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Concerns of Women's Studies Programs at the NWSA Convention: A Graduate Student's Perspective

By King Ming Young

As a graduate student, I found the Convention an inspiring educational experience. The high level of energy with which participants arrived became more intense as the week went by. A sense of excitement and a spirit of mission permeated the atmosphere. People were eager to share their experiences in women's studies and to learn from others. Many left with a heightened realization of how much remains to be done at their institutions. They also left with an increased commitment to bringing about the needed institutional and social changes.

One concern prevailed throughout the Convention: how can NWSA avoid becoming a predominantly white women's organization? If women's studies is to be a tool for social change, it must strive to incorporate democratic ideals into its process and structure. An organization which is not integrated in terms of race and class will only repeat the same forms of oppression which characterize male-dominated institutions and organizations. Judging by the small percentage of Third World women at the Convention, it is clear that the building of an organization which cuts across racial barriers remains an enormous, yet exciting, challenge. Some of the dialogues at the Convention reassured me that there is not another academic arena more committed to addressing the issues of sex, race, and class than women's studies. The plan to focus next year's Convention on race and racism reflects this commitment.

One can easily understand why an annual meeting of this kind is so important to so many women. It not only provides a support network, but it also reenergizes people, many of whom are overworked, underpaid, and receive little support from their own institutions. The mere opportunity for sharing similar concerns with other women is invaluable. As Elizabeth Janeway said at the opening session, "Sharing validates thought. Without sharing, you might feel you are an isolated freak."

The Convention program was structured in such a way as to balance the time for caucus and regional meetings, workshops, and entertainment or leisure. It was both a Convention where people met and exchanged ideas and a Convention where the business of NWSA was conducted through committees and through caucus and regional representatives at the Delegate Assembly. During the entire four and a half days, there was hardly a moment when one could not find something interesting to do. One could have spent an entire day browsing through the book exhibit, or viewing the films and filmstrips related to women's issues which were being shown continuously.

As a graduate student in educational administration, I was most interested in sessions on the development and administration of women's studies programs from an institutional perspective. Most of the participants at these sessions were coordinators of women's studies programs. A problem common to many programs is inadequate and unstable funding. Many coordinators are either not compensated for their work as coordinators or hired on unstable sources of funding with little institutional commitment to making their positions permanent. The lack of release time for teachers and coordinators engaged in developing women's studies courses or administering programs has been one important obstacle to the growth of women's studies on many campuses.

Another concern of program coordinators is how to gain academic respectability, legitimacy, and therefore autonomy, while remaining responsive to community needs. A women's studies program needs the
support of its women constituents in order to remain viable, but it also needs the support of the university administration in order to survive and grow. The hierarchical and competitive values of the institution and the egalitarian and democratic values of women's studies programs often come into conflict with each other. Many coordinators feel that they are caught in the middle, being held accountable internally under one set of criteria and externally under another set of criteria.

Considerable time at these meetings was devoted to discussing the role of the coordinators. One question loomed large: is there life after being the coordinator of women's studies? The demands on the coordinator are such that she is likely to get "burnt out" after a few years. Unless the coordinator has tenure or can go back to a traditional department, serious problems may arise. Deciding whether the coordinator should be a tenured or tenure-tracked faculty member or an administrator or a combination of both is a critical question of strategy.

The coordinators agreed on the need to devise new mechanisms for exchanging information with one another. (See elsewhere in this issue the announcement of a new publication, Network Notes, to meet this need.) Another suggestion called for the development of a Pre-Convention training institute for coordinators. Such an institute would begin several days before the next NWSA Convention. The training program would emphasize administrative skills and models for program, curriculum, and faculty development in women's studies. A combination of grant support and support from participating institutions might fund such a program.

The coordinators outlined several ways for NWSA to be more directly helpful to women's studies programs. First, NWSA could provide some support services for the projected coordinators' newsletter. Second, NWSA could collect baseline data about the programs in existence, their instructional budgets, tenured positions, and degree-granting power. Third, NWSA could be a central repository and clearinghouse for all kinds of research related to women's studies. Fourth, NWSA could review and maintain a directory of consultants with whom women's studies programs could contract at a discount off the regular consultants' fees. In turn, what women's studies programs could do for NWSA would be to contribute institutional information, submit research reports for dissemination, and help with membership development for the regions and for the National Association.

King Ming Young is a graduate student at Stanford University School of Education who is planning to write her dissertation on the administration of women's studies programs.

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** A Librarian's View of the Second NWSA Convention

By Linda Parker

In the introduction to the NWSA Convention program, the Convention Coordinators refer to the necessity of building networks, disseminating new information and research, launching new campaigns for change, stirring new insights, and nurturing our growth as individuals. These concepts could form a feminist librarian's motto.

Many libraries are bureaucratic monoliths which may seem impervious to change, but change is occurring because feminist library workers are challenging institutional policies and practices which form barriers to both women workers and women library users. Feminist librarians join NWSA for the same reason as anyone else—"to further the social, political, and professional development of women's studies at every educational level and in every educational setting"—but with a special emphasis on libraries.

Feminist librarians came to the Second NWSA Convention to communicate to other women the importance of libraries in the women's movement, to develop a supportive network which would serve as a stepping-stone for projects designed to build a stronger information base for women's studies research and practice, and to share ideas about methods for implementing change. By participating in this organization, feminist librarians wanted (and will continue) to make themselves visible not only within NWSA but also in their respective communities—the university or college, the city or town, the school, and the publishing industry.

Information gathering was an important aspect of the Convention. We discovered new publications, films, and archival resources which do not appear in the reviewing media. We talked to publishers who are feminists. We attended the sessions and experienced the excitement of learning about and sharing our knowledge with women.

The development of communication between librarians and other participants in the Convention was as important as the process of collecting information. In joint sessions with colleagues from other disciplines, and in informal conversations in the hallways, dining rooms, and buses, we stressed the function of librarians in the development of women's studies as an academic area of knowledge: acquisition of feminist source materials; organization of collections for research and dissemination of information about them; and creation of bibliographic tools. A growing enthusiasm emerged as faculty, students, and librarians exchanged information about new research, previously unknown resources, and the development of new methods of access to traditional materials.

Librarians actively participated in the Convention. We delivered papers and presented panels on library services to women's studies, on feminist publishing, and on development of networks to acquire...