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Editorial: Everywoman's Educational Health on the Road to Equity

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Everywoman’s Educational Health on the Road to Equity

We have not often used this space to announce new projects. But we are doing so because the project is both timely and important. This fall, The Feminist Press, with the cooperation of NWSA and other major organizations, is launching a two-year project called Everywoman’s Guide to Colleges and Universities.* The title of the project will also be the title of a paperback designed to supplement the guides produced for those college-bound.

To produce this book we will collect information from all two- and four-year institutions of higher education in the United States. The theme around which this information will be collected is the “health” of the college environment for women.

At The Feminist Press, we used to be asked, “Where are the ‘good’ women’s studies programs?” Recently, the questions have grown more complicated: “Where can my daughter study marine biology and find good role models, women’s studies courses, and team sports?” “You want everything,” was one surprised response. But why should women not want everything? Shouldn’t colleges serve the “whole” woman?

It has always been true that colleges, even when coeducational, supposedly served the “whole” man. The catalogue of a prestigious Eastern university, for example, announces as its purpose “to develop the whole man, the sensitive, cultured, open-minded citizen who grounds his thinking in fact... and who is concerned with society and the role he will play in it.” The Stanford or Michigan man is, ideally, interested in some field of study—say economics. He also studies the history of the nation’s fathers and lawmakers; finds his social and moral identity both in the experiences recorded by Melville and Hemingway, and in the philosophical constructs of male thinkers; and learns appropriate leadership and group behavior through participating in team sports and other student activities. If this is normal and “healthy” for the “whole” college man, then what might be unhealthy for the woman sitting beside him? What message does the male-focused curriculum provide for Everywoman? Is the collegiate environment “healthy” for women? Is it healthy for minority women as well as white women?

This project has been designed to answer questions through asking them. First, we will ask questions relating to sex equity as defined, in part, by Title IX’s assumption that facilities traditionally available to males should also be available to females: access to sports, scholarships, role models, student activities, and all academic programs. In addition, we will gauge women’s access to the content of the curriculum—through women’s studies courses, for example.

But equity for women is more complex than Title IX. A second group of questions will focus on those additional services institutions have added specifically because of the physical or social needs of women. Among the former are health clinics and safety measures, including the training of personnel and students about rape prevention and about discouraging and reporting cases of sexual harassment. Among the latter are childcare facilities, programs for “reentry” women, and women’s centers. While providing such services “compensates” for women’s subordinate social status (or for their special responsibility for the care of children), and thus may be seen as helping provide “equity” for women in a collegiate environment, we see these facilities as distinctive, since they are generally not provided for men.

Thus, the concept of a “healthy” educational environment for women is and is not similar to one for men. Defining Everywoman’s health on the road to equity is the first task of this project. We welcome contributions to this conceptual framework, as well as efforts to help spread the word on campuses. Copies of this editorial and other materials on Everywoman’s Guide are available from the Editor.

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