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# Berkeley "Freshwomen" Look at Women's Studies

by Renate Duelli-Klein

"It changed my life!" students in women's studies courses often say. Indeed, some surveys suggest that the feminist consciousness developed in such courses is not reversible, that it leads students to a new perception of their lives. But what are the attitudes of students who have not yet been exposed to women's studies (WS) courses? Do they know what WS is about? Do they think that knowledge of the past and present lives of women in the United States and other cultures will be pertinent to their personal and professional plans? Or do they reject WS as an inappropriate field of study at an academic institution or as a fad?

In Fall, 1979, I posed these and other questions to a randomly-selected group of 54 female first year students (average age of 18) at the University of California, Berkeley. I also asked them about their personal goals, their perceptions of the present situation of American women, and their opinions about the activities of the women's movement. (The complete report on which this article is based is available from the Women's Studies Program, University of California, Berkeley; a summary is forthcoming in *Women's Studies International Quarterly*.)

Although none of the students surveyed planned to major in WS, and though only four of them had already taken a WS course, their definitions of women's studies were positive. They believe that WS courses describe women's roles and attitudes, analyze discrimination, and adduce strategies for change. It is not surprising, then, that half of the students say that they "might take a WS course while at Berkeley." The most likely reason offered for not taking such a course was "I simply don't have the time for extra courses," followed by "WS classes would not help me with my major or planned career." Only eight women thought that "the study of women is not an appropriate subject at an academic institution." Thirteen agreed "somewhat" with "I think WS is a fad." Out of a list of 14 WS courses, most students were interested in "Psychology and Women," "Sociology and Women," and "WS and Career Opportunities"; they were least curious about "Minority Women and Feminism" and "Lesbian Women." On the other hand, students strongly rejected statements like "I'm not interested in WS because it is a ghetto for lesbians" or "because WS students are man-haters."

I also wanted to know about students' expectations should they decide to enroll in the "Introduction to WS." From a list of 12 goals, over two-thirds of the women checked "I hope the class would help me in gaining a better perspective of what it means to be a woman in today's society" and "I would hope to learn more about the roles of women in different cultures" (multiple checking was allowed). Half the students hoped that "the class would broaden my horizon about relationships between women and men" and an

equal number marked "to learn strategies for women's success in college and in life in general." Only one-third expressed interest in learning "to better articulate our views on feminism," in getting "information about the women's movement," or in getting "support from other women."

The group of students I investigated mirror precisely the racial distribution of Berkeley students: two-thirds are Caucasian, almost one-third Asian-American, and only two women, Afro-American. Predominately white and economically privileged, they constitute a special segment of today's young women. Still, their answers provide us with useful information about the image women's studies projects to female students. They are neither hostile to nor particularly enthusiastic about WS, nor do they perceive it as essential to their education. These young women display an enormous belief in their ability to attain their goals in life, and exempt themselves from what they perceive as general discrimination against women. They can imagine no restrictions on their professional and personal plans. I take hope from the expectation that their life experience will show them the discrepancies between their dreams and reality. At that time, they may join the women's movement—toward which they express the same neutral but open attitude.

Despite a belief in their invulnerability, these women are not biased against women's studies, and might well participate in a WS class if they are convinced that it will contribute to their professional advancement. Women's studies courses must seem "worthwhile and useful" to these career-oriented women. To meet such needs, the Women's Studies Program at Berkeley offered in 1980 a seminar called "Integrating Women's Studies and Careers," taught by Gloria Bowles. Students interviewed feminist professionals, heard speakers from feminist organizations, and discussed barriers against women in various careers.

This is not an entirely novel departure. From its earliest beginnings, women's studies has focused on the history of women and work, on the sociology and economics of women in the workforce. And its earliest inspiration, like that of the women's movement itself, came from the consciousness that educated women were unemployed and underemployed. If the current generation of women students is interested in "careers," women's studies courses could and should help students to turn those dreams into reality.

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