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Promises to Keep: A Defense of Women's Studies in the Academy

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Abstract

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Abstract:

As we move beyond the third wave of feminism, some question the need for separate departments and degree programs focused on the study of women. This paper argues that Women's Studies programs are necessary to the academy. This argument is made through a review of the literature on the history and development of Women's Studies programs in order to examine the past, and a survey of the presence of Women's Studies and LGBT programs in 159 colleges/universities in 2012 in an attempt to examine the present. The battle Women's Studies has fought and continues to fight in order to assert itself as a valid field of study in the university, complicated by the struggle of establishing itself as an entirely new discipline rather than a branch of a larger one has resulted in an identity crisis surrounding issues of purpose and disciplinary canon. I argue that the biases and prejudices built into the structure of the university are still at play, and though they are subtler, they are no less insidious than before. Considering this structure is important for academic librarians who often work as liaisons for departments that each have internal and external structures and politics to navigate while working to provide the best possible service to faculty and students.

Keywords: Women's Studies | Feminism | University in Society | Women's History | Women's Liberation Movement |



INTRODUCTION

"[Feminism is] a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians."

~ Pat Robertson¹

In 1963 Betty Friedan lit a spark that would ignite the rage of women across the country. In her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan set out to highlight what she called "the problem that has no name."² Often credited as the launching point for the 'second wave'³ feminist movement, the problem Friedan attempted to describe was dissatisfaction with parameters put by men on the lives that women were allowed to lead. More rapidly than anyone could have predicted, women across the country banded together and launched an activist movement that would dramatically change the reality of life for women in the United States. Newly formed political organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), founded in 1966, played a pivotal role in this movement, along with the appearance of what would come to be known as Women's Studies programs in universities across the country.⁴ San Diego State University and Cornell University were the first to establish formal Women's Studies Programs in 1970, paving the way for the exponential increase of such programs that would appear in the decades that followed.⁵

Twenty-nine years after Friedan's bold declarations, Rebecca Walker wrote an article in the 1992 Jan/Feb issue of *Ms. Magazine* in response to a *New York Times* article that proclaimed, "feminism is dead." After the initial intensity of the Women's Liberation Movement died down in the late 1970's and early 1980's, conservative activists attempted to fight back and, quite successfully, painted second wave feminists as radical home-wreckers as opposed to stay-at-home-moms who were seen as true women who had their priorities straight. Amid this conservative backlash that followed the Women's Liberation Movement, Walker found herself in a society that had allowed the political

¹ "Robertson Letter Attacks Feminists," from The New York Times archives, Aug 26, 1992.

² Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Dell Publishing Company, 1984), 51.

³ The first wave is considered to be the suffragettes and the early 20th century women's rights advocates.

⁴ Howe, Florence. "The First Ten Years are the Easiest." *Women's Studies Quarterly* (The Feminist Press at the City University of New York) 10, no. Index to the First Ten Years, 1972-1982. (1982): 6.

⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

leaders and the media of the 1980s to turn the trail-blazing women of the 1960s into an archetypal punch line. She declared,

“To be a feminist is to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life. It is to search for personal clarity in the midst of systemic destruction, to join in sisterhood with women when often we are divided, to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them... The fight is far from over... I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave.”⁶

Walker’s statement was a seminal rallying point for women who had become apathetic to the feminist cause. The term ‘Third Wave feminism’ was immediately associated with the young adult women of the early 1990s, the daughters of the Second Wave feminists. As the decade progressed, society saw a renewal in counterculture energy. The Spice Girls popularized the phrase “girl power,” new political organizations such as EMILY’s List, a national network of political donors focused on raising money for pro-choice, democratic women candidates, emerged. Riot Grrrl, a punk-grunge group of musicians, published a series of zines encouraging women to take their place as powerful forces in music.

A generation after the first women in the country emerged from newly created Women’s Studies programs, the Third Wave feminists entered them expecting to find an established discipline with a clear purpose and canon of literature. Unlike their predecessors, third wavers had the advantage of studying with professors that had formal training in Feminist Theory. In the decades that had passed, one might assume that all the problems faced by second wavers had been solved. Yet the stigma surrounding Women’s Studies students had evolved only marginally. Rather than a radical threat to society, third wavers were considered almost a joke. Rather than trailblazers, they were seen as beating the dead horse of a fight that had already been won. If the fight for gender equality had been won (which neither I, nor many feminists concede) then what was the point of Women’s Studies? Just as it had become established in the academy, it seemed Women’s Studies was having its quarter life crisis.

Now, forty-nine years after Friedan’s ‘problem with no name’ and twenty years after Walker’s declaration of the third wave, where do we stand? In many ways we are right back to where we started, politically, socially and academically. The rallying cry of “Grrrl

⁶ Rebecca Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave,” *Ms.*, Jan/Feb 1992, 41.

Power” has been drowned out by the screams of “Bieber Fever.” Advertisers claim they are just giving the customer what they want when they coat “girl” sets of Legos in Pepto Bismol pink⁷. Women’s reproductive rights are being hotly debated in the campaigns of the 2012 presidential election. Women’s rights are still largely determined not by a diverse group of women, but by wealthy, white, men.

In the academy, Women’s Studies courses are widely offered across the country, but freestanding departments are still a novelty rather than the norm. The damaging stereotype of the Women’s Studies student as exclusively female, lesbian and obnoxiously unrelenting in expressing unrealistic opinions persists. Undergraduate minors in Women’s Studies can be attained almost anywhere, but PhD programs are still comparatively rare. Questions asked in the 1960s about the root and affect of gender inequality continue to go unanswered, and tensions continue to plague women from different ‘camps’ of feminism. Even basic questions, like whether or not Women’s Studies is and should be considered a separate academic discipline, prove difficult to answer clearly. The aftermath of the revolution is more complicated than second wave feminists predicted it would be. Their grand promises of equality and mutual respect among the genders are proving difficult to keep.

Moving forward, I argue that stable Women’s Studies programs are a necessity to the university as we move past the ‘wave’ terminology and acknowledge the complexity of the modern world. The crisis of identity in Women’s Studies sometimes cited as a rationale for its elimination is felt throughout the university as society begins to question the place of the academy within our culture. Patriarchy still reigns, insidious and conniving as ever, but now sends subtler messages that are crafted to avoid detection and thereby challenge. As long as the default assumption of authorship, voice and perspective within the university remains that of a white man, Women’s Studies will be needed to add a rainbow of color to a system that has existed too long in black and white.

⁷ National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/18/145397007/gender-controversy-stacks-up-against-lego-friends>, accessed October 27, 2012.

WOMEN'S STUDIES / WOMEN'S LIBERATION

"Feminism directly confronts the idea that one person or set of people [has] the right to impose definitions of reality on others."

~ Liz Stanley and Sue Wise

The January issue of the 1977 *Women's Studies Newsletter* included the newly written Constitution of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA). It stated, "Women's Studies owes its existence to the movement for the liberation of women; the women's liberation movement exists because women are oppressed."⁸ It went on to define Women's Studies as a 'strategy for change' based on the belief that the best means to the end of sexism and oppression and thus the liberation of all women was through Women's Studies programs.⁹ Even as Women's Studies was established, it drew criticism both from within the feminist movement and without. Debates raged over whether or not Women's Studies would be primarily an academic endeavor or an extension of the Women's Liberation Movement. A separation between the two would likely mean that academic feminism would not dramatically change anything in the 'real world,' and also that the Women's Liberation Movement would not benefit from any progress the academic feminists might make.

Mary Evans, an advocate for the need for Women's Studies programs, summarized, "The argument put forward by some feminists suggests that Women's Studies represent either the exploitation or the de-radicalization (or both) of feminism and the women's movement."¹⁰ Many argued that by becoming part of the university, a sexist and elitist system, those who teach as well as those who study Women's Studies serve only their own interests and those of the patriarchy, ignoring the needs of 'real' women. Marilyn Salzman-Webb, a leader of the Academic Feminist Movement, echoed these concerns when she stated, "If we are not careful, rather than making any dent in a patriarchal class system, we will become like overseers. So divided, we will all fail to change so pervasive a power dynamic."¹¹

⁸ "Constitution," *Women's Studies Newsletter* (1977), 6.

⁹ *Ibid*, 6.

¹⁰ Mary Evans, "In praise of theory: the case for Women's Studies," in *Theories of Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 219.

¹¹ Marilyn Salzman-Webb, "Feminist Studies: Frill or Necessity?" in *Females Studies* 5 (1972), 64-65.

Advocates for Women's Studies asserted that it was through intellectual study that women would overcome patriarchal oppression. Through reading critical analysis and conducting self-examination, students would begin to see the world differently. They would then be able to see the discrimination that they had accepted, unconscious of its presence, and begin to fight against it. Through the illumination of male-centered assumptions and the pervading representation of male as the norm and of women as "other," women would leave the university and enter the world better equipped to fight such oppression. Gloria Bowles stated in her defense of Women's Studies, "On every campus there is at least one building with 'Veritas' emblazoned upon it...the university needs Women's Studies to live up to its highest and oft-processed goal, the search for Truth."¹²

A decade after *The Feminine Mystique* was published, Patricia Albjerg Graham wrote that "the most important single observation about women in the academic world" was that their numbers decrease dramatically in relation to the status of the position.¹³ She went on to state that, as of 1973, women constituted 41 percent of undergraduate students, 13.5 percent of doctorate recipients, two percent of full professors at research universities, and that no woman at that time held a position of president of a "major coeducational university."¹⁴

Though the academy provided a structure and system for women to lay a foundation of learning, women had to first learn to navigate the politics and procedures of higher education. In *Academic Tribes and Territories*, Becher quotes Michael Mulkay as stating:

"Because judgments of the highest quality can only be made by men [sic] who are already eminent, those at the top of the various informal scientific hierarchies exercise great influence over the standards operative within their fields. And those scientists who wish to advance their careers and to produce results which are accepted as significant contributions to knowledge must comply with the standards set by these leaders."¹⁵

¹² Gloria Bowles, "Is Women's Studies an academic discipline?" in Bowles, 39.

¹³ Ellen Messer-Davidow, *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 51.

¹⁴ Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Status Transitions of Women Students, Faculty and Administrators," in *Academic Women on the Move*, by Alice S. Rossi and Ann Calderwood (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1973), 163.

¹⁵ Michael Mulkay, "The sociology of the scientific research community" quoted in Tony Becher and Paul R. Trowler, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines*, 2nd ed. (Bristol, PA: Open University Press, 1989), 85.

Though Becher adds the note “[sic]” behind the single gender reference Mulkay makes, Mulkay’s original statement illustrates the point that it was only men who were considered worthy of positions in the upper echelon of education. The men who served the role of what Becher calls “‘gatekeeper’—the person that determines who is allowed into a particular community and who remains excluded,”¹⁶ created a barrier for women in advancing in the university or for establishing a ‘room of their own’ in the form of Women’s Studies programs.

These gatekeepers were the men in positions of authority in the university that women had to go through in order to teach courses and establish programs. Jean O’Barr describes in *Feminism in Action* an encounter from 1972 when she asked permission to teach a course on Third World Women:

“The chairperson looked at me as if I were from another planet and announced that the only way new courses entered the curriculum was when a distinguished research literature on the subject existed. I thought about the piles of mimeographed papers on the floor of my study at home. I looked at him and surprised even myself by confidently asserting that there was now an extensive research literature in existence on the subject of Third World women and development.”¹⁷

The trouble with the contingent requirement of research for the establishment of new courses and studies is that in order to reference research it must be published, and in order to publish research one must navigate the publishing and peer review process that is unabashedly biased. The academic community uses peer review to police the gates of the disciplines, but not only are the borders of an academic peer group poorly defined, they also assume the existence of a wide pool of fellow researchers who are equally accomplished in the same specialization. When building the new discipline of Women’s Studies the peer group was small, and very few women, if any, had made it to one of the higher echelons of the academic structure. Another element of the inequality of the peer review process was, as Becher states, “that those who have already earned reputations tend to be consistently favoured at the expense of those who have not.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Becher and Trowler, 85.

¹⁷ Jean O’Barr, *Feminism in Action* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 154.

¹⁸ Becher and Trowler, 87.

In the early days of Women's Studies, it was publications such as *McCall's*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Mademoiselle* and *Glamour* that circulated the majority of the feminist research and literature. This was largely the result of much pressure from women of the feminist movement.¹⁹ Ellen Messer-Davidow points to 1973 as the year when new academic-feminist journals "began churning out feminist scholarship and the commercial presses backed away from feminist trade books that hybridized the elements of movements and academic discourses."²⁰ The 1974 issue of *Women's Studies* was devoted entirely to scholarly writing and constituted a turning point in the scholarship of Women's Studies. Though often marked as a breakthrough for the academic feminist movement, this turn of events brought mixed results. On the one hand, scholarly works in the field of Women's Studies would begin to be published with more regularity and in a wider array of publications. On the other hand, this was not the result of a successful transformation of the process of scholarly publication—rather academic feminists had learned to format their discourse after the examples set before them by academic men. They were now allowed past the gatekeeper who guarded academic publication because they had been properly assimilated.

SHIFTING ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN SOCIETY

"The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself."
 ~ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

In his 1979 report, *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives."²¹ He constructs his analysis of postmodern society on the claim that the metanarratives that directed the 'discourse of legitimation' in the university had collapsed, and with them the position of the university within society at large. In *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings points to 1968 as the pinnacle year of this shift in position. Previous to that time the University's main function in society was the dissemination of culture, Lyotard's metanarrative, to the younger generation. Young Americans (predominately men) entered the university to learn how to be a functioning member of American Society. They were inculcated with the

¹⁹ Messer-Davidow, 131.

²⁰ Messer-Davidow, 133.

²¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), xxiv.

knowledge and ideology expected of an educated person and went on to take their place in the leadership of the country. Readings refers to this as the 'University of Culture,' which served to take raw, uneducated citizens of a nation-state and transform them into moral, productive members of a nation-state.²² Readings states that in this context, "the University must embody thought as action, as striving for an ideal...the state protects the action of the University; the University safeguards the thought of the state. And each strives to realize the idea of national culture."²³

It is this idea of national culture, this metanarrative, from which women of the 1960s felt excluded. Women sought to be a part of this process, this transformation of raw into refined and intelligence into knowledge. The only way to do this was to demand equal access and attention within the university. Though some state universities had been admitting women for years (The University of Iowa was the first to do so in the 1850s²⁴), many elite private universities, such as Harvard, did not admit women until the 1970s. In the co-educational institutions very few women studied in the hard science fields or other traditionally male disciplines such as law and medicine and instead were funneled into traditionally 'feminine' fields such as education, nursing, home economics and library service.

Just as women began to demand equal access in this power for cultural change, however, the era of the 'University of Culture' ended and what Readings calls 'the University of Excellence' took its place.²⁵ Readings succinctly analyzes the correlation between these two events:

"It is no accident that at this point a number of transdisciplinary movements arise that pose the question of identity otherwise... such movements signal the end of the reign of literary culture as the organizing discipline of the University's cultural mission, for they loosen the tie between the subject and the nation-state...Women's Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Postcolonial Studies arise when the abstract notion of 'citizen' ceases to be an adequate and exhaustive description of the subject, when the apparent blankness and

²² Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

²³ Readings, 69.

²⁴ University of Iowa Special Collections, <http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/archives/faq/faqfirsts.htm> accessed May 3, 2012.

²⁵ Readings, 126.

universality of the subject of the state is able to be perceived as the repository of privileged markers of maleness, heterosexuality and whiteness.”²⁶

Though many aspects of the ‘University of Excellence’ are met with dismay by academics, the broadened definition of identity within a globalized society represents the progress feminists have been fighting for. The world is more complex than it was, and in order to best equip the next generation to live in this complex world we must embrace the study of identity as a multi-dimensional and complex concept rather than a simple definition. It is, perhaps, the interdisciplinary programs that may best accomplish this, programs like Women’s Studies, Queer Studies, and Cultural Studies among others. The newness and flexibility of the boundaries in such disciplines allow students to embrace social complexity across a myriad of disciplines and subjects. In what other discipline is this encouraged? In what other discipline will students be asked such questions? Now, more than ever, Women’s Studies is needed for students to examine the changing definitions and complex nature of the changing world and their individual place within it.

THE EQUALITY-DIFFERENCE DEBATE

*“Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.”*²⁷

~ Cheris Kramarae & Paula Treichler ~

Early in its formation, women of the feminist movement began to take sides, or feel the pressure to do so, on the debate between “equality feminism” as defined by Friedan and “difference feminism.” Two main theories regarding the oppression of women by men emerged that continue to shape feminist theory today and would prove to have significant influence in the establishment and development of Women’s Studies programs in universities.

Friedan’s writing became the foundation for what is known as “equality feminism,” or sometimes “liberal feminism.” Equality feminism declares that the only difference between the genders is their biological role in reproduction, and demands that the opportunities and privileges men enjoy should be equally available to women.²⁸ At first

²⁶ Readings, 87.

²⁷ Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary* (Boston: Pandora Press, 1985).

²⁸ Peta Bowden and Jane Mummery, *Understanding Feminism* (Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2009), 16.

glance this seems practical, plausible, even ideal. In order to overthrow patriarchy, women need only reject the conventions established for women and embrace those established by men. This ideology motivated the academic feminists to push for equal access in the university: equal admittance rates, equal representation among faculty, equal time and focus on women and women's issues in coursework.

On the other side of the 'equality-difference' debate was the argument that rather than abandoning traditionally feminine associations, women should embrace them as a source of strength and power. Known as "difference feminists" or "cultural feminists," women supporting this viewpoint believed that nurturing qualities *are* inherently feminine and that it is not the qualities themselves, but the value judgment of them that should be challenged by women. They believed that oppression was not the result of the imposition of feminine roles in the home but rather the undervaluing of such roles.²⁹

The dichotomy of these two perspectives gives insight into the deeper question at the heart of the feminist movement. Women now, as then, struggle to understand the meaning and affect of words like "difference" and "equality" and to answer the many questions that arise. Is all gender difference merely gender performance? Can women and men be different and equal at the same time? How can/should this play out in society? Is there actually any innate difference between women and men? These questions invoke Foucault's discussion of truth claims and knowledge. Foucault claims that the identities and 'truths' we cling to are constructed through discourse, or "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak."³⁰ He tells us that just because a claim is *regarded* as true, it does not necessarily follow that such a claim *is* true. Claims are infused with the status of 'truth' by a society when such claims appear to be true within a context dictated by the rules of a discourse.³¹ The heart of the equality-difference debate—whether there is any innate difference between the genders beyond the biological one—is centered on this concept of truth. It follows, then, that this debate is unresolvable because in the absence of one single, culminating truth, the different perspectives or individual truths women and men hold will forever be at conflict with each other.

²⁹ Bowden and Mummy, 23.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1982), 49.

³¹ Ibid.

The voice of “equality feminists” has largely dominated the discourse of feminism over the last four decades. Considering the many other activist movements taking place in the 1960s, this is not surprising. While the feminists were fighting for liberation from the oppression of the patriarchy, the Civil Rights movement was overthrowing “separate but equal” and the Gay and Lesbian movement was demanding recognition as a functioning part of society. In this context, the concepts of “different” and “equal” carried too much social baggage to be separated from each other. To be equal to a man meant having the same opportunities, the same abilities, the same expectations and assumptions about life. To be different was to be lesser. To be different was to be subordinate. Being different meant being oppressed.

This dichotomy of terms and identities plagues feminists today. We are the generation raised by the second wave feminists. We grew up knowing we are equal to men, and believing that we were treated as such. A common modern critique of Women’s Studies programs is that by separating the study of women into a different discipline we are enforcing, not eliminating inequality. Questions are asked about why we can’t infuse the study of women into all the disciplines in the university. Why must we have separate courses for the literature of women? Can’t we evaluate all literature on terms of merit regardless of the gender of the author? I argue that the biases and prejudices built into the structure of the university are still at play, and though they are subtler, they are no less insidious than before. We are not ready to trust other professors and administrators to equally represent the genders in research and analysis across the disciplines. We still require a room of our own to ensure such study is pursued.

Aside from this reality check, I assert that the study of woman as object still merits research and discussion. Brown, in her article, “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” describes her students’ desired focus in their research:

“Many of our students wanted to think, learn and talk about body image and eating disorders, gender and sexuality in the media, sexual practices, intimate relationships, sexual violence, how children and adolescents are gendered, and survivor identities ranging from alcohol to incest.”³²

Equal in importance to studies not centered on women, where will this research be given training and funding if not in Women’s Studies programs? The need for strong Women’s

³² Wendy Brown, “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (1997): 82.

Studies programs will remain as long as different and equal are seen to be at odds with each other.

WHAT IS WOMEN'S STUDIES ANYWAY?

*"Feminism is a philosophy of knowledge. It is the intellectual understanding of the historical struggle between domination and submission... Such a philosophy cuts across so-called 'disciplines'... But this [feminist] study is from a wholly different context: it is the history of what was created both by the dominated and the dominator to sustain or struggle against that domination."*³³

~ Marilyn Salzman-Webb

In the summer of 1970, an unusual publication was circulated among practicing and aspiring academic feminists. Merely a stack of photocopied pages, it contained 17 syllabi of courses focused on women as object of study that had been taught during the 1969-1970 school year. In the introduction, Shelia Tobias, the editor of the collection, dubbed the courses part of a "field that may eventually be called Female Studies."³⁴ This publication was titled *Female Studies* and soon followed, a bit unexpectedly, by *Female Studies II* six months later in December 1970.³⁵ *Female Studies II* contained sixty-six course syllabi and a note from the new editor, Florence Howe, that she was aware of thirty-seven other similar courses. When three hundred syllabi were submitted for *Female Studies III*, which would be the third in a series of ten publications bearing the name, the editors Howe and Carol Ahlum knew that unstoppable wheels had been set into motion.³⁶

In addition to the rapid proliferation of courses being taught, these early reports also show the wide variety of formats and structures they took. This variety is attributed mainly to the difference in institution and the relationship with the administration that professors who taught these courses held. Because the courses were proposed by the women who intended to teach them, each incorporated the background study and methodology of the professor, rather than a coherent idea of what such a curriculum should contain. This interdisciplinarity was necessary to support the wide variety of subject matter being taught, as well as the need to establish ties outside the traditional

³³ Salzman-Webb, 66-67.

³⁴ Shelia Tobias, "Introduction" in *Female Studies*, ed. Shelia Tobias (Pittsburgh: KNOW Press, 1970), i.

³⁵ Messer-Davidow, 83.

³⁶ Messer-Davidow, 83.

disciplinary structure of the university in order to survive those early years. Women's Studies did not evolve as a branch within a larger, established field, but rather emerged as something new, birthed by sheer force of will amidst radical social change. As such, it had to grab one hand onto the established academy (in any form it was offered) and the other onto the activism that was taking place outside the university while this baby field was learning to walk. It was hard enough to get a course focused on women approved at all, trying to impose any central and universal idea of what the field as a whole should be focused on would have caused the whole fragile system to collapse.

The current debate in the modern academy incorporates questions about the ultimate goal of Women's Studies. If the goal is to eliminate inequality and be diffused into every element of every discipline, then Women's Studies should be an interdisciplinary program that works with multiple outside disciplines. If the goal is to establish a solid, independent, research base and unique methodology, then Women's Studies should be a freestanding and independent department. The tension between faculty and administration on either side of this debate contributes to the confusion within the discipline itself and hinders the establishment of a stable disciplinary identity.

Despite the initial desire to cover the full spectrum of disciplines through a feminist perspective within Women's Studies courses, most curricula in early Women's Studies programs evolved by chance rather than through thoughtful consideration. Women's Studies finds itself now in a similar position to that of its first conception, that of facing an uncertain future with the pervading feeling of complete unpreparedness. Students are demanding to study research questions with which professors have little training and knowledge. In "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," Wendy Brown describes her experience in the late 1990's revising the curriculum of the Women's Studies program at her university:

"We also found ourselves repeatedly mired by a strange chasm between faculty and students in the program. A majority of our majors were interested in some variant of feminist sociological or psychological analysis – experientially, empirically, and practically oriented – or in studies of popular culture. Yet not one of our core faculty worked in sociology, psychology, community studies, communications, or film/video. [...] Our five core and three most closely affiliated faculty are trained respectively in American literature, American history, Chinese history, English literature, Renaissance Italian and French literature, Western political theory, European history, and molecular biology. As feminist scholars, we have clearly strayed from the most traditional boundaries of these fields, just

as we have learned and taught material relatively unrelated to them, but even this reformation of our training and scholarly orientation could not close the gap between the students' interests and our own."³⁷

Brown states that as she and the faculty examined the courses required, those offered regularly, and the desires of their students, "we found ourselves completely stumped over the question of what a women's studies curriculum should contain,"³⁸ and describes an overwhelming anxiety over the enormity of the problem in front of them.

The concept of a stable canon of literature, whose existence was a given during Readings' "University of Culture" has become obsolete, leaving little, if any foundation for knowledge to be built on. In addition, various tensions within the field, the university and society complicated the task of establishing such a foundation. Brown discusses how they were "up against" the divide between the expertise of the faculty and the training and interests of a new generation of students. They were "up against" the tension between the academic snobbery of women's studies and the political nature of feminist activism, not to mention the divide between feminist theory, queer theory and the ideology of cultural studies. They were "up against" the paradox of the disciplines that they could not exist within and could not function without. They were "up against" the fracturing of feminist theory into separate ideologies and goals and the instability of the gender binary taken so long for granted. She goes on,

"We were up against more than any one of these challenges because we were up against all of them. And together, they called into question the quarter century old project of institutionalizing as curriculum, method, field, major, or bachelor of arts what was a profoundly important political moment in the academy, the moment in which women's movements challenged the ubiquitous misogyny, masculinism, and sexism in academic research, curricula, canons and pedagogies."³⁹

So what is Women's Studies? The answers are as varied as the programs that populate the universities. Women's Studies is a location within the structure of the academy for research and study that focuses on women. It is a mechanism for educating young women about their history so often overlooked by men. It is a means of passing on the feminist perspective, to challenge the unconscious assumptions transmitted through

³⁷ Brown, 82.

³⁸ Brown, 81.

³⁹ Brown, 83.

words and actions and media. It is a place for women to learn of their birthright, to take up the mantle of power. It is possibly still the only place in the university where a female student may study where she won't face challenges merely based on the makeup of her chromosomes.

THEN AND NOW

"I've yet to be on a campus where most women weren't worrying about some aspect of combining marriage, children, and a career. I've yet to find one where many men were worrying about the same thing."

~ Gloria Steinem

In 1973, The Publication for the Modern Language Association (PMLA) published for the first time in its directory a list of Women's Studies programs offered at universities across the country. It included 82 programs and while most offered only a number of interdisciplinary courses, some offered minors or a B.A., and three schools, California State University San Francisco (now San Francisco State University), Cambridge, and George Washington University offered a Master of Arts in Women's Studies.⁴⁰ By 1976 there were 149 programs listed in their yearly directory, eight of which offered M.A. degrees and three of which offered a PhD.⁴¹ In 1984, just over a decade after its first publication of Women's Studies Programs, the PMLA listed 447 programs, twenty-one of which offered M.A. degrees and 7 of which offered PhD's.⁴² These numbers are probably not exact given the rapid proliferation of Women's Studies programs across the country, but give an idea of how quickly the fire spread once ignited.

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION AND METHODOLOGY

In order to better understand the status of Women's Studies as a discipline in today's universities, a survey was conducted of 159 institutions of higher education for the presence and degree offerings of a Women's Studies program. One university of each type (research, land grant, liberal arts college) was selected from each state and the District of Columbia; the Ivy League schools were also included in the sample. In

⁴⁰ "Women's Studies Programs," *PMLA* 88, no. 4 (1973), 904.

⁴¹ "Women's Studies Programs," *PMLA* 91, no. 4 (1976), 712-713.

⁴² "Women's Studies Programs," *PMLA* 99, no. 4 (1984), 743-749.

general, one university bore the name “The University of____”, another “____ State University”, and the third, the liberal arts college, was chosen randomly from a comprehensive list. Institutions that bore obviously religious names (such as St. Mary’s College) were not included in the sample.

The following information was gathered from the website of each university: presence/absence of a program, the name of the program (i.e., Gender Studies, Women’s Studies, Feminist Studies, etc.), the classification status as a program or department, the religious affiliation of the school, and the presence of an LGBT/Queer studies component either as a part of the Women’s Studies program or a separate entity. Schools with a Women’s Studies program were investigated for their degree offerings and information was gathered regarding the awarding of an: undergraduate minor, undergraduate major, graduate minor, graduate certificate, master’s degree, PhD, LGBT/Queer studies, undergraduate minor and LGBT undergraduate major.

RESULTS

Offerings by Degree		
Type of Degree	Total # of Schools (N=159)	Percentage Total (N=159 schools)
Undergraduate Minor	112	70%
Undergraduate Major	76	48%
Graduate Certificate	44	27%
LGBT Minor	26	16%
Graduate Minor	18	11%
Master’s Degree	16	10%
PhD	11	7%
LGBT Major	4	3%

Of the schools surveyed, 112 (70%) offer an undergraduate minor, 76 (48%) offer an undergraduate major, 18 (11%) offer a graduate minor, 44 (27%) offer a graduate certificate, 16 (10%) offer a Master's degree, and only 11 (7%) offer a PhD. The same schools were examined for the presence of an LGBT/Queer Studies component, either separate or as part of the Women's Studies program. Only 26 schools (16%) offer a minor in LGBT/Queer Studies, and only 4 schools (3%) offer a major in LGBT/Queer studies.

When analyzed by region, schools in the Southeast offer the smallest percentage of Women's Studies programs (64%), while the Midwest offer the largest (79%). Of the liberal arts colleges sampled, 40 percent (21 schools) were religiously affiliated, while 60 percent (32 schools) were not religiously affiliated. According to the data, self-identified Christian colleges are equally as likely as non-religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges to have a Women's Studies program. Of self-identified Christian schools surveyed, 44 percent include a Women's Studies program, the same percentage as non-religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges. A much higher percentage of Research Universities (87%) offer a Women's Studies program as opposed to Land Grant Universities (60%).

The name of the program can sometimes be an indication of the priorities in curriculum and the established mission of the program. Only 2 percent of schools include the word "Feminist" in the title of the program, 12 percent include "Sexuality," 16 percent include only "Gender," 31 percent include only "Women," and the largest group, 39 percent, include both "Women" and "Gender," occasionally in combination with "Sexuality" as well. Sixty-nine percent of schools offer interdisciplinary programs of Women's Studies, and only thirty-one percent have established Women's Studies Departments. (Graphic representation of the data and a list of the states by region may be found in the Appendix.)

ANALYSIS

The move towards replacing "Women" with, or including, "Gender" in the title of the program indicates a shift away from the maintenance of the gender binary, and a more open attitude to a continuum of gender, as well as the desire to examine men and masculinity as well as women and femininity as object of study. This could also be an effort to fight the pervading stereotype of those who study and teach Women's Studies

courses as the archetypal feminist painted by the conservative media as an out-of-touch, angry 'man-hater.' Including "Gender" in the title of the program also establishes an atmosphere more inviting to men. The inclusion and study of men in Gender Studies is a vital component of social change. One of the reasons women today feel such pressure about combining family life with education and a career is that while the expectations of women have drastically changed in the last forty years, social expectations of men have not. Unpacking the privilege of patriarchy in a safe and supportive environment is essential to the goal of equality.

The inclusion of "Sexuality" is an attempt to break down the barriers that divide 'Women's Studies' from 'Queer Studies.' Gender and sexuality are inextricably linked, but it is important to teach that they are not the same thing. As homosexuality becomes more socially acceptable and as more people openly identify as transgender, our understanding of both gender and sexuality change. Research in these areas will be essential to social change, and while LGBT programs struggle to establish themselves in the university, perhaps they can find a home with Women's and Gender Studies.

The two most often awarded degrees, according to the data, are the undergraduate minor and the graduate certificate. These students bring their knowledge and training from other disciplines to Women's Studies and take away from it, hopefully, a new perspective on the world. Because there is often no formal admission requirements for either degree, it can be speculated that students come to such a program with a wide variety of interests and abilities. This is a fulfillment of the dream of feminists to reach a wide range of young people in the country. At the same time, the tiny percentage of PhD programs is an indication that while women and Women's Studies are permitted in the university, they still do not hold equal status and privilege as other, older, disciplines.

BEYOND THE WAVES

"I'm a woman Phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, That's me."

~ Maya Angelou

The Winter 2004 edition of *Ms. Magazine* saw another bold statement in the world of feminism. Lisa Jervis's piece titled "The End of Feminism's Third Wave" situates the newest generation of feminists as one that is tired of all the labels. She states,



“We’ve reached the end of the wave terminology’s usefulness. What was at first a handy-dandy way to refer to feminism’s history and its present and future potential with a single metaphor has become shorthand that invites intellectual laziness, an escape hatch from the hard work of distinguishing between core beliefs and a cultural moment.”⁴³

She discusses the divide between the second wave and the third, summarizing the shorthand insults that pass between them: older women refuse to acknowledge their sexuality; younger women are overly sexualized. Older women are angry; younger women are clueless. Older women’s definition of feminism is too narrow and exclusive; younger women have no focus, priorities or unity. “It’s just so much easier,” Jervis says, “to hit on the playful cultural elements of the third wave and contrast them with the brass-tacks agenda – and impressive gains – of the second wave: It’s become the master narrative of feminism’s progression.”⁴⁴ This master narrative might have served us well a half-century ago, but in a post-modern world we see the master narrative for all its flaws. Women cannot be reduced to stereotypes and archetypes. We cannot be lumped together in a group. We cannot expect to all agree. But, as Jervis quotes bell hooks, “we all want gender justice.”

What women want now, what Women’s Studies and Gender Studies and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies programs want to help bring to pass is the *actual* freedom to choose. We want the freedom to choose to pursue elite education and the freedom to work at the mall. We want the freedom to stay at home with young children and the freedom to pursue a career. We want the freedom to marry whomever we choose or to not marry at all. We want our partners to value us as equals, to base decisions about family and money not on gender biased assumptions but on honest reflective discussions. I cannot say that the continued presence of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies in the university will single-handedly achieve this goal, but I can state with certainty that their absence will deal a heavy blow to the ongoing battle for equality.

Margaret Mead, the influential feminist anthropologist said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” As we move into the future, we must continue the fight our mothers began, for we have their promises to keep.

⁴³ Lisa Jervis, “The End of Feminism’s Third Wave,” *Ms*, Winter, 2004.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

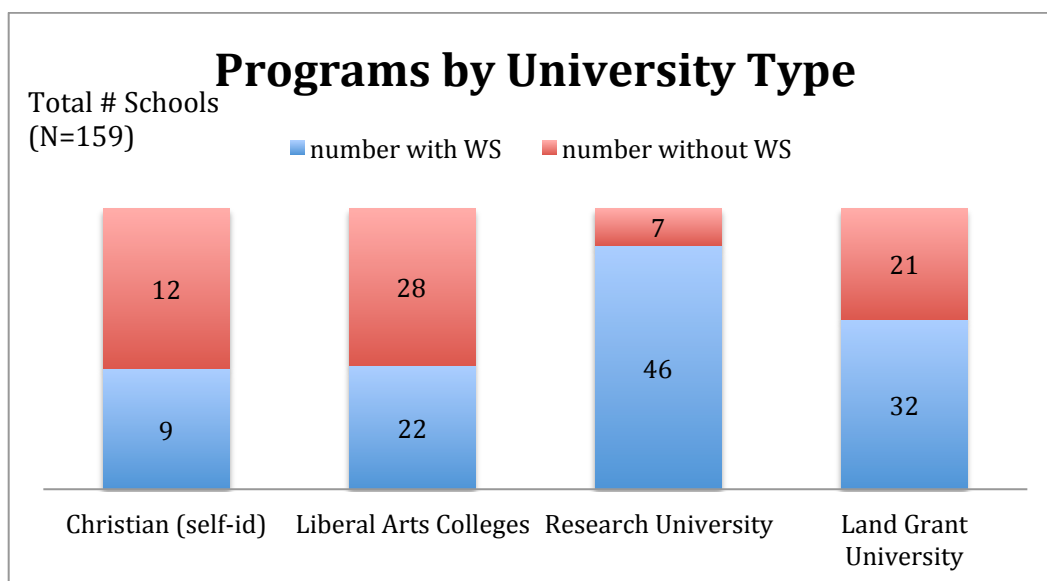
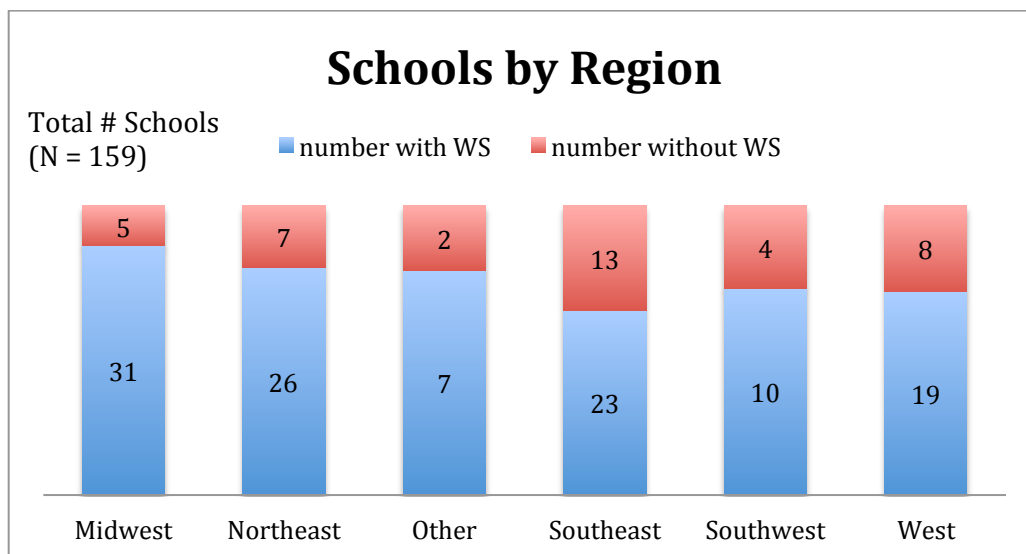
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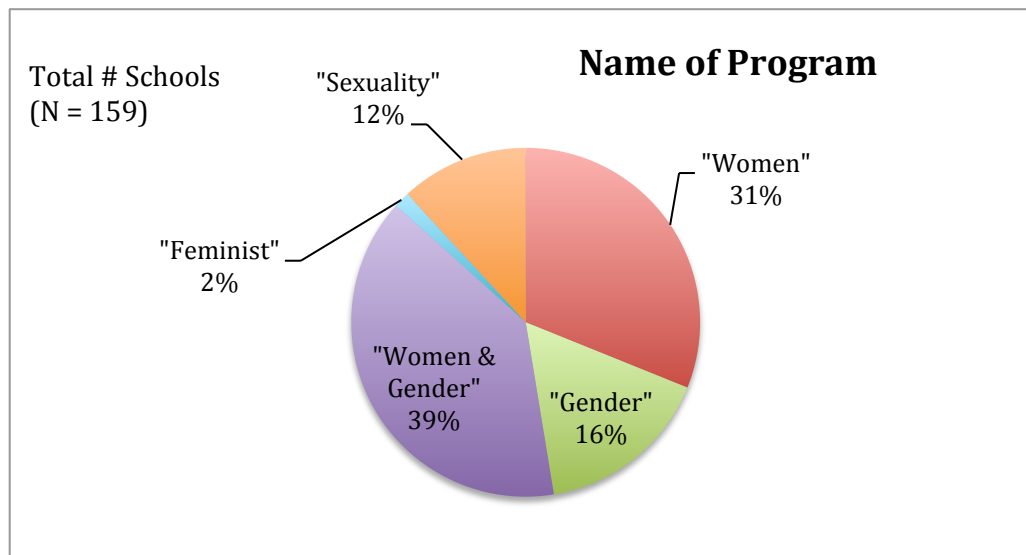
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APPENDIX: SURVEY DATA





States listed by Region	
Region	States
Midwest	Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin
Northeast	Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont
Other	Alaska, Hawaii, Washington D.C.
Southeast	Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia
Southwest	Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas
West	California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming