, in family albums and ancient chests for the women who preceded us. We were seeking their likenesses, their loved ones, the objects they held dear, and the ordinary events which marked their time and place of residence. We wanted to extend our picture of the past."

Generations of Women: Private Lives is a collection of photographs gathered by women's studies students and staff at Jersey City State College. Supported by grants from the New Jersey Committee for the Humanities and the New Jersey Department of Higher Education, the exhibit includes about 80 sepia and black and white enlargements of photographs taken mainly between 1890 and 1940, grouped into five categories: "Portraits," "Romance," "Friendship," "Mothers and Children," and "Occasions." Included are photographs of poor women, ordinary women, unknown women, comfortable women, immigrant women, and minority women; Greeks, Irish, Italians, Nigerians, and Cubans; second- and third-generation Americans, Southern and Northern Blacks, women from Philadelphia and Paterson, Brooklyn and Bayonne, Jersey City, Newark, and Hoboken. The idea for the exhibit came out of an introductory women's studies course taught by Doris Friedensohn and Barbara Rubin. Friedensohn notes that "the process of creating and continuing the exhibit has not only given 'Women's Lives' new vitality and depth but has also brought women's studies to the attention of the entire college community." The exhibit has already been on display in a number of places and is scheduled to be shown in several locations in the spring, including SUNY/New Paltz, Montclair State College, Glassboro State College, and the Market Five Gallery in Washington, D.C.
Of course, Professor Smith may be eager to explore a particular topic pertinent to women’s studies in a particular semester, and the offering may be worthy and may attract enrollment. But Professor Smith was not hired to teach women’s studies. There are service courses, bread and butter disciplinary offerings, core courses, graduate courses, other special interests competing for this professor’s time and that of the student body. A women’s studies course in such a setting is more than likely to be or to become an occasional, topical offering; and, if enrollment is slight or below otherwise obtainable levels, the experiment is unlikely to be repeated. All of which says nothing about the question of Smith’s qualifications to teach women’s studies. Professors are not self-selected in medicine, law, or dentistry. Yet there seems to be a notion that any competent historian or literary critic or anthropologist or sociologist who is interested, or thinks students might be, is qualified to teach women’s studies, quite regardless, for example, of whether this person has done or is likely to do any research of publishable quality in this field.

And what about research? Professor Smith might want to do women’s studies research and might be very capable of doing it. But is this the field Smith is likely to do research in most thoroughly, consistently, and rigorously if women’s studies is not the primary agenda of those who will evaluate Smith’s work and award tenure and promotion in accordance with their criteria? Or is it fair to Smith or to women’s studies to expect that her research in women’s studies should be ancillary to the main body of work on which her career development will depend? This is not a purely abstract question since all of us, I’m sure, can name individuals who have done distinguished work, yet been denied tenure at the institutions where that work was done on the grounds that women’s studies research was not central to the disciplinary concerns of the particular individuals into whose hands these decisions were entrusted. Unjust? Of course. But can we refocus the concerns of long-established disciplines without a base from which to do original research in those disciplines? That is too much of a bootstrap operation. It certainly cannot be done by the offering of an occasional topics course drawn from the sheer goodwill of already heavily overburdened faculty.

The time has come, I think, for women’s studies programs and those who are committed to the advancement of women’s studies as an interdisciplinary academic field to rid themselves of the tutelage of oversight committees and shed the ritual and fiscal constraints of annual negotiations for borrowed faculty and ad hoc credit-hours and place women’s studies where it belongs, squarely at the heart of undergraduate education. A women’s studies curriculum can be coherent only if it is planned as a women’s studies curriculum. It will have continuity only if its courses are offered regularly and their sequence refined as the field advances.

In time, I think, but I fear a very long time, it will no longer be necessary for women’s studies to constitute itself as a separate field and seek integration with other academic fields; the legitimate place and perspective of women’s concerns will be recognized by all the disciplines. But until that happens there is a need and a very urgent mission for scientists, humanists, and social scientists in women’s studies. As members of a department among departments, recognized for their academic contributions and bearing the full autonomy of a department in the give-and-take of academic planning, women’s studies scholars together with their students and allies in many fields have a fair chance of contributing to the achievement of that integration of women’s studies into the disciplines it addresses and of contributing at the same time and through that process of integration to the larger agenda of human understanding.

Madeleine J. Goodman is Coordinator of Women’s Studies at the University of Hawaii.

Expanding the Concept of Affirmative Action to Include the Curriculum

By Nancy Topping Bazin

At Old Dominion University, a state university of 14,500 students in Norfolk, Virginia, the concept of affirmative action has been expanded to include the curriculum. From my perspective as a Women’s Studies Director who also serves on the University Affirmative Action/Equal Employment Opportunities Committee, I would like to share the story of (1) how this came about, (2) what it means, and (3) what questions and problems it raises in terms of my work as Director of Women’s Studies.

The President of ODU strongly supports affirmative action in hiring. Because we have an energetic Coordinator of International Programs, the President likewise recognizes that material concerning people of color inside and outside the United States should be integrated into the curriculum. In September 1979, however, when this story begins, he did not realize that the integration of women into the university and into society called for a transformation of the traditional curriculum. Because his talk at the first meeting of the President’s Advisory Committee on Affirmative Action/Equal Employment Opportunity revealed this gap in his awareness, I suggested to the Affirmative Action Director, Maggi Curry (whose title is also Assistant to the President), that a special meeting with the President to clarify the goals and activities of both Women’s Studies and the Women’s Center would be helpful. She decided that a meeting