To Arm the Amazons: Educating Students about the Characteristics and Problems of Feminist Workplaces

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Sisterhood can be joyous and energizing. It can also be frustrating and disillusioning. The personal cost of working in a women’s center, a rape project, or a women’s studies program is often quite high. We expect the hours of exciting and tedious processing that it takes to build the Community, explore some of the specific problems interns may encounter in femist groups less confident than when we started and feeling badly about skills, and values, but these are also outcomes of the feminine group experience.

Where does sisterhood go wrong? We work in groups dedicated to learning new skills and taking back our power, yet we may leave these groups less confident than when we started and feeling badly about ourselves and the femist process. “Collaboration,” “cooperation,” “nonhierarchical,” “consensual,” “collective”—these are the key descriptors of the groups that leave bitter ex-members behind. For how many of our students is the femist worksite empowering? I will explore some of the specific problems interns may encounter in femist groups, and sketch some steps that a women’s studies program might initiate to assist both the student and the femist organization in creating a mutually satisfying internship.

To explore issues student interns are likely to confront in feminist worksite placements, I will begin by listing common characteristics and patterns of many feminist organizations:

Desire for, or assumption of, equality. In our hearts I think we expect and wish feminist organizations to provide us an experience of equality among our sisters—to function holding true to some notion of equality.

Missing accountability mechanisms. Procedures for ensuring that tasks are accomplished appropriately, and for responding when they are not, are frequently fuzzy, avoided, or nonexistent.

Job rotation or open job selection and job changing. Job rotation or self-selection of tasks and jobs are ways that groups have tried to enable women to develop new skills and follow new interests. The changing and rotation of jobs are also intended to demystify certain types of work and to maintain an equality of skills, knowledge, and power.

High staff turnover. This bane of many feminist organizations is self-explanatory, and its causes are probably familiar—salaries that are too low (where they exist at all) and work that is overwhelming.

Participatory or consensual decision-making. While there seem to be fewer task groups and organizations functioning with an explicitly nonhierarchical structure now than in earlier years, many groups operate with a modified hierarchy and attempt to make decisions in a consensual or participatory manner. Compromises are made in the structure such that the director, for example, may have overall authority and be perceived by the larger institution or community as being “in charge,” but actual decision-making authority and responsibility are delegated to groups or the entire staff. In some cases a modified hierarchy is an attempt to maintain two fronts: an external hierarchy for incorporation or credibility purposes, and an internal nonhierarchy for ideological ones. Decentralization and small group autonomy are two other characteristics related to this type of organizational structure.

Desire to meet the needs and expectations of others. As women well socialized in this society, many of us do not say “No” easily in the face of obvious need. In addition to being a personal neurosis, this pattern is also an organizational one. All organizations face the problem of fitting individual needs, program needs, and larger community or institutional needs into a workable and effective whole. Women’s organizations—including and perhaps especially feminist ones—suffer from women’s issues at the organizational level. For the only women’s organization on a campus or in a town, this pattern is exacerbated.

Constant focus on survival and crisis. Very few feminist organizations go through a year without having to worry about how to survive the following year. Issues of effectiveness are constantly being thrown up against issues of survival; often, long-range planning is neglected.

Underfunded, understaffed, and “undereverythinged” compared to goals and services. Most feminist organizations are inadequately staffed, severely underfunded, and incredibly overworked. (For example, a survey of women’s centers across the country found that the typical women’s center, reaching over 2,000 women a year, had five part-time staff and ran nine programs.) The resulting strain is easy to predict. Feminist groups always aspire to accomplish far more than their available resources would seem to allow.

Marginality. This is a characteristic familiar to most women’s studies programs, as well as other feminist groups, since none are funded nor “housed” so as to be a part of the mainstream of our communities or academic institutions. A small budget and small staff doing work that is generally considered unimportant may bring greater freedom, since fewer people care to pay serious attention, and that can be a real advantage. On the other hand, the risk to survival is significantly increased.

Equalization of rewards. Even where salaries are graduated, the belief that rewards should be equalized is often present—sometimes as an undercurrent, sometimes as an explicit issue. Frequently there is some attempt to equalize other concrete rewards, such as vacation time, and/or more intangible rewards, such as inclusion in social activities.

Confusion over issues of power and leadership. Confusion often seems to arise around the appropriateness and meaning of power. We
want our organizations to have the power to effect changes but, within
them, individual power is often perceived negatively. Covert norms
and problematic dynamics around power often center on an assump-
tion that everyone in the organization has, or should have, equal power
(something that is virtually impossible); or on an assumption that if
someone has power, then someone else has had it taken away (which is
sometimes true, and sometimes an assumption that obscures how
frequently we give our power away); or on an assumption that no one
should have power (also virtually impossible). These assumptions tend
to prevent us from dealing with the reality of our differences.

If the foregoing list characterizes some of the organizations into which
we are sending idealistic, hopeful, Amazon feminist students, how, at
least, can we send them in armed? What are the implications for interns
of these organizational patterns?

The desire for, or assumption of, equality becomes problematic
when the equality of members is translated into sameness. Feminists
believe in and are fighting for equality, but realizing equality in feminist
workplaces is very difficult. We frequently end up reducing equality
to the simplest and most concrete idea—sameness: same treatment,
because that is a clear marker of equality, and same status or
level, because we assume that that will preclude power inequities.

This assumption has several implications for people coming into the
workplace. An intern or a new staff member requires some basic
training and orientation, but since teacher-student or trainer-trainee
relationships appear unequal, there may be widespread discomfort
with such explicit inequities. That discomfort may explain the experi-
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The polite avoidance of skill differences affords students few favors.
An undergraduate whose placement is her first job typically lacks the
skills to negotiate for training. If she has as great a discomfort with the
teacher-learner dichotomy as staff members, she may initially appreci-
ate the assumption that she can just “catch on” by herself. Such initial
appreciation can quickly fade if the task is overwhelming or not
familiar. Tension is compounded when a student internalizes the
problem and sees her difficulties as her failure, her problem.

Another problem arises from warm-hearted, well-intentioned mes-
sages of equality to interns and new staff. Interns, especially full-time
ones, may be told that they are to function as equal members of the
organization, but the reality is that they cannot: they lack the history,
information, and influence or power among group members as well as
the leadership skills or positions of older members. The message and
the experience are dissonant and confusing. Again, inexperience,
socialization, and expectations of the feminist workplace may contrib-
ute to the student’s feeling that confusion is her failure.

The assumption of equality may also preclude a thorough assess-
ment of an intern’s skills and abilities, so that the intern may be
assigned to tasks either below or beyond her capabilities. This, of
course, leads to an experience of frustration and disappointment,
which often turns to anger and resentment, or an experience of intense
anxiety.

The goal of women, of coming to know and to validate women’s
strengths, is not aided by the assumption that “Of course I can start
counseling rape victims tomorrow.” We do not need to create and
perpetuate an Amazon myth. The dynamic that arises from allowing
women to attempt as much as they want (or the organization wants)
without adequate training or support, coupled with a common individ-
ual pattern of internalizing problems as personal failures, is not
productive to a student’s learning.

One final point about issues for interns related to assumptions of
equality: the more “radical” students are the ones most likely to have
the most difficult time. The student who has just begun to think about
women’s issues is not as likely to hold heartfelt expectations about the
experience of sisterhood in a feminist internship setting. More “radical
” students, who have already acquired a zealous spirit and an
Amazon persona, are more likely to enter the organization expecting
the experience of equality that the other members of the group think
they are prepared to give. In a “radical” organization they are likely to
hear the rhetoric and observe some of the behavior that on the surface
seem appropriate, but that then increase their confusion and pain when
the experience “doesn’t feel good.”

The lack of clear accountability mechanisms is connected to the
assumption of equality. Feminist organizations and their individual
members often speak passionately about their accountability and re-
sponsibility to their community. Individual members also speak, with
a great deal of feeling, about their responsibility to be true to their own
convictions, values, and political beliefs, and express strong feelings
of responsibility toward the other women in the organization. The
problems arise at the level of accountability for completing tasks
related to the organization’s purpose. Accountability at that level is
often seen as too hierarchical, intruding on personal autonomy and
undermining individual power within the group. It is rare to find clear
systems of accountability—systems set up so that someone else knows
what an individual is to do, by when, and is responsible for interven-
ing if that person doesn’t do it.

Even in more hierarchical and professional organizations with clearly
defined staff responsibilities, accountability mechanisms may still
be inadequate because of a great hesitancy to intrude into another’s
work, to make direct statements, such as, “You didn’t do X.” (It is
interesting how the women’s movement and our socialization combine
to burden us with the beliefs and behaviors of superwoman, on the one
hand, and, on the other, emotional fragility with regard to criticism and
anger.)

One clear implication is that interns can end up without supervision,
if no one has that assignment among the regular staff, and if no one is
quite comfortable fulfilling it. Or the staff may dutifully create a
supervisory accountability system for the intern, who then becomes the
only one in the entire organization whose work is checked! Either way,
the intern suffers the effects of negative dynamics.

Interns also can be victims of “crisis accountability,” accountability
mechanisms that only come into play when work due a month ago is
needed. A crisis meeting is scheduled, and the intern may hear for the
first time both the group’s expectations of her and its responses to her.
Because of the crisis, others in the organization may already be at the
point of thinking of changing her job or terminating her.

Two other characteristics of feminist groups—the transience of
staff and the rotation of jobs—serve to compound the problem of
accountability. Both these patterns militate against the development of
staff members’ skills to the point where they can feel sufficiently
competent and “expert” to supervise an intern. Too, if there are few or
no existing training, accountability, or supervisory mechanisms among the staff, those assigned such tasks with an intern are likely to lack the skills and experience to set up effective systems. They also may find it more comfortable to “let the intern learn like I did,” ignoring the differences in time and function between an internship and a regular staff position.

Participatory decision-making, consensual decision-making, and nonhierarchical or modified hierarchical structures can all create problems for interns. In addition to time and commitment, successful participation in these structures requires: listening skills; the ability to see similarities and to allow differences; a willingness to be the only person in the room who articulates a different point of view; clarity in defining and exercising one’s right to say “No” when “No” in a consensual decision-making process is a veto; clarity in defining and exercising one’s responsibility to support a majority decision in democratic decision-making. Participation requires a great deal of verbal ability, as well as information about issues and familiarity with procedures.

It seems only fair that, in choosing a practicum in a nonhierarchical or consensual organization, interns be informed of the skills and abilities that effective participation in such an organization requires. Such prior knowledge can help them maintain the focus on learning how to participate, and on developing selected skills. More typically, the intern is left to struggle with the confusion of participating in an egalitarian structure while feeling decidedly unequal. Those working only a few hours a week in an alternative organizational structure will not have the time to participate in the key elements of the organization’s process. Thus, no matter how friendly everyone is to her, the intern is likely to have an experience of being an outsider. Again, the stronger the student’s expectation of experiencing the camaraderie of sisterhood and equality, the more painful and confusing her actual experience will be. Even if an intern is working almost full time in an organization, the limited duration of the practicum prevents in-depth participation for most people. She may have the time to attend all the meetings, but she will still be without the experience, knowledge, and relationships to support truly equal participation. She, too, will still have the experience of being an outsider. We need to be aware of the stress created by internships that require an intense commitment and involve very complex relationships for a one- to three-month period of time.

A common carryover from the way women are socialized is a feeling of being responsible for meeting the needs and expectations of others. In feminist organizations, this often means we assume that if we are going to meet the needs of the women “out there,” surely we must meet the needs of the women on our staff as well. From an organization’s point of view, then, one problem with any intern is that she is yet another person whose needs must be met and somehow fitted into the organization’s activities. For example, if an intern is shy in groups, isn’t it the staff’s responsibility to help her feel more comfortable, to take the time to include her, to help her become more verbal and a more active participant? After all, feminists work in organizations both to help each other grow and to accomplish important work. The balance between those two purposes is difficult to maintain, even more difficult when feminists also feel personal compulsions to meet the needs of others. These compulsions build a group or organizational norm which leads members to expect that their needs have a clear place in the organization’s life.

The burden of this dynamic on the organization should be clear. The intern’s situational needs (the need for supervision, the need to integrate her learning goals with the job tasks available, the need to be oriented and trained, etc.) do create a substantial demand on the organization. This fact, coupled with whatever personal needs and expectations an intern may bring, can lead the regular staff to feel resentful toward her because, on both emotional levels, they do not want any additional responsibility. After all, most feminist groups set up internships because they need help and are already severely overworked.

Interns are also affected by another aspect of this personal and organizational dynamic. When the organizational norm is one of responding to all requests for help, information, or assistance, whether or not they fall within the group’s stated purpose, an intern may quickly find herself dealing with situations and problems that are, at best, inappropriate to her chosen learning goals and, at worst, overwhelming and scary. The group norm often does not support the refusal to “take on” the situation or problem.

Ever-present issues of survival and an orientation toward crisis stemming from underfunding and overwork make successful internships difficult. Lack of long-range planning usually means that many organizations cannot guarantee that the internship originally negotiated will be the one implemented. Instead, an intern may be directed to an assignment that is very much in reaction to immediate events and represents the “easiest” thing an intern could be asked to do. Short-range planning and the search for where the intern can fill in or be of immediate help might result in the intern’s spending her time answering the phone and providing information on request. While chances are that this assignment would provide other staff with more time for more “important” work and might provide the intern with a sense of the range of women’s needs in the community, it is less likely to be of enduring value to her or to the organization.

In those feminist organizations attempting to equalize concrete and/or intangible rewards, two types of problems may emerge for interns. One is that the organization may feel guilty about the lack of salary and compensate by: (1) allowing the intern to do things they would not ordinarily prefer her to do (which may lead to covert resentment or an unexpected attack); and/or (2) inviting the intern to participate in meetings or activities beyond her job description so that she will at least feel included and “good” (which usually leads to confusion and rapid burnout for the intern).

The other problem is that most feminist groups are inadequate when it comes to praise—a key intangible reward. Usually, there is an absence of positive feedback among staff members. The intern, then, doesn’t get rewarded by the formative feedback and praise she needs. And most interns don’t get the other major intangible reward—the satisfaction of seeing the product of one’s work and its impact.

Marginality is one characteristic of feminist organizations that offers advantages for interns. The major advantage of marginality is the greater freedom the organization may have to create internships that enable students to test out new skills and abilities, and to take on
significant responsibilities. The only pitfall is that a placement in an alternative marginal organization may carry less professional weight and credibility when it comes to job hunting.

The strong desire to create our feminist visions now is often a block to the actual realization of those visions. We need time to define our visions more clearly, and time to develop the personal skills necessary to implement them. For me, this is a central purpose of women's studies. Our task is to teach our students to be creative rather than reactive in responding to the cultural norms, values, and models that surround and are a part of us.

We and our students can only move from reaction to creation by accepting, rather than denying, the problems we have and the obstacles we face, personally and organizationally. We need to encourage the acknowledgment of fears, hopes, confusions, and expectations around power, leadership, and equality. We need to find and teach that difficult balance between patience and gentleness with flaws, on the one hand, and demands and expectations for change, on the other. We need to validate that it makes sense if the changes we are seeking are personally confusing and difficult. Not only are we struggling with the residue of our socialization around power and leadership and our experiences of their being used against women, but we are also attempting to create organizations free of the types of power and leadership most familiar to us. The role models are very scarce; our students have the right to know the complexity and enormity of the undertaking, and the cost of the superwoman, Amazon myth.

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Three Decades of Reminiscences about Women in the Academy

Thalia Gouma-Peterson

The following oral history was presented as part of a panel on "The Isolation of Women from Each Other in the Academy," at the GLCA Women's Studies Conference in Fall 1980.

I came to the United States in 1952 from Pierce College, a women's high school in Athens, Greece. During my years there as a student, I had always taken the friendship and companionship of women for granted. I had excellent teachers in history, psychology, chemistry, art, ancient Greek, physical education, and philosophy—all of them women; and I had come to take for granted the existence of strong and inspiring women role models. Many of these women were single. I did not realize then that this would prove to be a common occurrence for professional women. I still remember them distinctly, for their warmth, their intelligence, their dedication, and their encouragement. The president of the school was also a woman, an American in her sixties, rather eccentric and colorful. Many of the Greek students made fun of her, but I found her rather splendid.

I won a Fulbright award and arrived at Mills College in September 1952, assuming, erroneously, that I would find the same spirit of companionship and friendship. Very quickly, however, I learned that, although Mills, like Pierce, was a small women's institution, most of my teachers were men. Of the few women, most were single. They were considered brilliant, eccentric, and difficult. My major professor, a German émigré, was an excellent and stimulating teacher. With our common European background as a bond, he encouraged and supported me and, in fact, became my role model.

There was one woman art historian, a visiting assistant professor. She was married, taught part time, and commuted from out of town. Because the student grapevine rumored her to be disorganized and effusive, I resisted taking a course from her until graduation requirements finally forced me to do so. She was disorganized, to be sure, but...