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The Push and Pull for Women's Studies

“In the cruel world outside, there are girls,” Sue Jacobson, the first woman to graduate from Bowdoin College in 1971, said facetiously in a *Bowdoin Orient* article about the merits of coeducation¹. She refers to a need for the men at the college to learn how to interact, respect, and treat women equally. The uphill battle for coeducation at elite institutions across the country in the 60's and 70's reflects the necessity for a discipline that examines why and how women became second-class-citizens. As the first women matriculated to Bowdoin College in 1971, simultaneously, across the country at San Diego University, the first Women's Studies program formulated. It would be another twenty years before Bowdoin College establishes Women's Studies as an official major. The birth and development of the field of Women's Studies in the United States relates directly to the political landscape of the time. The growth of the field cannot be understood without knowledge of the political movements that propelled it. Women's Studies evolved with commonly held ideas about gender, feminism, and sexuality—arming each generation with knowledge to challenge the status quo. However, Bowdoin reveals its conservative nature in this process, demonstrating reluctance to incorporate a discipline about the women they only recently let enroll². Student activism served as the catalyst to drive archaic

¹ Susan Jacobson, “Bowdoin Graduates its First Woman Student”, *The Bowdoin Orient*, June 4th, 1971. <https://research.bowdoin.edu/forty-years-the-history-of-women-at-bowdoin/process-of-coeducation/susan-jacobson-orient-article/>

² Ginsberg, A.. 2009, “Part One: History”, *The Evolution of American Women's Studies : Reflections on Triumphs, Controversies, and Change*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, Accessed May 13, 2022, ProQuest Ebook Central.

institutions into the future of education, both at Bowdoin and nationally. Student protests, petitions, and events involving issues of women's rights drew attention to the undeniable need for an academic examination of gender. Over time, the field expanded to encompass the concepts of gender and sexuality—reflecting growth in their own research and understanding. Bowdoin's history behind the Gender, Sexuality, and Women Studies department demonstrates how the dissonance between a progressive student body and faculty and a conservative administration characterizes the old, elite, wealthy institution.

The Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s gave birth to the discipline of Women's Studies. Focused on attaining the equal rights of many oppressed groups, the social upheaval of the 60's inspired a desire to incorporate social justice in education. The concept of devoting a whole class to studying women, when coeducation still garnered heavy controversy, was a radical one. Originally known as Female Studies, the discipline appeared in other fields before formally becoming known as Women's Studies at San Diego University³. This first change in title intended to designate the field as for women, by women—instead of the study of how men understand women. While programs began to proliferate across the country, growth did not necessarily indicate acceptance. Experiencing humble beginnings, new Women's Studies programs often functioned like a grassroots movement—unsupported by the institutions attached to them. “[Students] demanded classes at a time when student voices carried major influence in university forums, and they enrolled in massive numbers in the new courses, especially in enrollment-budgeted state institutions such as the California State,” Author Marilyn Boxer emphasizes⁴. In her historical account of Women's Studies, Boxer cannot overstate the influence

³ Ginsberg, *The Evolution of American Women's Studies*, 5.

⁴Boxer, Marilyn J, “Women's Studies as Women's History,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3/4 (2002): 42–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003241>.

of student engagement creating a monetary incentive for schools to incorporate the discipline. The movement for Women's Studies represented a rejection of what the Western patriarchy had defined as academic, and, therefore, rustled the feathers of archaic institutions. The growth of Women's Studies presented a threat to the patriarchy, which elite institutions benefited from, by increasing the likelihood that women would demand equality and seek out higher level professions. During a time of immense social revolution, different causes searched for ways to proliferate their ideas; feminists recognized education as a way to legitimize their ideology and meet the needs of a generation who increasingly desired information relevant to current events⁵.

By the mid-70's, almost 300 Women's Studies programs developed across the country. However, the existence of programs must be distinguished from departments—which received funding, faculty, and recognition from their coinciding institution. The passage of Title IX in 1972 gave women a platform through which to advocate for themselves, enroll in undergraduate programs, and populate Women's Studies courses in droves. While the popularity of the discipline grew rapidly, much of the learning continued to take place without formal classrooms or paid instructors. Often the only way for Women's Studies to get a foot in the door involved interdisciplinary study. Faculty who taught Women's Studies worried about their credibility and the potential jeopardy of their tenure track, and, therefore, found incorporating the field with others to be a safe option. While the interdisciplinary nature of early Women's Studies programs gave the field legs, it also muddled the documentation of the history⁶.

During the 1980s, the discipline continued to grow, however, swift political backlash created setbacks; conservatives viewed the study as an anti-family movement and liberals found

⁵ Boxer, *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30, 45

⁶ Tobias, Sheila, "Women's Studies: Its Origins, Its Organization and Its Prospects," *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1978, pp. 85–97., [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0148-0685\(78\)90396-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0148-0685(78)90396-2).

the field non inclusive of wealthy, white, heterosexual women. Simultaneously, the programs lost what little funding they had for being too radical and lost support for not being radical enough. This time period forced the field to reckon with its identity and consider what Women's Studies includes. As a discipline that discovered itself in the process of being taught, Women's studies faced frequent redefinition. Scholars began to recognize the need to include the intersections of sexuality and race, yet the expansions and boundaries of Women's Studies still face scrutiny today. Pioneers of the field grappled with how to reconcile the reality of womanhood and the social construct of gender⁷. By the 90's, most institutions recognized the field as a legitimate study and established majors and departments devoted to Women's Studies. However, the focus of the field shifted; scholars became interested in how gender shaped the K-12 classroom⁸. Two significant publications, *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* and *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, revealed the extent of gender discrimination in primary education⁹. These texts not only propelled the discipline in a different direction, but brought national attention to Women's Studies. Popular news outlets and TV shows published stories discussing the research presented. This exposure brought questions about how schools socialize boys and girls, what fields they push each gender towards, and the presence of sexual harassment in primary education into the realm of normalcy; these issues became of genuine concern to the American public, solidifying Women's Studies place in higher education.

In the 21st century, the discipline of Women's studies still grappled with internal conflict about how to define and title the study. Now a popular, legitimized major, scholars debated how

⁷ Stimpson, Catherine R. and Nina Kressner Cobb, *Women's Studies in the United States: A Report to the Ford Foundation: Ford Foundation*, Box 559, 1986.
<https://login.ezproxy.bowdoin.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/reports/womens-studies-united-states-report-ford/docview/63212782/se-2?accountid=9681>.

⁸ Berger, michele tracy, "Learning from Women's Studies," *Contexts* 12, no. 2 (2013): 76–79,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41960461>.

⁹ Ginsberg, *The Evolution of American Women's Studies*, 23.

to recognize the duality of the historical oppression of women and deconstruction of the gender binary. Could Women's Studies function as an academic study while still taking a firm, feminist stance? Additionally, scholars recognized the important role of race in Women's Studies but struggled to find ways to incorporate it. The changes in title directly reflected expansion and growth; the discipline ascended to a level where Americans no longer questioned its existence, and scholars were able to dissect and debate the intricacies of its rhetoric. Eventually, some variation of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies became the status quo, but scholars still debate the purpose and goals of the field.

Reluctant to even enroll female students in the 1970s, elite New England post-secondary schools like Bowdoin College arrived late to the conversation about Women's Studies.

Unpressured by financial incentives to become coeducational, the wealthy, small liberal arts college had more agency to make calculated decisions about who and what were part of the institution. Women began matriculating to Bowdoin in 1971, in part due to social pressures for coeducation and in part so male students could access romantic partners without traveling.

However, once women arrived, they made their presence known; the first generation of Bowdoin women, naturally, desired an equal education to their male-counterparts and organized efforts to achieve such. In the early 70s, female students would frequently publish opinion pieces in the

Bowdoin Orient about how Bowdoin felt like "a men's college with women¹⁰." Bowdoin

Women made a place for themselves at Bowdoin—hosting their own sports events and electing

the 1st ever female president of a fraternity. In 1972, various women founded the Bowdoin

Women's Association in order to discuss the issues on campus involving coeducation and bridge

the gap between men and women. The college also began to hire female faculty, which led to the

¹⁰ Caroline Boardman, Miranda Spivack, "Men's College with Women," *The Bowdoin Orient*, September 17th, 1971.

introduction of Women's Studies at Bowdoin. In 1974, Bowdoin offered a senior seminar exclusively focused on the history of women. The seminar students quickly discovered the depth of information to unpack surrounding the experiences of women, creating student interest in the field. In 1977, the first official Women's Studies course was offered cross-listed with the German department. Like at other colleges, interdisciplinary study served as a platform to introduce Women's Studies. The potential for Women's Studies at Bowdoin began to flourish, but the urgent need to mediate issues consequent of coeducation took priority.

In the early 80's, the discipline of Women's Studies gained trajectory on Bowdoin's campus due to the establishment of several resources and persistent student activism. By this time the field had gained momentum on a national level, and Bowdoin's course catalog began to sprinkle Women's Studies courses into the mix. In 1980, the Women's Center at 24 College opened—but not without an uphill battle; founder Linda Nelson '83 recalled “reciev[ing] threatening phone calls often” and that “somebody tried to burn [24 College Street]¹¹.” An unirving resistance to women's programs, yet a reminder of their necessity. In 1983, a group of women established the first and only all female fraternity, another space on campus for women to find solidarity and community. While women were ready to advocate for themselves at Bowdoin, a culture of sexism pervaded amongst the male students and a complacent administration. However, women on campus had now built an army of organizations for their battle. In his 1986-87 report, President Greason spoke in depth of the unrest at Bowdoin due to the lack of adequate attention directed towards gender equity at Bowdoin¹². Over ten years after coeducation began at Bowdoin, the institution continued to neglect the vocalized needs of women on campus to achieve safety, equality, and inclusion. Women, students and faculty, began writing petitions to

¹¹ Linda Nelson, “Forty Years of Women at Bowdoin,” 2011.

¹² The Report of the President 1986-87, 4,
<https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1095&context=presidents-reports>.

the administration asking for the establishment of a Women's Studies minor and major. Over the course of the 80s, hundreds of letters addressed the president and his administration, arguing for the importance of the discipline. In 1987, Bowdoin offered the first introduction to Women's Studies course and incorporated a Women's Studies curriculum as interdisciplinary courses¹³, committing to a future minor and major¹⁴.

In 1988, Bowdoin officially established the Women Studies minor. Administrators expressed some debate over whether or not to originally title the department "Women's Studies" or "Women and Gender Studies" but ultimately decided on the former because of the original purpose of the program, the study of women¹⁵. In 1992, Bowdoin officially founded the Women's Studies major—a testament to the diligence of Bowdoin women in campaigning to be heard. Students served as the backbone of the drive for Women's Studies, even inviting faculty to the women's resource center to propose the program¹⁶. For years, passionate students and faculty members petitioned for the Women's Studies program, resulting in its existence. President Greason used Financial trouble as part of the explanation for why Bowdoin did not establish the program sooner, however, financial stability often allowed Bowdoin to exert power over students' wishes. While the administration did not establish the major until 1992 (long after national normalization), the culture at Bowdoin reflected a more progressive understanding of education—speaking to tension between the groups. Experiencing some of the same internal debates as on the national level, the name of the department changed often at Bowdoin. In 2005, the administration changed the title to their original idea, Gender and Women's Studies. Finally,

¹³ Bowdoin Course Catalog 1987-88, 277, Bowdoin Archives and Special Collections.

¹⁴ The Report of the President 1987-88, 5, <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1096&context=presidents-reports>.

¹⁵ CEP Minutes and Reports, Series Number A01.07.04 Volume 5, Pg. 79, November 2nd, 1987

¹⁶ Caroline Westport and Liz Brimmer to the Bowdoin Faculty, letter, 1996

in 2015, the department merged with Gay and Lesbian Studies to create Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies.

The history of Women's Studies offers salient insight into the political landscape of the late 20th century, and how institutions of higher education serve as mirrors to reflect the pulse of the country. When considering the value of Women's Studies, many criticisms circled around the value of the study. What does one do with a degree in Women's Studies? These beliefs speak to the values of our country—capitalism and men. In order for an action to be of value in the United States, it often must benefit either the patriarchy or financially—which is still true today. How could institutions, like Bowdoin, see the importance of studying people who—only recently—became equals in their eyes? Furthermore, the field of Women's Studies has a complicated relationship with race—struggling to address the nuance of the intersection of race and gender—and this remains true at Bowdoin. Women of color continue to be slighted by a discipline established by white women. Additionally, people in the LGBTQ community often feel alienated by the field due to the entangled but separate relationship between gender and sexuality. However, Women's Studies significantly shaped higher education by intersecting social justice and education. The field introduced the idea that political activism held a place in the college classroom, and turned the personal to political. Bowdoin's positionality as part of the group of historical elite New England colleges, fostered a confrontation between progressive, young students and traditional, rigid administrators in the fight for Women's Studies. Bowdoin's campus today sustains the same disconnect between a student body, whose ideas stretch ten-steps ahead, and a tone deaf administration. The future of Women's Studies in America has a questionable fate; as our ideas of gender deconstruct, what will student ask for and how will institutions respond?