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## Finding a Voice in the Academy: The History of Women's Studies in Higher Education

Betsy Crouch

*The introduction of Women's Studies programs into the academy has been one of American higher education's greatest success stories of the last 40 years. These programs' foundation in political activism, focus on diversity and social justice, and collaborative learning environments have created academic communities for women to share their unique perspectives and connect their personal experiences with traditional scholarship. Despite internal debates about how the programs should be structured, what they should teach, and whom they should represent, the efforts of Women's Studies faculty and students have transformed higher education's traditional male-dominated curriculum. By examining the history, key characteristics, and overall impact of Women's Studies programs on the academy, this article will demonstrate that these programs are still relevant and must continue to exist and evolve in order to fulfill their mission of giving a voice to people with oppressed identities.*

Women have struggled to find their place in higher education and its curriculum since they gained admittance in the mid-19th century. For the earliest women in higher education, coursework focused on preparing them for their primary role as caregiver of their families. After the success of the suffrage movement in the early 20th century, women assumed that they would make progress toward equality in all areas of their lives and began to demand access to the traditional higher education curriculum. As the proportion of female undergraduates steadily grew, women in the academy could no longer tolerate the lack of women faculty, lack of scholarship written by or about women, and lack of resources available to women on college and university campuses. By the late 1960s, women in higher education shifted their focus from attaining access to the standard curriculum to challenging its male-dominated nature (Boxer, 1988). These efforts led to the founding of Women's Studies programs on college and university campuses across the coun-

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try. Although Women's Studies programs have had both internal and external controversy throughout their development, they have given women a voice and a community in American higher education and its curriculum.

### The 1970s: Introducing Feminist Activism to the Academy

The political climate of the late 1960s had a profound effect on female faculty and students in the academy, which formed the basis for the introduction of Women's Studies into the curriculum. As these women observed and participated in activism on behalf of the women's liberation movement, the Civil Rights movement, the antiwar movement, the antipoverty movement, and the movement for gay and lesbian equality, they became passionate about transferring this positive momentum from their communities into their classrooms. The political roots of Women's Studies inspired its mission: "from the beginning, the goal of Women's Studies was not merely to study women's position in the world but to change it" (Boxer, 1998, p. 13). Women no longer wanted to limit their studies to existing knowledge. Instead, they wanted to use their experiences of discrimination and oppression to create new knowledge that would lead to positive change for women (Ginsberg, 2008).

The founders of the first Women's Studies programs were part-time or assistant professors with little administrative influence. Even after the first official program began at San Diego State University in 1970, professors taught Women's Studies courses in addition to their already overloaded course schedules and usually without additional payment. Because the original Women's Studies instructors held degrees in more traditional academic disciplines, they spent many additional hours preparing to teach material outside of their specialized areas of knowledge. The presence and popularity of these introductory courses flourished across the country despite their grassroots nature; by the mid-1970s, a study of 15 campuses showed that between 10- 33% of all female undergraduates were enrolled in at least one Women's Studies course (Buhle, 2000). By the end of the decade there were over 300 Women's Studies programs and over 30,000 available courses (Boxer, 1988).

Although each Women's Studies program had unique beginnings and components, several key characteristics defined the programs as they developed throughout the 1970s. The most important distinctive feature of Women's Studies programs was the equal focus on scholarship and political action. Both faculty and students in the early years of the programs spent as much time working on women's issues and with women's organizations in their communities as they did inside the classroom (Buhle, 2000). Some prevalent features in the early Women's Studies classrooms that have continued throughout the last 40 years include a circular arrangement of chairs, small group discussions, cooperative projects, student participation in teaching, journal or reflection writing assignments, and the use of first names for

professors (Boxer, 1988). The women's liberation slogan "the personal is political" carried over into Women's Studies classrooms, where professors placed the highest importance on students' personal experiences as the basis for new knowledge and advancement (Buhle, 2000, p. xix).

#### Key Debates Within Women's Studies Programs in the 1970s

The most important debate within Women's Studies began with the founding of the first programs and continues to be unresolved: should Women's Studies be considered its own discipline and therefore exist as a separate department, or should it be considered an interdisciplinary program? Throughout the last 40 years, Women's Studies has been referred to as "multidisciplinary, intradisciplinary, nondisciplinary, antisciplinary, neo-disciplinary, transdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, critical interdisciplinary, intersectional, intertextual, and pluri-disciplinary" (Ginsberg, 2008, p. 13). Proponents of defining Women's Studies as a discipline highlight the benefits associated with departmental status, including financial resources, tenured faculty positions, and scholarly legitimacy within the institution (Boxer, 1998). These proponents also argue that Women's Studies programs will never receive the time or resources they deserve if faculty members have a primary obligation to serve another department and if program directors must constantly negotiate for consistent degree requirements and sufficient funding (Schmitz, Butler, Rosenfelt, & Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Those who argue for an interdisciplinary status for Women's Studies believe that the creation of a separate department poses a threat to the impact of feminist scholarship across the academy. They express concern that the business operations accompanying departmental status could weaken the collaborations with other disciplines and that departmental hierarchies could distract scholars from their critical work inside and outside of the classroom (Thorne, 2000).

A second debate that shaped the evolution of Women's Studies involved differing opinions about the primary goal of women's efforts in changing the higher education curriculum. Some argued that the ultimate goal should be transformative curriculum change and that women should focus on revising the traditional male-dominated curriculum. The early proponents of building Women's Studies into the traditional curriculum used terms such as "mainstreaming, curriculum integration, curriculum transformation, curriculum expansion, balancing the curriculum, and gender balancing the curriculum" (Sullivan, 1995, p. 48) to describe their efforts. Others argued that the ultimate goal should be developmental curriculum change and that women should focus on creating new scholarship and knowledge. Anderson (1987) stated that "women cannot be simply included in a curriculum already structured, organized, and conceived through the experience of men" (p. 229), and that "what is wrong with the dominant curriculum cannot be fixed by simple addition, inclusion, and minor revision" (p. 230). Because the

founders of Women's Studies sought to radically change the existing systems of oppression and discrimination, some worried that the movement would lose its political mission if it had to conform to the preexisting patriarchal structure of higher education.

### The 1980s: Growing Pains and Identity Crises

By the early 1980s, Women's Studies programs were firmly entrenched in the higher education curriculum on several hundred campuses and continued to experience rapid growth throughout the country. Faculty and students maintained a dual focus on academics and political activism, and the new scholarship produced during the 1970s ensured that research by and about women was accessible across the academy. Efforts toward transforming the curriculum of the traditional disciplines progressed slowly, with some increase in women's scholarship in the humanities but little to no change in social or hard sciences (Boxer, 1988). As the political climate in the 1980s shifted to conservatism, critics began to voice their concerns about how feminist scholarship and Women's Studies programs were damaging the higher education curriculum. One significant result of the increasingly hostile criticism was the loss of Women's Studies programs' already scarce funding.

### Key Debates Within Women's Studies Programs in the 1980s

In addition to criticism from outside the academy, the 1980s also brought tensions within the Women's Studies ranks. As different types of practitioners with conflicting ideologies and goals gained influence within Women's Studies programs, the clashes among them produced conflict over what should be studied, who should teach, and how the programs should be structured. At times, the possibility of destruction from within the ranks of Women's Studies posed a more serious threat than the external critics (Boxer, 1988).

A central focus of the internal discord was the question of what the prevailing definition of feminist theory should be within Women's Studies programs. Ginsberg (2008) listed, "liberal feminism, radical feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, cultural feminism, Marxist feminism/socialist feminism, standpoint epistemology, modern and postmodern feminism, and postcolonial feminism" (p. 18), as just a few of the dominant theories from different points throughout the last 40 years. To add to the stress of these competing viewpoints, some Women's Studies practitioners did not believe in using any theory. They argued that the use of theory in general is a hallmark of the traditional male curriculum and that many feminist theories can be difficult to translate into practice, therefore alienating women outside the academy. Whether a practitioner supported a particular feminist theory or no theory at all, the prominent publications and academic tensions of the 1980s focused on "the overall question of what unites and defines the category of women...can we

talk about ‘women’ as if they are a cohesive category?” (Ginsberg, 2008, p. 19).

### The Turning Point: Whom Does Women’s Studies Represent?

Throughout the extensive internal and external debates of the 1980s, one question within Women’s Studies garnered more attention and debate than any other: what is the definition of women? Based on the initial Women’s Studies curricula and scholarship of the 1970s, “the concept of ‘women’...had largely been defined as white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian, educated women of privilege” (Ginsberg, 2008, p. 16). Despite the roots of Women’s Studies within the larger movement for equality for all marginalized groups, hierarchies of power among women were embedded in the developing Women’s Studies programs.

As women from underrepresented identities realized that the Women’s Studies programs of the 1970s and early 1980s did not adequately reflect their opinions, they developed their own movements and fields of study to give a voice to their experiences. Black Women’s Studies programs began with the intention of placing women of Color in the center of Women’s Studies and changing the curricula to include research from Black female authors and Black feminist literary criticism. The success of Black Women’s Studies inspired the development of several other fields of study that contributed to the transformation of Women’s Studies, including American Indian Women’s Studies, Asian Pacific American Women’s Studies, Chicana/Latina Studies, Jewish Women’s Studies, and Lesbian Studies (Schmitz et al., 1995). The introduction of these perspectives “changed the face of feminist scholarship, making it intellectually irresponsible to talk about ‘woman’ as an undifferentiated universal category” (Kennedy & Beins, 2005, p. 4).

### The 1990s and New Millennium: Maintaining Impact and Preparing for the Future

As Women’s Studies entered the 1990s and the new millennium, it had “developed into an integral part of American higher education and of the network of private and public institutions that support it. Like no other educational movement in recent history, it had begun to change human consciousness” (Boxer, 1998, p. 49). Despite this success, Women’s Studies practitioners continued to struggle with the debates from previous decades, such as what the primary agenda of Women’s Studies programs should be, how to define women, and where Women’s Studies belonged in relation to the overall higher education curriculum.

### Key Question: Is Women’s Studies Still Relevant?

A new debate began in the 1990s and early 21st century on whether the programs should still have Women’s Studies as a title. Some within the field have proposed

adding Gender Studies to the title or changing the name from Women's Studies to Gender Studies. By broadening the title, the field could appear more inclusive to different gender and sexual identities. Also, proponents of a broader title argue that a title focused solely on women will perpetuate the idea that men are the norm and that women can only be the focus of study in special programs. Opponents feel that altering the title could weaken the impact of feminist scholarship in the academy and Women Studies' link to the women's movement. They argue that, "gender studies might or might not be feminist...but women's studies must be feminist or it is not women's studies" (Zimmerman, 2005, p. 37). As evidenced by the variety of program titles currently existing on American campuses, Women's Studies practitioners have not yet resolved this debate.

Beyond the question of what to name Women's Studies programs lies the deeper question of whether the programs should continue to exist in American higher education. One side of this argument believes that Women's Studies programs are no longer necessary because they have already achieved their goal of increasing attention to the study of women throughout the academy. Some believe that, from a political standpoint, women today are no longer facing oppression. They argue that Women's Studies programs cannot maintain their activist component and therefore should no longer exist in their current form (Patai & Koertge, 2003). Proponents of the continuation of Women's Studies programs focus on their impact on students. In addition to providing the critical analysis and problem-solving skills that are central outcomes of a liberal arts education, Women's Studies programs encourage students to merge their classroom learning experiences with their personal experiences and therefore develop the tools to facilitate lifelong learning. The focus on activism inspires students to "move from voice to self-empowerment to social responsibility...to improve things for others as well as themselves...[and to] translate these desires into citizen action" (Schmitz et al., 1995, p. 716). Most importantly, Women's Studies programs teach students to appreciate the differences of others and allow students to develop an understanding of systems of privilege and how they affect people of various identities.

### Conclusion

Although the debate over the appropriate placement of Women's Studies programs within the structure of higher education continues, the academy's ultimate focus should be ensuring that these programs exist in the future. Students of all genders should have a community within their academic institution that encourages them to reflect on their personal experiences, values their individual perspectives, fosters an understanding of diversity and social justice issues, and introduces them to scholarship from authors that traditionally have not had a voice in the curriculum. Women's Studies programs' most important contribution to American higher education is the creation of that community for many students. Both

academic and student affairs practitioners should encourage students to seek out the unique learning environment that Women's Studies programs provide. They should join in the programs' efforts to empower students of all identities and build connections within the community. Women's Studies programs have given women a voice in the academy, and until all forms of oppression have ended, it is essential for that voice to be heard.



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