

**QUESTIONS FOR A NEW CENTURY:
WOMEN'S STUDIES AND INTEGRATIVE
LEARNING**

A Report to the National Women's Studies Association

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QUESTIONS FOR A NEW CENTURY: WOMEN'S STUDIES AND INTEGRATIVE LEARNING¹

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Introduction

The interdiscipline of Women's Studies remains a relative newcomer to academia, an outgrowth of the women's movement of the late sixties and seventies. The first Women's Studies program in the United States was established at San Diego State University in 1970, and the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) was formed in 1977. In the thirty years since, Women's Studies programs and departments have burgeoned in every state and at every level, from community college to doctoral programs, from private liberal arts colleges to large state-supported universities. As technology renders distance learning increasingly convenient, Women's Studies programs are offering their courses on line as well.

The early history of Women's Studies echoes a movement that occurred approximately one hundred years earlier—the development of English Studies, or English, as we call it, now one of the most established fields in the academic curriculum. Like English Studies, Women's Studies sought to illuminate areas of knowledge that its

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proponents believed had received insufficient attention; it, too, was inspired by a virtually missionary zeal to teach some of society's disadvantaged about their history and culture, even as it, too, initially focused on a white middle class. Finally, both areas were expected to justify themselves and their place in higher education.

Those of us in Women's Studies can only hope that over time our field will keep developing in new directions while gaining the credibility of the discipline of English. Such recent books as *When Women Ask the Questions: Creating Women's Studies in America* by Marilyn Jacoby Boxer, *Women's Studies on its Own*, edited by Robyn Wiegman, and *Women's Studies for the Future*, edited by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Agatha Beins, indicate that the area has created a niche for itself. The fact remains, however, that even though the interdiscipline has gained recognition in multiple parts of the academy, many students, faculty members, administrators, legislators, and members of the general public continue to question the validity of the field. For example, in "An Empty Room of One's Own: A Critical Look at the Women's Studies Programs of North Carolina's Publicly Funded Universities," Melana Zyla Vickers argues that Women's Studies programs offer "doctrinaire, proto-Marxist teachings on subjects that are dated and largely hostile to the majority of women's views of work, family, and heterosexuality." On an individual level, students in Women's Studies classes at two different state universities in relatively rural areas reported in 2007 that they had been teased or harassed about their affiliations with the program. Faculty members in these and similar institutions report that Women's Studies at once lessens their sense of isolation and renders them targets of verbal attack from male colleagues.

In this context, it comes as little surprise that in "The Possibility of Women's Studies," Robin Wiegman characterizes the dominant narrative of the discipline as one of "apocalyptic" thinking (41), organized around recurring assertions of the discipline's

failure and approaching demise, even as the number of PhD programs in Women's Studies is growing, and the 2007 NWSA conference was one of the largest ever. How do we sort out these competing views? What truly happens in Women's Studies classrooms? What exactly do students learn? Are the skills gained in Women's Studies classes ultimately as essential as those taught in such established disciplines as English?

The aim of this study is to find current answers to some of these questions and to chart a process for finding answers to the others. Its immediate audience is intended to be directors and chairs of Women's Studies programs assessing student learning in their units, preparing self-study documents for program reviews, and justifying requests for resources. At the same time, this study seeks to insert itself in the wider national dialogues about accountability in U.S. higher education, and in particular to respond to concerns raised by Margaret Spellings, U.S. Secretary of Education, regarding the "value added" by university and college degrees.² The National Women's Studies Association concurs with the views of major national organizations such as the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) that tertiary educators need to be proactive in assessment efforts; our members' expertise as professionals endows them with a thorough understanding of the complexities and diversity of learning in Women's Studies.

Prior reports on the field

² The Spellings Commission, appointed by the Secretary of Education, issued a report in late 2006 which deplored "a lack of clear, reliable information about the cost and quality of postsecondary institutions, along with a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students." The report further criticized the "internal" nature of accreditation and recommended national assessment tests for gauging student progress toward achieving learning outcomes. Among other recommendations, the document proposed incentives for cost-cutting in higher education. See <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/pre-pub-report.pdf>

Major organizations such as the Ford Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) have shown their support for the interdiscipline by sponsoring efforts to gauge its effects on students and on higher education in general. Similarly, prominent feminist scholars have taken leadership in these efforts. What follows is a summary of major studies of the field.

The National Institute of Education first commissioned a report in 1976. In the report, *Seven Years Later: Women's Studies Programs in 1976*, Florence Howe reviewed fifteen Women's Studies programs, looking at a variety of characteristics, such as their faculty. A series of eight follow-up reports appeared in 1980, with such titles as *Women's Studies in Community Colleges*; *The Effectiveness of Women's Studies Teaching*; *The Involvement of Minority Women in Women's Studies*; and *The Impact of Women's Studies on the Campus and Disciplines*. In two-day meetings, the authors of the eight monographs made four recommendations, not only to the National Institute of Education, but also to other federal offices and private foundations. These recommendations included a call for additional monographs or works on Women's Studies; a database on the interdiscipline; the inclusion of scholars with expertise in Women's Studies "in every aspect of research design and process" (Porter and Eileenchild, v); and continuing assessments of the field.

The first of the major assessment reports was by Catharine R. Stimpson, former director of the fellows program of the MacArthur Foundation and Dean of New York University's Graduate School of Arts and Science. *Women's Studies in the United States: A Report to the Ford Foundation* appeared in 1986. Stimpson begins her report with a brief overview of the development of the traditional liberal arts curriculum in U.S. higher education, followed by histories of women's education and the field of Women's Studies. She traces the connections of the Civil Rights movement and the New Left to

the women's movement, and then to Women's Studies. Her narrative of the field reflects a link between Women's Studies and anti-racist work from the very beginning. Moreover, Stimpson summarizes the original "tasks" of the field: "For some, Women's Studies was feminism's academic 'arm.' As such, Women's Studies had three major tasks: teaching the subject of women properly; ending sex discrimination in education on all levels, from pre-kindergarten to postdoctoral study; and integrating feminist activism with feminist thought" (12-13). These tasks included discovering lost or forgotten women's contributions; proving the existence of sex discrimination in various areas and recommending changes to eliminate it; and developing feminist theories. According to Stimpson, the burgeoning of research was accompanied by curriculum development in Women's Studies and the institutionalization of programs and departments (18), with classes characterized by feminist pedagogies. Stimpson names some of the earliest scholars and funding agencies in the field; outlines the creation of research centers; and describes the early days of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA). In particular, she summarizes initial, but persisting, challenges for Women's Studies programs: "Disagreement over governance has been at once organizational and political. How should a program be run? Who should control it—students, faculty, or both? Should it include community women and activists to maintain its ties to the outside world? How can a program be anti-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian, and collectivist, and still function" (29).

In the next phase of her report, Stimpson the content of Women's Studies classes and the shift from a primary focus on women's subordination to a concentration on women's strengths (35-36). Significantly, even in this early report, the issue of Women's Studies in a global context arises (46), as does the notion that Women's Studies is no longer necessary because of women's social advancement (49). She

presents the challenges for the field at the time as balancing the uniqueness of Women's Studies, the need for its own courses and programs, and its "mainstreaming" or movement into the center of academia (53). These, too, remain continuing tensions in the field.

Stimpson argues that a strong emphasis on research is essential to the success of the field—"hard questions continue to demand the accumulation of facts and the construction of theory" (55) and calls for an assessment of the academic field as well as expansion into community colleges and graduate programs. She perceives as possible obstacles the lack of faculty "stability" (56)—the prevalence of adjuncts and joint appointment positions. Other future tasks include making research centers less dependent on outside funding and "the reconstruction of gender relations" (58).

Beverly Guy-Sheftall, founding director of the Women's Research and Resource Center at Spelman College, was asked by the Ford Foundation to write a follow-up report with Susan Heath in 1995. In addition to summarizing Stimpson's report, Guy-Sheftall's *Women's Studies: A Retrospective* cites other texts she considers critical in assessing the field, such as the February 1989 issue of *Women's Review of Books*. Guy-Sheftall's report is particularly important in terms of its emphasis on race and the need for all students to learn about cultural diversity.

The section of her report titled, "Intersections: Race and Gender" (13-18), focuses on two trends—curriculum transformation programs such as the New Jersey Project, designed to integrate issues of race, class, and gender, and analyses of differences among women. The latter led to the recognition of prominent feminist scholars in Native American, Latino, Asian, queer, and Black Studies, among other fields, as well as increasing criticism of mainstream feminists for focusing primarily on the experiences of white middle-class women. Guy-Sheftall describes the work of Spelman College in

creating curriculum that de-centers the experiences of white women as an example for other institutions (16-17).

Like Stimpson, Guy-Sheftall looks at emerging trends in the discipline, reminding her readers that Women's Studies must continue to become increasingly international. She observes, too, that "Few undergraduate colleges offer courses that incorporate the new scholarship on gender and science; this omission continues to perpetuate the notion that the sciences are an objective, value-free scholarly endeavor" (22). In contrast, she praises the feminist research conducted in professional fields and anthropology (22-23). Significantly, these points remain valid more than a dozen years later, as do Guy-Sheftall's closing strictures, first, that "we must debunk the myth that women's studies has taken over the academy . . . women's studies is barely in the front door on hundreds of campuses" (27), and second, that research on gender, families, and people of color should infuse public policy discussions (28). She predicts, accurately, that "Transcending the boundaries of race, ethnicity, class, geography, and language in the interest of a feminism that is more expansive, more responsive to a diverse group of women around the world will continue to be a major challenge to women's studies in the 1990s" (28). This challenge continues today, for all the progress that has been made in these areas.

Another valuable aspect of Guy-Sheftall's text is a list of questions in the preface. These queries would be useful in any assessment of the field, and many of them would be pertinent to reviewing individual programs as well. For instance, she asks, "Is there an adequate conception of the variety of feminisms or is there a hegemonic party line" and "Has women's studies altered the major disciplines especially in the humanities and social sciences?" A similarly useful list is located at the end of the document (26-27)—it

consists of recommendations made by NWSA to the Association of American Colleges in 1991.

In the fall of 1999, the Spencer Foundation offered its report on the field through a working conference titled, “Women’s Studies and the Study of Women: What Do We Know About Them and Their Influences?” A report on the conference, available on the foundation’s web site (www.spencer.org), reiterates many of the issues raised in Stimpson’s and Guy-Sheftall’s reports (and, significantly, both women attended the conference), such as the relative invisibility of women of color in the field and the need for more changes at the graduate level. At the same time, this report cites strengths of the field, with Bonnie Thornton Dill of the University of Maryland inserting the term “polyvocality” into the conversation, whereas others expressed concerns about how a fading commitment to social justice affects Women’s Studies programs and the individuals they serve. The role of feminism in institutional change also received considerable discussion in terms of the improvement of working conditions for women faculty and the increase of women in administrative positions.

In the Spencer report, Carolyn Allen of the University of Washington asks key questions about the future of the field: “What kinds of scholarly projects would help advance the study of women to increase its impact on the disciplines of the professions? What kinds of projects might further loosen traditional disciplinary boundaries and increase their fluidity?” Allen wonders about “the importance of continuing with interdisciplinary work as the hallmark of women’s studies and the possibility of developing a stronger sense of what it constitutes. Could the enterprise be organized around central questions rather than around particular disciplines or departments? . . . [quoting Allen] ‘Is the study of women most successfully advanced under the rubric of women’s studies, or are there others we might consider?’”

Margaret Wilkerson of the Ford Foundation brought up the issue of accountability: “Should we think about accountability in terms of our intellectual enterprise? Within the academy, what are the intellectual spaces that we should be opening up, and what are the other organizations, units, departments, disciplines, or interdisciplinary programs to which we should have real connections and collaborations?” Wilkerson also noted that it is “critical that we somehow get a grip-on [sic] technology.”

According to the report, the closing session of the conference focused on the future of the discipline, and the summary of this session includes pages of valuable questions for the assessment of the field. For instance, Stimpson asks about the relationship between Women’s Studies and Gender Studies,³ and Judith Allen from the Radcliffe Institute asks about tenure and promotion criteria in the field. Like the Stimpson report before it, the Spencer document calls for “basic research on the state of the field,” ranging from the number of programs to research on the role and impact of introductory Women’s Studies courses and the development of Women’s Studies Ph.D. programs. Participants expressed a wish for a national organization to collect such data but apparently did not feel that NWSA possessed the capacity for this work, a sentiment that is also implicit in the Stimpson report.

Since the early days of Women’s Studies, books and articles have also reflected on the field. Among the most recent of these efforts are Marilyn Jacoby Boxer’s *When Women Ask the Questions*, and two collections of articles, *Women’s Studies on its Own*, edited by Robyn Wiegman, and *Women’s Studies for the Future*, edited by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Agatha Beins. Boxer provides an extremely detailed history of

³ Many programs have changed their names to include the term *gender*. This document is intended to apply to those units as well as those that retain the name *Women’s Studies*; however, for the sake of consistency within the report, I use the name that appears in earlier reports on the field, and which, for now, continues to be employed by our national professional organization, the National Women’s Studies Association.

Women's Studies in the academy, with chapters on key topics such as curriculum development, the movement toward theory, and the relationship between feminist activism and scholarship. While the book is not intended for assessment purposes, its discussions lay out areas that might be included in a program evaluation. Details about course content and textbooks might also be useful for planning purposes. For assessment, Wiegman's collection includes a forum on institutional pedagogies and articles on "critical classrooms," in addition to chapters on Women's Studies graduates and the links between Women's Studies and LGBT studies. This text contains many articles focusing on the experiences of Women's Studies faculty members, which might be more useful for a program review than for learning outcomes assessment. Finally, Kennedy and Beins's text emerged from a 2000 conference co-sponsored by the Southwest Institute for Research on Women (SIROW) and the Women's Studies Advisory Council of the University of Arizona with funding from the Spencer Foundation. The articles in the collection focus on key questions, such as "What is the subject of Women's Studies," "How does Women's Studies negotiate the politics of alliance and the politics of difference," and "How has feminist pedagogy responded to changing social conditions?" Many of the articles in this text take theoretical approaches to the questions, inviting reflection on feminism's agenda and offering new perspectives for inclusion in course syllabi. One could develop an outstanding series of learning outcomes from the discussions in this text and draw up a list of pedagogical strategies, but there is little in this book that would be directly useful in assessing learning in Women's Studies.

Assessing Women's Studies

The documents referenced above provide overviews of the contributions of Women's Studies as well as its challenges, while one major project from the early 1990s offers a formal assessment of seven academic programs, complete with data collection. The project, funded by the FIPSE and directed by Caryn McTighe Musil, then Executive Director of the NWSA, consisted of a three-year study of Women's Studies programs in a range of institutions. Working with an external advisory board, each program developed and implemented an assessment plan appropriate to its local constituents. Their data led to three publications, all edited by Musil and published by AAC in 1992: *The Courage to Question: Women's Studies and Student Learning*, the *Executive Summary of the Courage to Question*, and *Students at the Center: Feminist Assessment*. All three documents remain useful and timely.

The Courage to Question is the most detailed of the three works, with a chapter by and about each of the seven programs that participated in the study; those at the University of Colorado-Boulder, Lewis and Clark College, Old Dominion University, Wellesley College, City University of New York-Hunter College, Oberlin College, and the University of Missouri-Columbia (the University of Wisconsin and Bennett College, a historically black institution, were initially involved in the grant but dropped out). Each chapter provides a brief description of the program being assessed, its goals, methodologies, and findings. A key feature of this project is that each unit decided to evaluate different aspects of its program and in different ways. For instance, Lewis and Clark decided to look for "knowledge plots" such as cultural images of sex and gender through an analysis of student papers, while Hunter College assessed learning in introductory courses from multiple perspectives. The book includes copies of assessment instruments used by the various schools, ranging from alumnae surveys to rubrics. Follow-up interviews with some of the participants in the study indicate that

they have changed their assessment plans since the early nineties, largely because they found the plans developed for the grant too time-consuming and complicated.

The methodologies and instruments included in the report are important in themselves; however, the results of the project are also significant, and they form the main subject of the executive summary to the report. The executive summary is organized around key aspects of learning in Women’s Studies instead of around the experiences of the different universities involved in the study. For example, sections focus on social responsibility and diversity. The learning outcomes the executive summary sets out as essential in Women’s Studies are still important goals for the discipline and, more broadly, for liberal education in the U.S., both of which remain predominantly white, despite demographic shifts in the past few decades. The table that follows quotes the openings to each section of the text:

Table 1. Conclusions from *Executive Summary to The Courage to Question*, ed. Musil

What is most distinctive about the learning process in women’s studies courses?

- Students link the intellectual and the experiential, creating personalized learning.
- Students find women’s studies to be more intellectually rigorous because it challenges them to incorporate new knowledge into their lives.
- A women’s studies student culture built on trust and mutual respect fosters personalized learning (2).

How does women’s studies affect students as individuals?

- Students feel empowered by the content of women’s studies.
- Students move from being objects of study to being subjects with a voice of their own.
- Women’s studies courses are structured to encourage students to speak.
- Women’s studies creates a link between voice, empowerment, self-esteem, and critical thinking (3).

Does women’s studies foster social responsibility?

- Students move from voice to self-empowerment to social responsibility.
- Students want to improve things not only for themselves but for other people.
- Students continue to translate that sense of empowerment after graduation into citizen

action. (4)

Does women's studies heighten an awareness of difference and diversity?

- All seven participating programs included diversity as a fundamental program goal.
- Women's studies students expect a discussion of difference in their classes and were critical if it were absent.
- Students report significant changes in the way they think about people who are different than themselves.
- Students find that continued communication about differences is valuable.
- Many students developed an analysis of larger systems in which differences were embedded, reinforced, and defined and from which unequal power was allocated and perpetuated. (5)

Is there a unified curriculum in women's studies programs?

- Women's studies programs teach students a critical approach to knowledge rather than a common set of facts.
- Women's studies programs typically share a commitment to grounding their investigations within interdisciplinary frameworks.
- Diversity is at the heart of the current intellectual agenda in women's studies.
- Women's studies courses posit an alternative to the single notion of men as the norms against which everyone else is judged and compared.
- Integrating scholarship on women and gender into the general curriculum enhances but does not replace women's studies courses. (6)

Are students in women's studies encouraged to think for themselves?

- Developing a critical perspective is a means for survival for many women's studies students.
- Students in women's studies classes debate issues far more frequently both in and out of classes.
- Women's studies professors encourage divergent points of view that challenge students to form their own opinions. (7)

Do students think women's studies classes are taught differently than their other courses?

- Both students and faculty members think there is a distinction between classroom dynamics in women's studies and non-women's studies courses.
- Women's studies classes are usually more participatory, experiential, diverse, and student-centered.
- Students are encouraged to view their peers as additional sources of knowledge. (8)

What about men in women's studies classes?

- Men increase the number of female friends they have by taking women's studies courses.
- While women name empowerment and agency as the most important personal growth outcome of women's studies, men name a heightened awareness of gendered power relations.
- Some men tend to resist the content of women's studies, but over time undergo significant changes that cause them to engage intellectually and personally with the material. (9).

Finally, the document includes a section on questions for the future, which are grouped into six categories: curriculum, pedagogy, student learning, retention, remedial work and Women's Studies, and commuting students (10-12). While researchers have studied many of these questions, such as "What is the relationship between peer pressure and the numbers of women who go into the fields of science and engineering" (11), other important concerns remain to be addressed, such as "what makes a student take her or his first women's studies class" (10).

Students at the Center: Feminist Assessment, the third text to come out of the FIPSE study, also maintains its relevance. This book grew out of the efforts of the external consultants to the colleges in the study; as they began work, they realized that they needed to define feminist assessment, its methods and goals. The resulting book provides that definition as well as sample assessment instruments, summaries of the approaches to assessment taken by each of the colleges in the FIPSE study, a list of consultants (now somewhat dated), and a bibliography. For Women's Studies practitioners wary of assessment, Pat Hutchings indicates that "feminist assessment is shaped by a coherent system of values and by feminist theory" (22), enacting central tenets of the discipline by being "student-centered because of a theoretical, practical, and personal commitment to women—and ultimately all students—to how they learn and thus to the things students themselves can tell us about how they learn" (23). For

this reason, feminist assessment uses multiple research methods, drawing on qualitative as well as quantitative data. This mode of assessment incorporates the kind of self-reflection that was characteristic of feminist consciousness groups and the women's liberation movement and has become a distinguishing feature of Women's Studies classes. It focuses, too, on skills, such as the application of knowledge, and not merely on content, such as names and dates. When this book was published, its participatory and formative approach may have troubled those accustomed to the gate-keeping functions of assessment; however, recent efforts take many of these tenets for granted.

A later study, *Feminist Evaluation: Explorations and Experiences*, edited by Denise Siegart and Sharon Brisolaro, would be more useful as a text in a course on feminist research methods than as a guide to conducting assessments of the discipline of Women's Studies since it focuses on evaluations of non-academic programs. Nevertheless, the text offers useful reminders of essential strategies in feminist assessment, such as the use of multiple methods and the importance of situating evaluations within a context (see references to Beardsley and Miller in this text on p. 32 under program reviews).

The books and reports discussed above are complemented by the Women's Studies assessment plans and reports now available on line through university web sites. Some of the plans focus exclusively on student learning (both graduate and undergraduate), while others are designed for a more comprehensive program review. Moreover, some focus on assessing processes rather than outcomes ("students will present their research in class" is evidence of a process, but it does not tell us whether students have actually improved in the area of oral communication). Because these multiple varieties of assessment are linked, this report provides some information on all

of these activities, though its primary focus is on undergraduate student learning and assessment of the field.

What do students learn in Women's Studies? Content and skills.

As diverse as the discipline may be, a review of previous studies, together with current assessment plans and mission statements at a variety of institutions, suggests that there is consensus about core learning outcomes in the field and that there has been little change since goals were delineated in *The Courage to Question*. For example, the five key concepts listed for Old Dominion University in that book are: “systematic, interlocking oppression of women; women’s varied relations to patriarchy; the social construction of gender; the social construction of knowledge; and the redefining and re-conceptualizing of women’s power and empowerment” (86). The documents consulted in the creation of the list below are recorded in Appendix B. Significantly, current programs appear to have moved from the “woman as victim” model to more explicit commitments to teaching about women of color both in the US and internationally. Some of the items below overlap; however, I have retained all of them for the sake of completeness. Graduate programs require advanced proficiency in meeting these goals. *These are not intended as benchmarks for the assessment of programs or individual students’ learning, but rather as a rough guide to common practices at this time:*

Table 2. Common learning outcomes for Women’s Studies

1. Baccalaureate candidates (and minors, to a lesser extent; graduate students to a greater extent) should be able to demonstrate knowledge of the following content/vocabulary:

- The difference between sex and gender; shifting definitions of “woman”

- Women’s contributions to history, culture, politics, etc.
- Variation in women’s experiences across nations, cultures, time, class, race, etc.
- Intersectionality of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality; interlocking oppression
- Standpoint theory; importance of location; situated knowledge
- Social construction of gender
- Gendered construction of knowledge and social institutions
- White privilege, male privilege, heterosexual privilege
- Feminism/Womanism/*mestizaje*
- Waves of feminism
- Major issues or “big questions” pertaining to contemporary women, eg. domestic violence, abortion, redefining motherhood
- Key figures and concepts in feminist theory, eg. Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich
- The history of women’s activism; strategies for social change.

2. Baccalaureate candidates (and minors, to a lesser extent; graduate students to a greater extent) should be able to demonstrate competence in the following skill areas:

- Applying cross-cultural and global awareness to “big questions” about women and gender
- Considering an issue from multiple perspectives
- Thinking critically
- Constructing arguments with evidence obtained from research
- Locating, evaluating and interpreting diverse sources, including statistics
- Recognizing sexist/racist writing and thinking
- Engaging in critical self-reflection, promoting self-awareness
- Connecting knowledge and experience, theory and activism, Women’s Studies and other courses
- Communicating effectively in writing and speech
- Applying knowledge for social transformation, citizenship
- Using gender as a category for analysis

(The assessment plan for ASU-West Campus includes some less common skills—lifelong learning and the use of technology. Both of these skills reflect social changes, and other programs may wish to add them to their goals.)

Similarly, Women’s Studies programs in the US tend to have certain common requirements, course offerings, and structures. They also distinguish themselves

through the use of feminist pedagogy. Smaller and under-resourced programs at public institutions may not be able to offer all of these features.

Table 3. Common features of Women's Studies programs.

Women's Studies minors and baccalaureate programs teach skills and content through certain common structures:

- A required introductory class, which often counts for general education, including material on the experiences of women of color and lesbians.
- Cross listed electives, primarily in the humanities, social sciences, education, and the arts, including one or more courses that focus exclusively on women of color or lesbians
- A required feminist theory class
- Research projects at different levels using a variety of kinds of sources
- A required capstone course or activity
- An internship, service learning or activism component
- Feminist pedagogy: team work or collaborative learning, student-centered classes, active discussions, personal writing or journals, opportunities to apply knowledge to "real world" situations, and a variety of kinds of assignments appropriate to individual learning styles.

Women's Studies graduate programs teach skills and content through certain common structures:

- A required feminist theory class.
- A required course in feminist research methods.
- An extended research project, thesis, or dissertation.
- Required courses on globalism, US women of color, or both.
- Cross-listed or interdisciplinary electives, which most commonly include classes on women in literature, LGBT issues, feminist pedagogy, and violence against women.

In addition to the components described above, the following topics have become increasingly common undergraduate electives: globalization and women internationally; feminist research methods; and gender and science. In rare cases, campuses offer courses focusing on women in business or management. Other common graduate offerings include feminist epistemologies, women and spirituality,

foundations of feminism, and activism. Courses on women and science, with the exception of those focusing on health care or biology, are few and far between on the graduate level. Doctoral programs often require students to specialize in a subfield, though they may be examined on several areas. For example, at Arizona State University, doctoral students may choose among specializations in visual and narrative culture; health, science, and technology (focusing primarily on health care); as well as justice, social change, and sustainability.

Common assessment practices

It is perhaps a truism to say that what constitutes good practice in assessing Women's Studies is good assessment practice in general. For example, in *Students at the Center*, Pat Hutchings summarizes key questions for assessment that would work well for almost any discipline:

- What do the courses and instruction we provide add up to for students?
- What do our students know and what can they do?
- Are they learning what we think we are teaching?
- Does their achievement match what our degrees imply?
- How do we know that and ensure that?
- How can the quantity and quality of student learning be improved? (18)

Jack Meacham, Chair of Psychology at SUNY-Buffalo has written an excellent brief guide to assessing multicultural courses. "Assessing Diversity Courses: Tips and Tools" is sensitive to some of the distinguishing features of such courses. For example, he suggests frequent informal assessments so instructors can gauge what and whether silent students are learning. He offers statements that can be included in standard course evaluation documents so instructors can understand how students use what

they learn about multiculturalism, and he suggests a strategy which I have found successful with graduate students—making assessment a course project, involving students in designing strategies for evaluating the class.

Meacham’s “tips and tools” are applicable to Women’s Studies courses, just as the questions posed by Pat Hutchings remain pertinent today. A review of current assessment plans and reports (for web addresses, see the list of plans in Appendix B) reveals that the range of techniques adopted consists primarily of those used by the schools participating in *The Courage to Question* study as well as some of the strategies recommended by Meacham.

Table 4. Women’s Studies assessment strategies

- Pre- and post-tests using key concepts and terms (see the University of Nebraska, Kearney, sample. In a similar vein, the Bowling Green State University program administers teaching evaluations in the middle of the semester as well as at the end so that the process of assessing learning also offers instructors feedback; I have tried this strategy as well and find that it has the added benefit of demonstrating to students that their opinions are valued and incorporated into the class)
- Coding a set of essays using a pre-determined rubric (the Hunter College program has an extremely detailed rubric that focuses primarily on writing skills rather than on specific content)
- Exit interviews or surveys (good examples appear on the University of Nebraska, Kearney, and Meredith College web sites)
- Alumnae surveys (an effective example appears on the Wright State University program’s web site)
- Focus groups with students or alumnae (Ellen Friedman at the College of New Jersey offers a report on the results of one of these groups)
- Portfolios (paper or electronic. A manageable example may be found on the Winona State University Women’s and Gender Studies Program web site, while a more thorough portfolio example is visible at Kansas State. A listing of institutions using this form of assessment is available on the American Association for Higher Education web site, http://ctl.du.edu/portfolioclearinghouse/search_portfolios.cfm).
- Student course evaluations (Meacham’s suggestions include asking students to indicate

agreement or disagreement with statements such as: “This course helped me to understand myself and others in ways other than stereotyped groups and categories,” “This course has helped me to ask questions, analyze arguments, make connections, and be a better thinker,” and “I have been able to see connections between the material in this course and real-life situations I might face on the job, in my family, and as a citizen.”)

- Class observations (these may have a different focus than teaching observations, which are designed primarily to determine the quality of instruction rather than the quality of learning).

As course software programs such as Blackboard become increasingly prevalent, Women’s Studies programs may consider allowing faculty to submit individual course sites for review as if they were teaching portfolios. Do assignments and handouts reflect course goals? If there is a discussion area, do student comments reflect learning of key concepts? Moreover, many other academic programs are beginning to survey alumni employers with the graduates’ consent. This approach would be helpful in finding out exactly which of the skills learned in Women’s Studies courses are most beneficial in the workplace.

The best plans and reports share certain features. First, they include clearly defined limits: for instance, they might evaluate only three of six learning outcomes, or focus on undergraduate learning only. While it is advisable to use more than one method, most programs do not attempt to incorporate more than three forms of assessment, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Sampling is frequent as well. Instead of reading all the papers in a certain course, an assessment committee might select one or two A papers, B papers, C papers, and so forth. Helen Bannan’s last assessment report as director of the Women’s Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh (see appendix B), is a strong representative plan for a state institution, characterized by the extreme honesty of its discussions of shortcomings and

its separate discussion of its general education courses. The main report is based on portfolios, exit interviews, and short pre- and post-tests designed to assess learning in the introductory course.

Jane Dickie's report from Hope College, a small liberal arts school, is based largely on student surveys. For each goal, Dickie summarizes students' responses in terms of the percentage that agree that they fulfilled the goal. But what is unique about the report is that following these data for each goal, Dickie includes a section titled "Student Voices," in which she quotes extensively from undergraduate comments. For example, one response regarding the goal, "Students recognize and create interconnections through interdisciplinary learning," focuses on big questions and the application of learning: "So many problems today are bigger than just psychology alone or social systems alone. Being able to look at the world and problems from different perspectives is so important. The women's studies program at Hope introduced me to the idea of integrating disciplines and is one of the reasons I have pursued a dual graduate degree."

A 360-degree program assessment and strategic plan, similar to the self-study reports described above, was prepared by Phyllis Baker at the University of Northern Iowa. The outcomes in the report are broken down into categories: general program goals and outcomes; teaching goals and outcomes; research goals and outcomes; and programming goals and outcomes. An appendix focuses on graduate student learning outcomes for those enrolled in the university's Master of Arts in Women's and Gender Studies program. This appendix is unusual in that it opens with a statement of "program philosophy of student outcomes assessment." Such a statement would be useful in other institutions where university-wide assessment committees might lack a context for understanding the collaborative and student-centered nature of feminist

assessment.

Works on feminist assessment and the assessment of Women's Studies are included in the attached bibliography. For additional resources, see the Teagle Foundation bibliography of works on outcomes and assessment, <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/learning/resources.aspx>.

Program reviews

Program review documents have many elements in common with learning assessments, although the former tend to be dictated by institutionally mandated formats. The National Women's Studies Association does not function as an accrediting or evaluating agency, though it lists program evaluators in the members-only section of its web site. Evaluators apply and list their credentials; their listing on the site indicates that the organization has approved their applications, but they have not received any special training from NWSA. There has been some discussion of whether the association should set standards for program reviews; however, many members are reluctant for NWSA to adopt this role because they have seen evaluation used in the past to exclude women and Women's Studies from higher education on the grounds of "quality control." The 2004 strategic plan of the organization, based on a wide membership survey, notes, "The association should promote best practices in Women's Studies. Establishing benchmarks for Women's Studies programs was mentioned by respondents as well, though less enthusiastically." What follows, therefore, is not intended to be an official guide, but rather a set of recommendations, which I hope will be useful for program administration and development. Examples of best practices are based on plans that were submitted to me or placed on line.

The need for program reviews has been sparked by the increasing institutionalization of Women's Studies in free-standing departments. While these reviews are time-consuming, their generally positive results have helped the units that have undertaken them. For instance, after the review at Minnesota State University-Moorhead, the program's director was allotted additional release time for her administrative work. In other cases, a review can identify curricular gaps that may not be apparent to those who are closely involved in developing requirements—in a review accompanying a proposal for a major at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, the evaluator noticed that the phrasing of the cross-cultural requirement was such that a student could graduate without any courses focusing on non-white women or women not of European descent. Last but not least, an outside evaluator can lend credence to and advocate for recommendations already made by program staff.

Program reviews are most easily accomplished when Women's Studies administrators have access to and keep meticulous records over a period of several years. Record-keeping can begin with the learning assessment data drawn from activities of the kind described above. In addition to documenting the actual numbers of students and gathering information from course evaluations, it is important to obtain figures on credit hour production (especially per faculty member) and costs per credit hour, because these numbers often reveal that, *rather than being drains on institutional resources as they are sometimes accused of being, Women's Studies programs tend to serve large numbers of undergraduates relatively inexpensively.* Indeed, one Women's Studies administrator conducting a program review was surprised to discover that her unit had lower credit hour costs than any other on campus! In recent years then, Women's Studies programs have become major

providers of service courses, modeling ways of teaching general education classes to large numbers of students without sacrificing quality or individual engagement.

Other useful indicators include student achievements (publications, grants, and conference papers) as well as the status of alumnae (employed, in graduate school, etc.). When discussing instructional staff, it is useful to provide information on their publications, artistic productions, grants, and service to the university. Women's Studies programs are often outstanding in terms of the productivity of their faculty. Marjorie Pryse drafted a guide to assessing faculty scholarship, *Defining Women's Studies Scholarship*, which is available through the members-only Program Administration and Development (PA&D) part of the NWSA web page. Similarly, budgets, facilities, and other resources can be compared to those suggested in the NWSA document drafted by Susan Hartman and revised by Dorothy Miller and Magdalena Garcia-Pinto, *What Programs Need: Essential Resources for WS Programs* (available on the NWSA PA&D web site, too). Resources should also be compared to those for similar units in the university, as Women's Studies programs continue to fall short in this regard.

Most universities establish a particular format for program reviews; however, if none is available, the guidelines for academic program reviews on the University of Missouri-St. Louis web site (<http://www.umsl.edu/services/academic/assessment/five-index.html>) are clear and comprehensive and thus provide an excellent model. Thorough guidelines may also be found in the 2001-2002 University of Wisconsin College of Letters and Science faculty handbook (http://www.ls.wisc.edu/handbook/ChapterFive/chV-4_01-02.htm). More recent University of Wisconsin guidelines are linked to university specific mission indicators and may be less useful to those outside the system). The narrative should ideally be written by a committee so that multiple points of view may be incorporated,

although in small programs, this task may fall to the administrator. Student comments are often extremely persuasive. An effective strategy is to provide comparative data both from other units within the university and from Women's Studies programs in similar institutions, regardless of whether the university requires such information.

In keeping with feminist practice, outside evaluators in Women's Studies tend to perceive their function as formative rather than summative. According to Beardsley and Miller, external reviewers should "facilitate the feminist evaluation approach, rather than be an expert in that approach" (68). Feminist reviewers may perceive themselves not as gate-keepers, but as participants in an on-going process of reflection. Their responsibilities include "assist[ing] in developing interdependence of relationships and coordinating information flow in nonhierarchical patterns," thus "provid[ing] a safe environment for stakeholders to collaboratively explore the evolving strengths and weaknesses of the program and of the evaluation recommendations" (68). Evaluator and evaluated alike are engaged in assessing an educational program with the goal of continually improving students' experiences.

In *Students at the Center*, Carolyne Arnold extends Joan Poliner Shapiro's concept of *illuminative evaluation* to describe what happens in reviews of Women's Studies:

Illuminative evaluation is so broad-based that it utilizes not only the techniques of participant observation, interviews, and analysis of documents in the form of a case study but also, where appropriate, incorporates questionnaires and other quantifiable instruments. The advantage of illuminative evaluation is that both qualitative and quantitative methods can be combined Illuminative evaluation, as a strategy, makes no claim to perfect objectivity. The evaluation is not supposed to be value-free. (53)

The model of illuminative evaluation is worthwhile for external evaluators to adopt because it draws on central features of feminist research, especially the use of multiple methods and the rejection of a single objective perspective. Moreover, in taking its subjects as participants, it eliminates the fear of judgment that may suppress open discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of the program. It also reduces the risk that the external evaluator will make recommendations that are inappropriate or impossible to implement in the institution; the faculty, students, and administration at the program being evaluated contribute their knowledge when conversations about the final report take place. Based on this model, an external evaluator might deviate from standard procedure and offer the programs being reviewed opportunities to comment (but not make decisions) on a draft of the final report, too.

Institutions frequently ask evaluators to rate programs in relation to an average. This creates particular difficulties in the case of Women's Studies programs. Often, there is no comparable unit within the institution if the question is aimed internally. If the reports cited in this document are accurate, most Women's Studies programs do an excellent job of promoting the learning skills that they aim to teach, so "average" in terms of Women's Studies might in fact be above average for another unit. I therefore recommend that, in answering such questions, evaluators define the terms of the comparison, and, when possible, compare the Women's Studies program not only to other Women's Studies programs, but also to other interdisciplinary programs. The same should be true when evaluating resources, an area in which Women's Studies programs may be found lacking.

One last recommendation: just as Women's Studies practitioners assert the contextual nature of knowledge, external reviewers should comment on the campus climate in which the programs they are evaluating function. This is anomalous in

higher education evaluation—no one considers the environment in which a mathematics or history department operates (thought it might be illuminating if they did). Yet Women’s Studies undergraduates continue to report being teased or harassed about their decisions to take courses, major, or minor in the interdiscipline; accounts of academic advisors who turn students away from the field remain frequent as well. Intimidation and negativity do not create an optimal environment for learning, and it is therefore essential that their presence be recorded in evaluating learning in Women’s Studies. Moreover, when faculty members face similar barriers and their scholarship or academic rigor is challenged unfairly, they are unable to contribute to student learning as effectively as they might. Thus, while evaluators are not expected to conduct full-scale studies of campus climate, they should ask pertinent questions of students and faculty, perhaps review campus media, and scan recent Clery Campus Security Act statistics.⁴ In their meetings with upper level administrators, external evaluators can play a key role in explaining the criteria used in assessing Women’s Studies as well as norms for the field.

Feminist Resistance to Assessment: Why haven’t we moved forward since The Courage to Question?

The lack of more current general assessments of the field may in part be due to continuing feminist distrust of assessment, or at least of certain models of assessment. Caryn McTighe Musil documented this “wariness” (14) in *Students at the Center*, but despite the FIPSE study, many directors of Women’s Studies programs acknowledge

⁴ The Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Crime Statistics Act requires campuses to publish an annual report of their policies pertaining to crime prevention and reporting; statistics on the frequency of certain crimes on campus; and availability of services and education focusing on crime prevention, increased reporting of crimes, and availability of support services for victims of crimes. Since students’ access to federal financial aid is contingent upon a university’s compliance with the act, most campuses make crime statistics widely available.

discomfort and distaste for the task. These feelings are rooted in several persistent concerns. Many perceive assessment as a process imposed by higher administration and antithetical to feminist beliefs in nonhierarchical structures. Others, who have had prior experiences with assessment, consider it another onerous service task when they are already overwhelmed, and the comments to this effect by participants in *The Courage to Question* study confirm their fears. More ominously, some Women's Studies directors report that past assessments and program reviews have been used to deny their programs resources (or even dismantle their programs), especially when higher level administrators do not understand or accept that some of the best features of Women's Studies programs, such as individualized learning, may be costly.

The nature of certain forms of assessment, together with the mystification wrought by some of assessment terminology and practitioners, may further alienate feminist scholars. For instance, at a workshop at Central Missouri State University (now the University of Central Missouri), I was instructed that anything that could not be measured was not worth assessing. This dictum violated my convictions that what was most valuable about learning in Women's Studies, such as students' increased perceptions of agency and civic engagement, were difficult if not impossible to measure, particularly in the short term. At another institution, an assessment specialist arrived in my office with a stack of three-ring notebooks two feet high to instruct me in the fine art of assessment, although she ultimately admitted that some of my simple strategies, such as counting the number of students in our program as a sign of increased interest, or counting the number of cross-listed courses as evidence of the multi-disciplinary nature of the program, would indeed suffice.

At the same time, even the simple but effective strategies described above are difficult for some small Women's Studies programs. The database systems in many

universities are designed only to track degree programs, so that it may be difficult to obtain lists of Women's Studies minors or graduate certificate students, let alone to contact them. University development offices often grant the departments of graduates' first majors the right to approach them for information and funds; this stymies Women's Studies programs because their graduates are likely to have completed minors or second majors in the field (particularly in programs with majors that are less than five years old, the preponderance of baccalaureate students are enrolled as second majors). Program heads cannot conduct exit interviews, contact alumnae, or collect other assessment data if they do not receive regular reports from their institutions. The lack of data ultimately makes it difficult to support requests for resources and thus inhibits the growth of the discipline. This, in turn, limits the extent to which the institution as a whole can document its commitment to diversity. NWSA therefore recommends that all institutions make every effort to provide Women's Studies programs with the same data sets that are available to large departments.

Portfolio assessment, which was incorporated in several of the plans in *The Courage to Question* study, has proven particularly tricky in Women's Studies, due to the nature of the student body—feminist programs in public institutions tend to attract nontraditional students, who may transfer, drop out of school and re-enter, or lack access to computer technology. Consequently, while portfolios may be created in individual classes, they do not work well for tracking progress over several years or semesters. Women's Studies faculty members who have appointments in two units or large numbers of students also find portfolio reviews inordinately time-consuming. Electronic portfolio assessment, which reduces some of the paperwork burden of this method, has been used even less frequently than paper portfolios in Women's Studies.

Kristine Blair, Chair of English at Bowling Green State University, as well as an expert in assessment and an affiliate in Women's Studies, is aware of many of these difficulties. At the same time, she believes that the emphasis on putting theory into practice and the encouragement of self-reflection in Women's Studies programs lend themselves particularly to portfolio assessment, which offers students opportunities to document and comment on what they learn. Electronic portfolios using multi-media can be especially useful in preparing for the job market (for instance, a student might include a video clip of herself giving a speech or a copy of a Powerpoint presentation). Yet in some ways, Blair wonders whether the ultimate benefit of electronic portfolios in Women's Studies might be in improving digital literacy among students who might otherwise be intimidated by the technology. This notion raises questions of its own: if students are going to gain digital literacy in Women's Studies, how will acquisition of the requisite skills be incorporated into the curriculum? Are Women's Studies faculty prepared to teach digital video techniques and the like, or should students take special courses or workshops in media production? Is this an area where the arts, social science, and humanities professors who have typically staffed Women's Studies programs can partner with their peers in the sciences?

Despite the ambivalence and questions about the forms Women's Studies assessment should take now and in the future, the program heads and assessment specialists to whom I spoke seemed to achieve consensus on one point: assessment should be integral to learning in Women's Studies. Ideally, it should not create new tasks for students or faculty, but rather consist of working with existing assignments and structures, while the information it generates should be used immediately in improving courses and programs. For example, a community college instructor might use a post-test on key concepts in Women's Studies as a springboard for an end-of-

semester review session. If student exit interviews consistently reflect negative attitudes toward women's participation in science and technology, the program might add courses on the history of women in science or units on gender and technology.

As matters stand now, there is a contradiction between the field's assertion that it is-- and has long been--at the forefront of educational change and the reality that program goals, student outcomes, and assessment methods have changed little in the past dozen years. Significant research questions posed at the end of the Executive Summary to *The Courage to Question* remain unanswered. This is not to say that the field of Women's Studies has remained static—far from it. But we have not recorded and documented the changes that would demonstrate *how* and *why* we remain leaders in education. National organizations such as NASULGC are engaged in a movement to be proactive before federal calls for accountability in higher education impose arbitrary external standards. Women's Studies must engage in renewed assessment efforts in order to maintain its position. At stake is the survival of the interdiscipline.

New questions for the next round of assessment

The common learning outcomes outlined above are culled from reports that began in the early 1990s. Proof that the field is at the forefront of educational progress is evident in the fact that it took until the following decade for AAC&U to articulate “five key outcomes as a concentrated focus for assessment” in *Our Students' Best Work: a Framework of Accountability Worthy of Our Mission*. These outcomes cover the major goals of Women's Studies, but in different terms. To quote the report:

In brief, the outcomes we propose are

1. strong analytical, communication, quantitative, and information skills . . .

2. deep understanding of and hands-on experience with the inquiry practices of disciplines that explore the natural, social, and cultural realms . . .
3. intercultural knowledge and collaborative problem-solving skills . . .
4. a proactive sense of responsibility for individual, civic, and social choices . . .
5. habits of mind that foster integrative thinking and the ability to transfer skills and knowledge from one setting to another . . . (5-6)

Obviously, these outcomes are appropriate to a variety of disciplines, but what is distinctive about Women's Studies is its inclusion of all of them. In some ways, the interdiscipline of Women's Studies has been soft on quantitative skills and the natural sciences; however, students in our courses use quantitative skills in evaluating data and learn about the gendered construction of science. Therefore, one area for study in a new assessment project should be the extent to which programs are including more opportunities for students to learn and use quantitative skills and information from the natural sciences. What courses are being developed that emphasize analysis of scientific research and the acquisition of digital literacy? What kinds of gender-related courses already teach "hard" science?

This report from AAC&U also argues strongly for sequenced learning and increasingly complex assignments, and Women's Studies could improve in this area. Because of many programs' reliance on cross-listed courses and the large numbers of nontraditional and transfer students in their Women's Studies courses at public institutions, those engaged in curriculum development may find it difficult to structure programs into cohesive structures in which students progress from basic to more advanced concepts and skills. One way that some programs are meeting this challenge is through the adoption of courses that fill the gap between introductory general education classes and advanced seminars or capstones. These intermediate classes may

carry prerequisites, thus encouraging students to proceed at a set pace. A second area of research, then, includes an analysis of the structures of Women's Studies programs and the sequencing of courses. (How) have we learned to adapt our curriculum to students' needs for incremental skills development, even as students pursue increasingly complex paths through higher education?

Moreover, as Women's Studies increasingly takes leadership in general education service courses, we must assess how the discipline manages to provide individualized and engaging experiences for students even in mass delivery formats. Students in Women's Studies general education courses frequently comment in their end of term evaluations that they find the course far more difficult than they had envisioned, and that they enjoyed the rigor, the expectation that they would challenge themselves to think critically and participate actively. What can other disciplines learn from Women's Studies' leadership in general education? How can large numbers of students be engaged in rigorous introductory courses?

AAC&U has gone beyond its 2004 report in the 2007 document *College Learning for the New Global Century*. The latter document is based on reports from business leaders that students need to be prepared to shift careers more often than in prior generations, "Americans already change jobs ten times in the two decades after they turn eighteen, with such change even more frequent for younger workers" (2). Graduates must excel in skills such as critical thinking and team work so they can be flexible in facing new challenges. For example, one executive quoted in the report cites another, the chairman of Intel Corporation, as saying that "90 percent of the products his company delivers on the final day of each year did not exist on the first day of the same year." (16). A narrow education based on content in a single area allows for less flexibility than a broad-based interdisciplinary course of study focused on integrating

major concepts and applying learning to multiple situations, especially those involving diverse cultural norms and business strategies. Furthermore, this report implies that the traditional mode of studying dominant, Western approaches to the sciences, engineering, mathematics, and economics in isolated departments, should be complemented by activities like those in Women's Studies classes, in which students use quantitative and technological knowledge in thinking about "big questions," current questions of pressing importance to an increasingly interconnected global society. (How) does the emphasis on an "ethic of care," hands-on learning, and social justice in Women's Studies enable females to function in nontraditional careers, such as business and engineering? How does the insistence on cross-cultural and cross-class analysis in Women's Studies prepare students for work in such careers? What can other disciplines learn from the progress Women's Studies practitioners have made in integrating knowledge about women of color throughout their courses?

One of the most recent changes in Women's Studies programs in the United States has been a move toward on-line delivery of courses. Indeed, the University of Central Missouri now offers a graduate certificate entirely on line, aimed at international students, while the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth has proposed a major available through distance learning. Such programs have the advantage of improving access for those populations of students from which Women's Studies has always drawn a sizeable contingent—working women, older students, and mothers. Yet at the same time it is difficult to deliver some of what Women's Studies does best through new technology—for instance, to engage in heated discussions, to learn how to manage conflict, and to be challenged with just the right question at the right time. Consequently, another new area for assessment will be the impact of on-line course delivery on women's studies learning.

The role of students in Women's Studies assessment and evaluation

Faculty and administrators in Women's Studies have a major opportunity to take leadership in assessment by involving students further in this important activity. Currently, students in all disciplines participate in assessment and program reviews through course evaluations, surveys, and focus groups. In Women's Studies, student representatives also frequently serve on certain committees. At Northern Illinois University, for example, the Women's Studies Executive Committee contains three student members, an undergraduate, a graduate student, and a teaching assistant. The curriculum committee also relies on student representatives.

More can and should be done in this area, because among the skills necessary for success in the twenty-first century is the ability to evaluate not only information but also workplace processes and structures; employees' achievements; income and expenditures; and the alignment of mission to goals. Indeed, according to the AAC&U report *Liberal Education Outcomes*, "evaluation is the highest level of the cognitive domain, [and] students themselves should be challenged to learn assessment techniques in which they assess work in exactly the same ways used by experts" (8). The involvement of students in assessment is entirely congruent with the student-centered mission of Women's Studies, as well as with the interdiscipline's emphasis on analytical thinking; as the AAC&U report notes, "a 'culture of assessment' would not only use . . . feedback to assess and improve student learning, but would also teach students the critical skills and discipline-specific vocabulary needed to become proficient self-evaluators, a capacity vital for achieving at high levels" (8).

Among recommended best practices in Women's Studies, then, is the development of strategies that deliberately involve students in multiple stages of

assessment or program review. Assessment should become another tool for learning and another skill to be learned, rather than an extraneous burden. As Meacham suggests above, students may be drafted to help design course evaluation forms. The Women's Studies program at Hope College has pioneered a way to make assessment reports vehicles for conveying student voices. On other campuses, portfolios engage students in self-reflection on their progress toward meeting goals for learning in particular courses. Christopher Bell at Towson State College incorporates positive and negative comments from past course evaluations into his syllabi for current courses, offering visible proof that the instructor cares about students' opinions and that assessment results go directly into improving classes.

At the University of Minnesota in Morris, Women's Studies majors are required to enroll in a one-credit course, Assessment of Student Learning in Women's Studies. The course is taken after students have completed most of the major, and, according to the program's website, it involves completion of a portfolio as well as "a paper reviewing the UMM women's studies program" and "participation in a panel discussion" about the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Elsewhere, the course is described as the primary mode of assessment in the department. The papers students write evaluating the program are shared with faculty and used to improve the unit.

Student observer programs at a number of institutions, such as Carleton College and Brigham Young University, offer a model that might be extended to and by Women's Studies programs. In these projects, selected students train to observe classes taught by professors other than their own. They may then be invited to assist in numerous ways: they may observe a class once or multiple times; they may interview students about a course when the instructor is not present; they may videotape and

comment on classes; or they may participate in other kinds of formative evaluation. The program is entirely optional and confidential. Faculty members are not required to include information about their participation in the program in their formal evaluations unless they choose. In some universities, student consultants receive credit; in others, they are paid in the same way that peer tutors are remunerated. Students who participate sharpen their listening and observation skills, learn how to give constructive criticism, and have multiple opportunities to write reports. At Brigham Young, approximately 300 instructors participated in the program over six years.

It is difficult to maintain confidentiality within a small Women's Studies program where students may know and take classes from every instructor. Consequently, student consultant programs tend to be college or university-wide. However, such programs could be adapted for use in large Women's Studies departments, or Women's Studies students could be trained with a particular emphasis on gender and then make themselves available to faculty across campus.

In "Student Collaboration in Faculty Development: Connecting Directly to the Learning Revolution," Milton Cox and D. Lynn Sorenson describe the student consultant system as well as other ways in which students might be involved in improving teaching and learning, including seminars in which students and faculty share their views of what matters in a classroom. Women's Studies faculty and program administrators are encouraged to consider these strategies and to create their own ways of making student involvement in assessment a key feature of their units. The history of student collaboration with faculty in Women's Studies programs makes them ideal sites for developing new best practices which may then be adapted by other disciplines. Involving students in assessment in a deliberate, systematic, and knowledgeable way has another benefit as well: it will result in more useful and

consistent information from students to their peers than the rants and skewed data found in unofficial college guides or websites such as www.RateMyProfessors.com.

More questions, more courage: where do we go from here?

With the possible exception of increasing students' involvement in assessment, the questions and areas for assessment described above are ones that can easily be culled from recent educational technologies, trends, and movements.

Table 5. Summary of new areas for assessment

1. The relationship between Women's Studies and STEM learning.

- What courses are being developed that emphasize analysis of scientific research?
- When and where do Women's Studies undergraduates use quantitative skills?
- What kinds of gender-related courses already teach "hard science"?

2. The structures of women's studies programs and the sequencing of courses.

- (How) have we adapted our curriculum to students' need for incremental skills development?
- What strategies have we found to build coherent programs rather than simply offering random collections of courses, given that our students pursue increasingly complex paths through higher education?

3. General Education and Women's Studies.

- What can other disciplines learn from Women's Studies' leadership in general education?
- How do students become so engaged in large introductory courses?

4. Academic excellence and Women's Studies.

- In what ways are Women's Studies classes rigorous?
- How do Women's Studies courses challenge students to do their best work?

5. Women's Studies and career preparation.

- How do Women's Studies courses prepare students for nontraditional careers for women, such as business and engineering?
- What can other disciplines learn about the progress Women's Studies practitioners have made in engaging students in "real world" applications of knowledge?

6. Women's Studies, social justice, and diversity.

- (How) does the emphasis on an “ethic of care,” hands-on learning, and social justice in Women’s Studies prepare students to engage as productive citizens?
- How does the insistence on cross-cultural and cross-class analysis in Women’s Studies courses prepare students for work or advanced study? In what ways could Women’s Studies programs improve in their inclusiveness of women from ethnic and racial minorities?
- What can other disciplines learn from the progress Women’s Studies practitioners have made in integrating knowledge about women of color (both in the US and internationally) throughout their courses? How can Women’s Studies faculty do better in this area?

7. Women’s Studies and new technologies.

- What are the effects of on-line courses and programs on learning in Women’s Studies?
- How can Women’s Studies promote digital literacy among women?
- How can the traditional social science/ arts /humanities faculty base of Women’s Studies partner with colleagues in the sciences to promote digital and scientific literacy?

8. Women’s Studies and assessment.

- (How) has feminist assessment changed since the publication of *Students at the Center*?
- What new assessment techniques lend themselves to learning in Women’s Studies?
- How can Women’s Studies faculty involve students as partners in assessment and program evaluation?

The questions posed above are not the only or necessarily the best questions that can and should be asked. Any good researcher knows that not all the questions are apparent at once, and even more importantly, *how* you ask the question is as important as *what* you ask. In other words, for a new assessment movement in Women’s Studies to take hold, the ideas in this document need to be discussed, challenged, and redirected in a series of open forums. Participants in these forums should include not only Women’s Studies practitioners and representatives of the NWSA, but also students, academic administrators, employers of Women’s Studies graduates, and representatives of higher education associations, accrediting organizations, and

foundations that have sponsored research in Women's Studies. The NWSA PA&D listserv and NWSA conference provide good venues for internal discussions, and an ad hoc committee needs to be formed to constitute a project advisory board. The advisory board could then convene external stakeholders in a 2008 one-day working conference similar to the one sponsored by the Spencer Foundation in 1999. The Spencer conference focused on "Women's Studies and the Study of Women: What Should We Know About Them and Their Influence," and the agenda is available at <http://www.spencer.org/publications/conferences/WomenStudies/agenda.htm>. The proposed working conference would have a different focus, less on the influence of Women's Studies, and more the questions that need to be asked now about the field's contributions to student learning, and how those contributions are best assessed.

Together, this document and the report from the working conference can form the basis for grant proposals to public or private funders for new studies. With the advent of better electronic communication, it is possible that NWSA member institutions might participate in a broad-based survey on some aspects of learning. In addition, more focused local studies, similar to those conducted at the seven institutions participating in the *Courage to Question* study, are necessary to understand the subtler and more complex aspects of learning in Women's Studies. Therefore, an in-depth study involving a limited number of institutions is recommended as well, with a particular emphasis on participation by women of color, which remains limited.

In looking ahead, it is clear that the new questions to be asked will also require new forms of courage, for the current climate of accountability focuses more on asking "how many" questions than on asking the "what" and "how" queries listed above. As Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, comments in the spring 2007 issue of *Liberal Education*, "The indicators of quality that are

mentioned most frequently [by the Department of Education] include graduation rates, job placement, course completion, pass rates on licensure and certification examinations, and successful transfer or entry to graduate school. Quality is defined as tangible benefits gained from a collegiate experience.” In other words, the Spellings Commission is suggesting a return to the notion that what cannot be measured does not count (literally).

We in Women’s Studies know that a student can excel in terms of all of the proposed measures and still fail to succeed in public and private life, at work and in the family. Graduation rates, GPAs and job placement numbers do not necessarily indicate whether individuals possess the innovative thinking and communication skills requisite for the global workplace; whether individuals demonstrate empathy and a willingness to help those with fewer advantages; and ultimately, whether graduates possess the greatest benefit of a higher education—the ability to apply it throughout a lifetime. For these reasons, it is imperative that we continue both local and discipline-wide assessment efforts and that we use what learn from these efforts as we in Women’s Studies continue to lead in higher education innovation.

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