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A Grand Illusion: Continuing the Debate on General Education

Joan Hoff Wilson

Basic curriculum reform is difficult at best to achieve. Although it was quickly obtained in the 1960s, when grade inflation and the proliferation of “relevant” courses accompanied the elimination of requirements, the result was faculty withdrawal or acquiescence, not basic reform. Consequently, recent moves by Harvard, Stanford, and other prestigious schools to redesign undergraduate programs represent the first attempt at fundamental curriculum reform since the 1930s and ’40s. Unfortunately, because these efforts come largely in reaction to the changes of the 1960s and to the disturbing decline in undergraduate enrollments, especially in the humanities, they tend to offer old wine in new bottles. They are characterized by retreat on the part of overly tenured, largely male faculties to the “good ole days” of training scientifically-literate Renaissance men, rather than steps forward based on nonsexist education offered for over a decade now by teachers of women’s studies and ethnic studies and by feminists in various disciplines.

Given the economic retrenchment in higher education, significant curriculum change is unlikely to occur again in major institutions before the end of the century. Even in the best of economic times, basic curriculum reform seems to appear in forty-to-fifty-year cycles. If history is any guide, it is unrealistic to anticipate more reform than has already taken place, at least at institutions like Harvard and Stanford and those that emulate them. I point out these patterns because the suggestions for improving humanities programs offered by Carolyn Lougee in the Spring issue of the Women’s Studies Quarterly,1 as well as those offered by Christine Froula and Adrienne Munich,2 rest on the assumption that the frugal 1980s and ’90s will be more conducive to curriculum reform at these elitist schools than the prosperous 1950s and ’60s.

Humanities courses redesigned in the next few years are likely to remain that way until the next millennium. Thus, when Lougee advocates “the reinstatement of traditional, unreconstructed, sexist courses rather than none,” she is condemning humanistic studies at Stanford to the curriculum of the 1930s, with minor innovations in interdisciplinary teaching. Two of her three suggestions for reconceptualizing and preserving the humanities in the undergraduate curriculum are based on the implicit but highly dubious assumption that there will be more feminist humanists at Stanford actively supporting “the introduction of something we knew we wanted to change” by the end of the decade.

The same illusionary quality permeates Froula and Munich’s ideas about teaching literature classes at Yale. We are to accept on faith that their male-dominated institution3 will acknowledge the importance of “learning to read the literary classics of the Western tradition from a feminist perspective,” even though feminist teachers of literature have long advocated this approach to little avail in major coeducational institutions. Moreover, the question of whether historical or literary texts in which men assign particular status and value to women “often show a more profound and sympathetic grasp of women’s oppression than many of us have today” has given rise to endless debate. If anything, Froula and Munich’s argument seems to be a diversion from Lougee’s important point about redefining the humanities so that it would no longer be necessary to debate the relative merits of prescriptive literature written by men and affective literature written by women. Froula and Munich do not advance the case for a feminist critique of prescriptive literature. (For example, Lilian Faderman has recently described women’s writing since the Renaissance about a private existence largely ignored or suppressed by men.) My point here is that literature written by men about women or by women about women has not been “mainstreamed” in the last ten years, Froula and Munich to the contrary notwithstanding.

Throughout the 1970s faculties across the country have resisted integration of feminist interpretations into humanities classes despite materials developed by women’s studies programs and individual women and men scholars. The reading lists from Columbia’s humanities sequence, published in the September 1981 Esquire, illustrate how strong resistance to this type of change has been. There is not a single book by or about women. The exceptions to this rule have been at isolated liberal arts colleges like Denison, Lewis and Clark, Wheaton, Georgia State, and Montana State—all of which have adopted nonsexist humanities materials as part of their general education component. As Amy Seward pointed out in her comment on Lougee’s remarks at the 1980 meeting of the American Historical Association, while people talk about mainstreaming feminist perspectives, the result is more often “malestreaming,” as the latest reform efforts at both Harvard and Stanford indicate.

Why, then, do feminist scholars at prestigious, trend-setting institutions appear so unrealistically optimistic? These women are in difficult positions. Like Lucy Stone, who acquiesced to male postponement of women’s suffrage following the Civil War, they find themselves surrounded by men determined to reinstate traditional, unreconstructed sexist courses in the humanities in the name of reform. But we should not mistake rationalizations of the failure to have a feminist

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3And now that Yale is one of the 219 out of 272 schools no longer required to file affirmative action plans because of the Reagan Administration’s modification of Executive Order 11246 (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2 September 1981, p. 21), it is unlikely that significantly more feminists will be hired.

impact on curriculum change for blueprints for transforming liberal arts education. Instead, I suggest that the best way to strengthen the liberal arts would be to use the women’s studies curriculum as the model for change.

I distinctly remember that a major objective and commitment of early women’s studies programs was the integration of material on women into the regular curriculum of all disciplines, but especially within the humanities. In those days we all tended to agree that if women’s studies truly succeeded it would cease to exist as a separate, liberal education program. I don’t think that consensus exists today. Rather, the most successful women’s studies programs seem to be permanent “departments” offering minors and majors, which delay indefinitely the integration of material on women into undergraduate liberal arts classes. Such a delay, whether intended or not, contributes to “ghettoizing” the study of women rather than mainstreaming it. The same might be said of women’s research institutions.

It should be clear that I think women’s studies and nonsexist liberal education are, or should be, the same thing in terms of the goal of changing values, the classical humanistic goal of teaching people to think critically, and the goal of ensuring the continued impact of liberally-educated individuals on public policy. We started out saying that women’s studies was a practical means toward a transformation of liberal education into a nonsexist curriculum. Now I think we are tending to view women’s studies as an end in itself because the battles fought, one class at a time, have been so enervating and time-consuming. Because some of us have lost sight of our original humanistic goal, we cannot conceive of matching our effort of the last ten years in order to overhaul liberal education.

Instead of continuing to rely on labor-intensive “bottom-up” tactics, I think we should begin to think about “top-down” strategies which might prove more efficient. One so obvious that I wonder why we have ignored it for a decade focuses on influencing the composition of standardized tests at the institutional level and beyond. I have found as a member of the American history panel of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) that high school teachers, in particular, teach what they anticipate will be on the SAT or AP examinations. A few questions about women could have widespread impact on teaching at the high school level. [Ed. Note: For an enthusiastic description of the positive effects of the introduction of a document-based question dealing with women’s history into the European History Advanced Placement test in 1978, see Mildred Alpern, “College Board Exam Places ‘Imprimatur’ on Women’s History,” in the Women’s Studies Newsletter 7:1 (Winter 1979): 3.] Another “top-down” approach would be for women’s studies programs on individual campuses to propose comprehensive restructuring of the undergraduate liberal education curriculum, not course by course within each discipline but through restructuring of the disciplines themselves, using one department as a model in the beginning.

This is more feasible now than a decade ago, because what has traditionally passed for liberal education is now in trouble on most public campuses. Undergraduate history majors, for example, have declined in the last twenty years from ten percent to two percent of the student body. In graduate schools, enrollments have shrunk as the academic job market in the humanities dwindled. As a result, most history departments at less prestigious schools are more open to suggestions for curriculum reform than they would have been ten or fifteen years ago.

To make women’s studies the basis for nonsexist education, we must change some of our ideas about it. I disagree with the first part of the definition of a liberal education proposed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, that is, that it consists “of a curriculum more or less in its entirety organized around the cultural heritage of civilization and thus concentrating heavily on the humanities.” Instead, I believe that our cultural heritage lies not only in the past but in our future. Our culture is clearly more technological than ever before. A person cannot be considered broadly educated unless she or he has “scientific literacy,” an intelligent understanding of new technological developments. Just as historians cannot ignore the spread of the quantitative skills in our society, neither can women when they revamp the liberal education curriculum.

At the same time, humanists must receive an education with practical overtones. This is more necessary for feminist humanists than we like to admit, since 60 percent of all women over sixteen years old will be in the work force by 1990. Women in particular can no longer afford the luxury of a liberal education based exclusively on traditional offerings in the humanities. One could even argue that they really never could afford the type of liberal education they received in the past. Beginning with the nineteenth-century female seminaries which institutionalized a double standard of learning for women, liberal education taught them not only about the world of famous men, but how to keep their place in that world.

Ideally, women undergraduates should obtain a feminist perspective and a practical humanist education. Indeed, we can argue and prove that a women’s studies-based liberal education would increase enrollments. After two years students would choose professionally-oriented upper-class-division courses or two more years in humanities classes that included marketable skills. In history, for example, this would mean editing, word processing and computer research, statistics, languages, quantitative analysis, oral history, archival techniques, public policy studies, and problem-solving based on case study methods. There is no longer any justification to turn out students who must immediately be retrained by government or business employers in order to qualify for a job.

I used to think that the chances for a bold, sweeping redesign of departmental and college-wide programs would be better in large, coeducational institutions, but given the prognosis of places like Stanford and Yale, I now believe that small public or private liberal arts colleges, and especially single-sex schools for women, offer more hope. Such a curriculum would institutionalize for the first time a female Gestalt into the basic undergraduate liberal education; end the ghettoization of women’s studies; and, if we’re lucky, produce professional women who are more feminist than any previous generation—and more employable in nonstereotyped jobs. Finally, nonsexist education would actually begin changing values. To date, women’s studies and the women’s movement have raised the consciousness of many, but have in fact changed few patriarchal institutions. In this respect we have all been suffering from a grand illusion.

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