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Scholarly Paper

The Development and Impact of Women's Studies In American Higher Education

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Abstract
This historical essay explores the development of women’s studies as a formal discipline in American higher education. Women’s studies pioneers altered higher education in a variety of ways, from fighting to include women in the curriculum in all disciplines to designing courses that specifically addressed the history, lives, and concerns of women.
The Development and Impact of Women’s Studies In American Higher Education

Women’s studies, as a formal discipline in higher education in America, grew out of a frustration among university women concerning the lack of female representation in education. More and more female scholars, in the late 1960s, began to become acutely aware of the obstacles girls and women faced in education, from primary school through graduate school. Groups of female scholars began to form across the nation in 1969, made up of women dedicated to raising the status of women within their field; shortly thereafter, women’s studies courses began to pop up around the nation simultaneously as interest in the advancement of women in education grew. In the fall of 1969, there were only 17 courses offered across the nation that were concerned with women (Cayleff, 2001; Davis, 1999). By 1970, 200 women-focused courses were being offered in various disciplines in American colleges and universities, and by 1973 over 2,000. As women and men in higher education became conscious of how gender and sex placed significant barriers on women’s educational attainment, achievement, and advancement, the number of students signing up for these classes continued to grow throughout the seventies and eighties. Women’s studies, as a discipline, was influenced by the momentum of the women’s movement in America (Cayleff, 2001; Davis, 1999; Solomon, 1985), and this momentum helped form a discipline that is by nature interdisciplinary, bringing together scholars from the sciences, the humanities, the arts, and business. Women’s studies scholars transformed the landscape of higher education in America by rewriting women into history texts, revolutionizing literary criticism, engaging in psychological and sociological studies that examined the concept and influence of gender and much more. The women’s studies programs that thrive to this day (many renamed “gender studies”) continue to provide all students with opportunities to explore how sex, gender, and sexual orientation affect their lives, the way they have perceived history, and the way they view the world today. In an a world that is increasingly diverse and complex, women’s studies allows scholars and students alike to challenge the traditional curriculum and create new spaces of knowledge.

Today, many women’s studies departments across the nation have transformed or morphed into gender studies. This change is due in part to efforts to address diversity among women and inclusion of
all people. Gender Studies provides a platform for students and scholars to explore gender as a construct, and how gender roles—both male and female—are restrictive. This paper will explore the historical
influences that led to the creation of women’s studies, the development of the discipline in academia, and the influence it has had on the institution at large.

_Foreshadowing Women’s Studies: A Brief History_

The study of women, by women, as a formal discipline may not have been actualized until the 1970s, but was foreshadowed decades earlier. In 1892, at the University of Kansas, a male professor offered a course on “The Status of Women” to female graduate students (Peril, 2006), and in 1911, Professor Theresa McMahon of the University of Washington taught courses titled “Women in Business and Industry” and “Vocational Opportunities for Women” (Solomon, 1985). At the same time, Wellesley offered a course on consumerism, comparing the incomes of working and middle class women, and at Goucher, a public health and hygiene course and a course on the women’s rights movement were offered to students. The advancement of women in education at the turn of the century began to create an awareness among many female professors of the lack of female representation in the curriculum in general, “Through a minority in the professorial ranks, some women scholars explored new ways of teaching and thinking in the humanities, the social sciences, and the sciences” (Solomon, 1985, p. 87). While radical and revolutionary, these courses that focused on women’s experience were the exception, not the rule, in early twentieth century. In the 1920s, Ethel Puffer Howes, the director of the Institute for the Coordination of Women’s Interests, presented a theoretical framework for incorporating women and women’s perspectives across the curriculum (Solomon, 1985). Unfortunately, her concept, what should have been the beginnings of women’s studies as a discipline, was not realized at that time. Later, in 1936, Mary Ritter Beard created the World Center for Women’s Archives (WCWA), and its mission was to help put women back into historical records and textbooks (Peril, 2006). The WCWA was sponsored by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and the center worked towards preserving and promoting documents of women’s history. Unfortunately, wartime stress and lack of funds caused the WCWA to disband by the end of the 1940s, and from then on through the 1950s, feminism and women’s rights was portrayed as outmoded and unnecessary. For most students, faculty, and administrators, “the study of women’s history or feminist psychology was a completely alien idea” (Peril, 2006, p. 219) for the first half of the 20th
 century. The repression of women’s rights throughout the 1950s directly contributed to women’s frustrations in America in the 1960s, and throughout this decade American college and university campuses became powerful locales in the fight for true equality.¹

The Development of Women’s Studies in the Academy

Women’s Studies is the attempt to correct the imbalance of power noted by the feminist movement within one particular institution - higher education. Women's Studies redresses the invisibility of women in the construction of knowledge. –Ruth Perry, 1996

Despite a lack of inclusion of women in the general curriculum in the 1950s, the 1960s truly laid the groundwork for the explosion of women’s studies courses nation wide by 1970. To demonstrate this, in 1963, Gerda Lerner, a professor at New York City’s New School offered a course in women’s history—enrollment didn’t reach the required minimum of ten students so the course never ran. Only seven years later, in 1970, Newsweek published an article proclaiming women’s studies as one of the “hottest” new developments in higher education (Peril, 2006). Throughout the 1960s, “American campuses were in a state of ferment” (Peril, 2006, p. 221). The civil rights and anti-war movements provided many women, who participated in organizing and promoting social justice for various causes, the skills needed to work collectively for the liberation of women. Riding the coattails of the civil rights movement, women formed groups on campuses across the nation and out of these grassroots efforts, curriculum changes began to take effect; the idea of social progress through inclusion formed a consciousness on campuses that led to the development of black studies and, shortly thereafter, women’s studies.

The first school to offer a women’s studies program was San Diego State College (now University) in 1970 (Peril, 2006). In 1969, student, faculty, and community members formed an Ad Hoc Committee for Women’s Studies, and obtained over 600 signatures of students supporting the development of women’s studies as a formal discipline (San Diego, 2012). In the spring of 1970, SDSC

¹ For more information on the development of the Women’s Rights/Liberation Movement of the 1960s, visit the San Diego State University Women’s Studies Website at: http://womensstudies.sdsu.edu/history.htm
ran a few women’s studies classes and by the fall of that year, a formal discipline emerged with 11
courses being offered. Shortly after SDSC formed a women’s studies department, other schools followed,
including Ivy League schools, such as Cornell. Across the nation, women’s studies programs grew
rapidly, yet faced widespread criticism (Peril, 2006; Solomon, 1985). By nature interdisciplinary,
women’s studies was attacked as being unfocused, too political, and too emotionally charged by the idea
of “consciousness raising” (Peril, 2006).

Despite criticisms, women’s studies did develop out of a heightened awareness of the gender
inequalities faced by women in America (Solomon, 1985). The discipline provided female scholars an
opportunity to explore the role of women in the past as well as their current status as modern, liberated
women. Investigations into women began to grow, and scholars contributed positively to all disciplines,
and the new women-focused questions being “posed by scholars who give women a central place in their
investigations enrich[ed] and alter[ed] perspectives in every field” (Solomon, 1985, p. 204). Many
academics were “openly hostile” (Davis, 1999, p. 222) towards feminist scholars who were attempting to
re-examine every subject. Barbara Miller Solomon, the first woman dean at Harvard and who played an
integral role in developing women’s studies courses at the same school, argued that the interdisciplinary
nature of women’s studies reflects the subject—women play many roles/partake in a variety of activities
in society, and therefore the discipline “lends itself to interdisciplinary approaches” (1985, p. 204).

Alongside the growth of women’s studies as a discipline, the development of scholarly journals,
feminist caucuses concerned with the study of women, and new conferences focused on women grew
(Evans, 1997). The creation of the journals Women’s Studies (1972), Feminist Studies (1972), and Signs
(1975) provided a forum for women’s studies scholars and researchers to publish, promote, and legitimize
this newly created discipline. While critics and anti-feminist academics still cried out against the rise of
women’s studies, by 1980, over 30,000 courses about women were being offered across America (Davis,
1999). The 1980s saw a transformation of women’s studies, and scholars and educators began to become
more inclusive and move away from the original white-women-focused studies of the 1970s. The
discipline evolved to address the cultural pluralism of women in America, intent on including
multicultural representation in the curriculum (for example, feminist literary scholars promoted incorporating writings by women and people of color into the canon alongside the traditional white male writers). Already established programs by the 1980s, women’s studies across the nation began to become more inclusive with courses examining women’s race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and much more.

The original women’s studies pioneers wrote and researched commonalities among women, influenced by the idea “the political is personal” (Boxer, 1998; Davis, 1999; Evans, 1997). The original faculty were almost exclusively white women, and while many of them were homosexual, “lesbian invisibility” (Boxer, 1998) persisted. There were a few scholars and activists focusing on difference in the 1970s, and Robin Morgan’s book *Sisterhood is Powerful* addressed black women’s place in the women’s liberation movement and strongly urged readers to not simplify women’s experience by focusing on commonalities. There was growing disagreement among feminists as to the purpose of women’s studies, as some critics claimed it was a “racist, classist, and heterosexist” (Boxer, 1998, p. 102) discipline, ignoring the complex histories and experiences of all women. Other feminists were shocked by this view, as women’s studies was supposed to be all-accepting. While there was a growing discontent among feminists about the relevance of women’s studies, the discipline grew rapidly across the nation and, throughout the 80s and 90s, the celebration of diversity moved to the forefront and “the recognition of difference between and among women affects every aspect of women’s studies, from curriculum and pedagogy to theory and practice” (Boxer, 1998, p. 101). New courses, such as “Women Writers of the World”, “Race, Class, & Gender”, and “Diversity and Women in America” began to emerge. These courses introduced readers to a variety of texts and topics about the varied histories of women in America, and encouraged students to broaden their understanding of femininity, womanhood, and experience by examining race, class, and sexual orientation (Davis, 1999).

As the discipline evolved throughout the seventies and eighties, it became a fixture in American higher education, and the research conducted by women-focused scholars influenced all areas of college life. Increasingly diverse and inclusive research and courses offered by women’s studies scholars forced
other disciplines to deal with the lack of women representation or focus in their fields. As a discipline that drew scholars from a variety of fields, faculty who taught women’s studies most often had earned degrees in another discipline, and were bringing their research or theories back to the science department, business department, humanities department, and so on. The ideas of feminism that influenced the creation of its own discipline were permeating the consciousness of the academy at large.

Women’s Studies Influence on Higher Education

*In women’s studies, feminism has a curricular base from which new ideas can be generated to add to the intellectual reservoirs that supply the university, culture, and society.*

–Marilyn Jacoby Boxer

The intellectual transformation that women’s studies scholars spearheaded in the early 1970s continues to affect all areas of scholarship to this day. Feminist scholar Marilyn Jacoby Boxer writes: “There was nothing in the history of the modern university that prepared it for the qualitative changes that vast quantitative demographic shifts in the composition of its student body and faculty, innovative intellectual inquiry, and new engagement in the community would entail” (199, p. 226). As the student population became increasingly diverse in the last two decades of the 20th century and on into the 21st, women’s studies had laid the groundwork for exploring issues related to students who had previously never been represented in higher education—as students, as faculty, or in textbooks. Women’s studies forced the university to let women be heard in “places where knowledge is created, taught, and preserved” (Boxer, 1998, p. 228). Having grown in strength over two decades, the 1990s witnessed the power of women’s studies to affect curriculum, pedagogy, and the treatment and role of women on college campuses.

The rising numbers of women attending college, graduate school, and entering the professorial ranks forced colleges and universities to address the needs of women on campus. By 1994, women made up 59% of the undergraduate student population, outnumbered men seeking advanced degrees, and received approximately 44% of doctoral degrees (Boxer, 1998). As faculty, the number of female full time faculty rose by 70% between 1976 and 1993. In the 2003-2004 academic year, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that higher education institutions granted 1,024 bachelor’s degrees, 135
master’s degrees, and 5 doctoral degrees in women’s studies (Stewart, 2007), although these numbers may under represent the actual number of women’s studies graduates, as the National Women’s Studies Association has 750 documented undergraduate and graduate women’s studies programs in postsecondary schools. In 2007, Reynolds, Shagle, and Venkataraman conducted a survey of women’s studies programs across the nation. Of the 652 institutions represented in the study, the researchers found that 88,967 students were enrolled in a women’s studies course over the 2007 academic year; graduate courses in women’s studies had a total enrollment of 2,668 and 1,501 students were enrolled to receive a graduate certificate in women’s studies. Furthermore, 1,076 students were reported as taking doctoral courses in women’s studies. This study also noted that the majority of women’s studies full time professors were tenured (83%), yet the study did not record if they were tenured in women’s studies or another discipline. These numbers suggest that not only is women’s studies or gender studies thriving among American higher education institutions, but that students who enroll in these courses are representing all disciplines—women’s studies is not only for the women’s studies major. As more and more students continue to enroll in women’s studies courses to fulfill electives, feminist thought will be introduced and brought back to influence scholarship and research in a variety of fields. It cannot be ignored how the growth of women’s studies programs and enrollment correlates the rapid growth of female representation on campuses nationwide, and today women make up the majority of students.

The discipline became a staple in higher education by the last decade of the 20th century “due to the enormous success of our [women’s studies] enterprise, the institutionalization of feminist criticism, and our inexperience as a movement with generational transfers of power” (Perry, 1996, p. 1). Yet, the influence of women’s studies is hard to generalize, as it differs department to department and campus to campus (Boxer, 1998). Certainly, competency in feminist scholarship is expected at the doctoral level in the humanities, as well as in other fields of study. And the momentum created by women’s studies has lent itself to the creation of gay and lesbian studies, queer studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies (Perry, 1996). One discipline where the influence of women’s studies is transparent is that of literary criticism—feminist thought has transformed the way scholars approach and analyze literature.
dramatically. Another discipline in which women’s studies has had a major influence is history. Women’s studies provided the most appropriate platform for historians to apply a critical feminist lens to their research. The completely understudied role and contribution of women in American and world history left a gap in historical texts that was filled (and continues to be filled in by) feminist historians. By 1996, there were 14 faculty members at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, who taught and published in women’s history—this number rose after a doctoral degree in women’s history was established in 1991 (Boxer, 1998). Duke University boasted 13 of its 38 full time history professors were specialists in women’s history by 1996. Over six months in 1995, the number of graduate theses in history cross-labeled as women’s studies was 119, 92 of which were doctoral dissertations (Boxer, 1998). In contrast, over the previous 87 years, only a total of 16 theses were considered women-focused.

Women’s studies contributed to the legitimization of feminist scholarship, which in turn planted seeds within a variety of other disciplines. As the study of women became an accepted academic pursuit, scholars at all levels—undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty—explored new projects by, for, and about women, “Even if women’s studies has not yet impelled a reevaluation of higher education, women and gender now appear across the curriculum. Academic feminists have pulpits from which to speak. Transformation projects carry the new scholarship beyond women’s studies classrooms.” (Boxer, 1998, p. 243). While it is certainly difficult to determine the exact extent of the impact women’s studies has had on higher education in America, that it has spearheaded major changed in pedagogy, curriculum, and policy cannot be denied. The interdisciplinary nature of women’s studies has allowed various scholars to come together to explore the experience of being women in America, from historical analyses of past women to investigations into contemporary experience. The transformative power of the discipline has been documented over numerous studies (Boxer, 1998), in which students claim women’s studies courses helped them to become more competent scholars while also forming a better understanding of self.

Further exploration of how women’s studies or gender studies continues to impact higher education in the 21st century is needed, as is research into how feminist theory has influenced studies in the sciences, medicine, and business. Despite critics who proclaim there is no longer a need for women’s studies, these
programs persist partially because student enrollment is so high—contemporary research would help feminist scholars better defend the role and purpose of 21st century women’s/gender studies scholarship.

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