"Everywoman's Guide" as an Organizing Tool on the Bowling Green Campus

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About a decade ago on many campuses in the United States, faculty and students formed committees or commissions on the status of women to gauge that status and, wherever possible, to measure progress toward equity. Some of these committees still in existence in the early eighties have been instrumental in the completion of the questionnaire mailed to campuses in the fall of this year by the project staff of Everywoman's Guide to Colleges and Universities. On other campuses—including Bowling Green State University, reported on below—the questionnaire functioned as a catalyst to help organize a new committee. We would be glad to hear from people on other campuses who have had similar—or different—experiences.

Everywoman's Guide as an Organizing Tool on the Bowling Green Campus
Susan S. Arpad

I returned Bowling Green State University’s completed questionnaire for the Everywoman’s Guide to Colleges and Universities with a note of thanks to Florence Howe, The Feminist Press, and the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE). I hope that the Guide will have a wide distribution and that it will help women students better to evaluate and select colleges. While the publication of this guidebook may have been the main goal of the project’s originators, I think the questionnaire itself has the potential of having an even greater direct impact on individual campuses. On my campus in Ohio, the project is providing an opportunity for us to focus attention university-wide on the status of women. For several years, groups of faculty, administrators, and staff have tried repeatedly to initiate an effective long-range project to improve the general educational climate for women on our campus; the Everywoman questionnaire may have provided the initiative for us to become effective change agents.

When we received the questionnaire, we realized that we would need to plan carefully if the survey was to be as useful as we hoped it would be. First, we sought the highest administrative approval to collect the information. In the past, when ad hoc campus women’s groups have attempted to collect information, we have been ignored, told that the information was unavailable, or given partial information. Making requests for data in the name of the president’s or provost’s office was an entirely different matter. Participating in a national project funded by FIPSE and sponsored by The Feminist Press helped to gain the administration’s support. Second, we wanted to ensure that, once the information was collected, it would be readily available to anyone interested. Our administration receives dozens, perhaps hundreds, of questionnaires annually. Most are answered by administrative assistants and then routinely buried. To ensure that we would have access to the information, we formed a committee of three to collect and collate it: myself as Director of the Women’s Studies Program, the Director of Institutional Studies, and the Coordinator of Institutional Reports.

The completed questionnaire is in itself extremely useful. It provides for the first time a wide-ranging body of information about women on campus. Our completed survey documents what is probably a typical pattern of sex inequity at similar universities. (See Suzanne Howard, But We Will Persist: A Comparative Research Report on the Status of Women in Academe.) For instance, although our student body is slightly over 60 percent female, women are 24 percent of all full-time faculty, 47 percent of all part-time faculty, and 16 percent of all full-time tenured faculty. The university has recently hired some women in upper-level administrative positions, but the questionnaire clearly shows that these positions are not part of the traditional decision-making structure of the university, which remains at our university entirely white and male. The questionnaire also provides such information as the fact that women students have held approximately 22 percent of the elected and appointed campus leadership positions and that women were 23 percent of all commencement speakers, honorary degree recipients, recipients of alumni awards, or major campus-wide lecturers last year.

In addition to documenting numerical inequities, the survey points out areas of need that are not being met by the university. For instance, although ‘‘materials’’ are available, no unit of the university concerned with either academic or student affairs provides educational programming about nontraditional careers for women. The questionnaire reveals that, while our university has a Committee on Minority Affairs and a relatively extensive and specific administrative structure to deal with minority affairs, there is no parallel Committee/Commission on the Status of Women or specific administrative structure concerned with women’s affairs.
The completed survey also indicates areas where statistical evidence about women is unavailable or where what is available is highly questionable. For instance, for a total student population of approximately 17,000, 57 percent of whom reside on campus, available data indicated that a total of two rapes and eighteen assaults were "reported" during 1980-81 and that the number of assaults on women was not available. Similarly, when the College of Business was asked if they provided "instruction about the problems of job discrimination, sexual harassment in the workplace, women in management," the reply was that those problems must certainly be addressed in courses on personnel management or by the Women in Business club, but no specific data were readily available. The questionnaire points up areas where further data collection is needed to test such presumptions.

As useful as the statistical information is, it is also problematic. Early in the process of data gathering, the committee addressed the question of checking the reliability or clarifying the ambiguity of information. We decided to use the information exactly as it was provided by the highest office responding. For instance, our final report stated that our university has a "Continuing Education for Women (CEW) Program" that "operates a designated space comparable to a Women's Center." A check with the director of the administrative unit reported to be directly responsible for this CEW Program revealed that she was unaware that the university had charged her unit with this mission!

While the survey itself will be valuable in convincing the university community that changes must be made to improve the educational environment for women, I see the questionnaire as only the beginning of another phase of the Everywoman project. This phase will take place on individual campuses. On our campus we hope to use the survey as an initial "fact book" for a newly-created campus-wide Commission on the Status of Women. We hope to convince our administration that, with the survey completed, the appointment of such a Commission would have to be viewed less as an ad hoc remedial measure and more as an emphatic statement by the university administration of their intention to improve the university whenever such an opportunity arises.

As we see it, the Commission on the Status of Women will have three major tasks. First, it will need to collect further information. In those areas where information has not been collected or where information is scanty or impressionistic, procedures for collecting and documenting will need to be set up. (Offices of institutional research can be very helpful both in formulating collection procedures and in ensuring that questions about women's experiences will be included in major institutional surveys.) It is at this point, for instance, that the intent of the university concerning support of a CEW Program can be clarified or that the College of Business can be requested to supply textbooks and syllabi documenting their instruction about issues relating to women and work.

The job we have been describing thus far is essentially a Title IX approach to equity: that is, whatever men have, women should also have, in some statistical measure. We realize, however, that statistics only partially describe complex situations. For instance, the questionnaire elicits only the number of male and female athletic coaches who are paid and of those who volunteer; the amount of pay and the conditions of the coaching situation are not reported. In its data collection, the Commission must range beyond quantitative information and collect and evaluate qualitative information.

While statistical equity would greatly improve the situation of women on college campuses, the question of what would be a good educational environment for women raises wider issues. As a panel of speakers pointed out at the NWSA Convention at Storrs, there is a vast difference between equity and opportunity: the former is usually given in numbers; the latter entails providing skills, options, and environments that enable and challenge women to succeed. While there is a growing literature about women's education, the question of what would be a good educational environment for women is only beginning to be explored; and it is this aspect of the Commission's task that will be the most challenging and exciting. It could also be the most attractive aspect of the Commission: the first task of the Commission—data gathering about existing situations for women—is frequently resisted because the results will be negative; the idea of a Commission becomes much more attractive if the second task—the creative response to the question of what would be a good educational environment for women—is emphasized. Implementation of responses offers an educational institution the opportunity to become a model of better education.

The final task of the Commission is one of communication. Publicizing findings, explaining the long-range consequences of equitable and inequitable educational situations, and maintaining a continuing dialogue between the Commission and the entire university community will be essential if the Commission is to have a long-term impact on the institution. Unfortunately, as Suzanne Howard has pointed out, much of the work done during the last two decades to improve women's education has been done by women themselves. Most frequently, it has been done on a voluntary basis and has, as a consequence, severely strained the resources of individuals and groups. In such situations, only the most vital tasks have been addressed; public relations in the form of broad-based community education have tended to fall by the wayside as a desirable but secondary task. As a consequence, support for changes that improve the quality of women's education is often narrow or superficial. It would be a wise precaution to provide the Commission with the personnel support that ensures adequate communication.

As the new academic year begins, I find myself more optimistic and enthusiastic than I have been for several years. We may be able to become more effective change agents. I am grateful to the Everywoman project staff for such a promising opportunity.

Susan S. Arpad is Director of the Women's Studies Program at Bowling Green State University.

*The panel included Florence Howe, Suzanne Howard, Mary Jo Strauss, Maria Chacon, Jackie Woods, Elaine Reuben, Denyse Brabham, and Maxine McCants (chair).