

History of Higher Education  
Professor Dorn  
Lucy Noel  
May 10, 2022

### The History of Women's Studies at Bowdoin and Beyond

#### **Part I:**

The 1960's were a decade of social and political activism. The Black Power Movement fought for racial equality and to end segregation, while the Women's Movement protested for gender equality within male-dominated structures of workplace and educational institutions. The momentum gained by these movements sparked a need for change on college and university campuses. The student demographic of colleges and universities before and during the early 1960's was largely homogenous, as the majority of students were white, wealthy men. The curriculum and resources of campuses reflected and addressed the societal values of the student body, therefore excluding people of color and women. The influence and engagement of the Women's Movement catalyzed a shift in higher education across the country. Notably, as schools began to admit women, the field of Women's Studies developed in response to inequalities addressed by the Women's Movement with the support of a broadening student body. As one of the fastest growing and most popular majors today, Women's Studies has transformed the structure, curriculum and culture of elite institutions by emphasizing the importance of women's voices.

Bowdoin College, a small liberal arts school in Brunswick, Maine, mirrored the development of Women's Studies Departments established across the country. The college experienced a series of curricular and social changes which advanced the representation of women on and off campus. Bowdoin exhibits a microcosm of the greater social change and mobilization occurring at most universities and colleges during the 70's and 80's.

## History of Women's Studies

In the late 1960's and early 1970's many higher education institutions began to incorporate courses about women through an interdisciplinary model. History, sociology, anthropology and English were among the first few departments that created classes reflecting the social, cultural, economic, and political lives of women of the current era and the past. Sheila Tobias, author of "Women's Studies: its Origins, its Organization and its Prospects," writes that "such courses began to be taught, quite spontaneously and without substantial prior organization, at many U.S colleges and universities beginning in 1969."<sup>1</sup> Female professors in particular saw the need and desire among students for courses about women and implemented them without permission or regulation of the administration. The first official Women's Studies Program developed at San Diego State College in 1970.<sup>2</sup> The department came together through the dedication and drive of professors among other disciplines who saw the value in engaging with scholarship about women. When institutions and faculty lacked the urgency to develop a Women's Studies Program, students became the main activists and voices of change. The persistence and diligence of such faculty and students transformed over 300 Women's Studies Programs across the country and changed the culture of colleges and universities today.

### A New Kind of Student

---

<sup>1</sup> Sheila Tobias, "Women's Studies: Its origins, its organization and its prospects," *Science Direct Vol.1,1(2004):85-97*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0148068578903962?via%3Dihub>

<sup>2</sup> Betsy Crouch, "Finding a Voice in the Academy: The History of Women's Studies in Higher Education," *The Vermont Connection Vol.33, 3 (2012): 16-22*, [https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol33/iss1/3/?utm\\_source=scholarworks.uvm.edu%2Ftvc%2Fvol33%2Fiss1%2F3&utm\\_medium=PDF&utm\\_campaign=PDFCoverPages](https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol33/iss1/3/?utm_source=scholarworks.uvm.edu%2Ftvc%2Fvol33%2Fiss1%2F3&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages)

Women's Studies Departments aimed to develop a new kind of student, one that opposed patriarchy of higher education and encouraged community organizing. For the first time, women saw themselves represented within the material and curriculum that for so long excluded their gender. While these academic changes helped, many faculty and students noticed a disparity among gendered social and community resources. As a result, Women's Studies Departments instilled a need for social engagement through the implementation of on campus resources and programming. In the article "Learning from Women's Studies" by Michele Tracey Berger, she notes that "growth of student services on college campuses and universities including centers of diversity and multicultural affairs, LGBTQ offices, and women's centers, [had a] significant positive impact on the overall quality of contemporary student life."<sup>3</sup> The diverse array of centers and support networks allowed for all students to have a safe space on campus. Many Women's Studies Departments coordinated their classes with social activism within particular resource groups and within the greater surrounding community. While the deep-rooted patriarchy of universities and colleges did not disappear overnight and still exists today, women gained greater representation in and out of the classroom as a result of the ethos of their respective Women's Studies Departments.

### **Departmental and Institutional Collaboration: A New Way of Teaching**

Historically within higher education, faculty and staff rarely collaborated within and especially outside their respective departments. Syllabi, curricula and resources are contained

---

<sup>3</sup> Michele Tracy Berger, "learning from women's studies," *Pedagogies, teaching and learning* Vol.12, 2(2013):76-79,  
[https://www.jstor.org/stable/41960461?searchText=Women+studies+in+the+United+States&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DWomen%2Bstudies%2Bin%2Bthe%2BUnited%2BStates%2B%26so%3Drel&ab\\_segments=0%2Fbasic\\_search\\_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A0b731df51334fd1dc7d862463092bc89&seq=4](https://www.jstor.org/stable/41960461?searchText=Women+studies+in+the+United+States&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DWomen%2Bstudies%2Bin%2Bthe%2BUnited%2BStates%2B%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A0b731df51334fd1dc7d862463092bc89&seq=4).

within departments and are seldom shared with other professors. The implementation of Women's Studies Programs across the country has led to greater alliance and sharing of content. Tobias mentions that "discussion among college professors about curriculum, course content or pedagogy is rare in the United States, and the publication of college course syllabi was virtually unknown prior to the appearance of Female Studies."<sup>4</sup> Women Studies Departments began to change the status quo by collaborating between departments and institutions. The Women's Movement served as a model demonstrating the necessity for women to work together, especially in predominantly male spaces such as higher education. Across the country, foundations and collections of famous women's work began to develop into spaces of archival research and curriculum development for Women's Studies courses. In Joanna Schneider Zangrando's article "Women's Studies in the United States", she mentions the creation of new intellectual spaces and work done by women.<sup>5</sup> A leading example of these spaces is the Sophia Smith Collection, established in 1942 at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. The collection consists of manuscripts, letters, diaries, journals, published and unpublished materials, essays, poems, reports, books, photographs, and other primary and secondary materials, primarily in the post-1865 period."<sup>6</sup> The publicity and collaboration of collections such as

---

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Tobias, "Women's Studies: Its origins, its organization and its prospects," *Science Direct Vol.1,1(2004):85-97*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0148068578903962?via%3Dihub>

<sup>5</sup> Joanna Schneider Zangrando, "Women's Studies in the United States: Approaching Reality," *American Studies International Vol.14,1(1975):15-37*, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/41278497?searchText=Women+studies+in+the+United+States&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DWomen%2Bstudies%2Bin%2Bthe%2BUnited%2BStates%2B%26so%3Drel&ab\\_segments=0%2Fbasic\\_search\\_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A1275e5cb610a21f0e411f7a50a1d10d0&seq=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/41278497?searchText=Women+studies+in+the+United+States&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DWomen%2Bstudies%2Bin%2Bthe%2BUnited%2BStates%2B%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A1275e5cb610a21f0e411f7a50a1d10d0&seq=1).

<sup>6</sup> Joanna Schneider Zangrando, "Women's Studies in the United States: Approaching Reality," *American Studies International Vol.14,1(1975):15-37*, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/41278497?searchText=Women+studies+in+the+United+States&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DWomen%2Bstudies%2Bin%2Bthe%2BUnited%2BStates%2B%26so%3Drel&ab\\_segments=0%2Fbasic\\_search\\_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A1275e5cb610a21f0e411f7a50a1d10d0&seq=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/41278497?searchText=Women+studies+in+the+United+States&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DWomen%2Bstudies%2Bin%2Bthe%2BUnited%2BStates%2B%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A1275e5cb610a21f0e411f7a50a1d10d0&seq=1).

Sophia Smith's became prominent components of the development and sustainability of Women's Studies Departments and programming.

### **Title Changes: The Evolution of Women's Studies**

The title of Women's Studies has changed drastically since the first programs initiated in 1970. Many departments can be categorized “under several different monikers including Women's and Gender Studies, Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Feminist Studies, or Gender Studies.”<sup>7</sup> Over the past fifty years many colleges and universities have transitioned from Feminist or Women's Studies to greater intersectional terminology such as Gender Studies. The intentional name change recognizes the complexity and social construction of gender. Additionally, with a more fluid and inclusive title, programs expanded their scope of intellectual material and topics of interest.

### **The Immersion of Black and Women's Studies**

While the implementation and inclusion of women into the curriculum was revolutionary, many voices and groups remained unseen and silenced. Society and institutions of higher education left out Black women and pushed them aside. Gloria T. [Askasha] Hull, author of the article “The Bridge between Black Studies and Women's Studies: Black Women's Studies”, mentions that, “Women's studies courses, usually taught in universities, which could be considered elite institutions just by virtue of the populations they served, focus almost exclusively upon the lives of white women. Black Studies, which were much too often male-

---

[b\\_segments=0%2Fbasic\\_search\\_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A1275e5cb610a21f0e411f7a50a1d10d0&seq=1.](#)

<sup>7</sup> Michele Tracy Berger, “learning from women's studies,” *Pedagogies, teaching and learning* Vol.12, 2(2013):76, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/41960461?searchText=Women+studies+in+the+United+States&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DWomen%2Bstudies%2Bin%2Bthe%2BUnited%2BStates%2B%26so%3Drel&ab\\_segments=0%2Fbasic\\_search\\_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A0b731df51334fd1dc7d862463092be89&seq=4](https://www.jstor.org/stable/41960461?searchText=Women+studies+in+the+United+States&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DWomen%2Bstudies%2Bin%2Bthe%2BUnited%2BStates%2B%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A0b731df51334fd1dc7d862463092be89&seq=4).

dominated, also ignored Black Women.”<sup>8</sup> Black Studies and Women’s Studies departments rarely showcased the works of Black women who have made important and influential contributions within these fields of scholarship. By rejecting Black women, colleges and universities perpetually harm by ignoring the intersectionality of their students and faculty. While Black women continued to be marginalized within society, many Women’s Studies Programs have developed more recently specific courses on the lives, work and influence of Black Women both domestically and abroad.

### **From Beyond to Bowdoin**

The activism and mobilization of the Women’s Movement encouraged students and faculty to fight for greater representation within academia and social spaces. Yet, the introduction of Women’s Studies programs across the United States was only one step towards creating equal opportunities on college and university campuses. The implementation of Women’s Studies catalyzed greater changes to resources and student engagement, more interdisciplinary and departmental collaboration and ongoing work to make programs more inclusive.

#### **Part II:**

#### **Bowdoin College: “A Men's College with Women?”<sup>9</sup>**

Bowdoin College was founded in 1794 as an all-male institution and remained this way for almost 200 years. In 1971 the first matriculating class of women entered life at Bowdoin. As

---

<sup>8</sup> Hull, Gloria T. [Akasha]. “The ‘Bridge’ between Black Studies and Women’s Studies: Black Women’s Studies.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 1/2 (1997): 40–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40005400>.

<sup>9</sup> Women’s History at Bowdoin, 2021, A Men’s College with Women? Over 50 years of Women’s Leadership and Education at Bowdoin, 19570-1979, n.d., George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

the college expanded, it remained structured as a male-centered institution as programs, classes, activities, and athletics focused on and supported those who identified as male, effectively excluding the new female population. Both the few existing female faculty and new students saw a dire need for change on campus and worked diligently to implement the necessary advancements. The addition of a Women's Studies Program, resource centers and courses focusing on the lives of women transformed the campus from a male-dominated space into a co-ed institution that valued the voices of women.

### **Women's Studies Program**

In 1971, when the first women were admitted to Bowdoin, there was a clear need for a curriculum change. Previously, the courses pertained to their white male demographic and little was discussed about race or gender. In 1974, after several years of women following the male-centered curriculum, the first course about women was offered. Titled, *Perspectives in Women's Studies*. The course covered topics including the historical view of women, images of women in literature and art, women and psychology, women and their bodies, and women and the family.<sup>10</sup> This vast array of topics approached within one semester took a broader not deeper approach. Over time other departments began to add courses which explicitly discussed women, but it was not until 1986 that a proposal was submitted for the creation of a Women's Studies Department. The proposal expressed "that the use of gender and sex roles as a fundamental category of thought and analysis will result in a deeper understanding of social issues here at Bowdoin."<sup>11</sup> Notably, the proposal indicated that the department would not only expand to new

---

<sup>10</sup> *Perspectives in Women's Studies Senior Seminar Proposal, 1974, Box 3, Senior Center Program Records, 19570-1979, n.d., George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.*

<sup>11</sup> *Women's Studies Department, 1986, Proposal for Women's Studies, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.*

areas of study, but the content and scholarship would support the social atmosphere of Bowdoin. In 1987, a program was established but existed only through an interdisciplinary model, where required courses were taken through other departments. A minor in Women's Studies was created in 1988 followed by a formal major in 1992. It took almost twenty years after women were welcomed into the Bowdoin community for an area of study focusing on them. The slow change highlights the challenges of a small liberal arts school that is deeply rooted in tradition, and the conservative values it was founded upon.

### **Women's Resource Center and Social Engagement**

One of the most important changes on campus, when Bowdoin became co-educational, was the creation of women's resources. In 1972, the Bowdoin Women's Association (BWA) sought to support women in all areas of campus life. They organized resources, raised funds, and brought in speakers and lectures on the topic of women. In 1980, a proposal was raised by Lois Egasti, the Dean of Students, in support of establishing a Women's Resource Center at 24 College Street. The Resource Center would "serve the Bowdoin community and individuals or groups within the same community. The Center will also provide the following:

1. A meeting place for any group, Bowdoin or local, concerned with Women's issues;
2. A library of books, periodicals, clippings and recordings that deal with women's issues;
3. A central office for the Bowdoin Women's Association, which is currently without an office;
4. An additional comfortable social setting on campus."<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Egasti, Lois. "Proposal for a Women's Resource Center." February 5, 1980. TMs. Office of the Dean of Student Affairs Records [4.1.4, Box 20: Women's Resource Center 1980-1981]. Bowdoin College Archives. Brunswick, Maine.



The proposal passed, and the resource center opened in the fall of 1980. It continues to house the Women's Resource Center what is now called SWAG, the Sexuality, Women's and Gender Center. The newly founded resource center brought about opportunities for social and community engagement. In 1987, the Women's Resource Center sponsored the publication of *Rethinking Sex*, a pamphlet that published "anonymous accounts of and about sexual harassment at Bowdoin College."<sup>13</sup> The vulnerable and raw anecdotes presented within this pamphlet were impactful for not only the women of Bowdoin, but also for the community as a whole. It exposed the frequent harassment and abuse women faced as they were constantly subjected to male-dominated spaces. The publication of *Rethinking Sex* has inspired current campus events such as *RISE: The Untold Stories of Bowdoin Women*. This annual performance tells anonymous personal stories submitted by those who identify as Bowdoin women. The emotional and impactful event has given greater awareness and respect for women's lives and stories at Bowdoin and in society.

### **Collaboration Among Departments: An Interdisciplinary Model**

At Bowdoin, when Women's Studies began it functioned as an interdisciplinary model. There were courses among a variety of departments that developed a curriculum on the topic of women. After the first Senior Seminar class in 1974, many other professors and areas of study followed suit. In the 1975-1976 academic year there were three courses taught on the subject of women. In the English Department, Professor Lauren taught a course on *Women in Eighteenth-Century Literature*. Also, categorized as Senior Seminars, Professor Cafferty taught *Women in*

---

<sup>13</sup> "Rethinking Sex: Anonymous accounts of and about sexual harassment at Bowdoin College, 1987. TMs (copy). Women's Resource Center Records [4.38, Box 1: WRC 1987 -1990]. Bowdoin College Archives. Brunswick, Maine.

*Literature: Changes in Consciousness* and Professor McLin taught *Feminism in Latin America*.<sup>14</sup>

In the early years of an established department, Women's Studies, many of the courses required for the degree fell within other departments. There was a single introductory course taught every other year, but the three remaining credits needed to be taken through other departments. In 1988, more than ten years later, there were courses that counted towards a Women's Studies minor being taught in the Afro-American Studies, Anthropology, Art, Classics, Economics, English, German, Government, History, Psychobiology Religion, Romance Language, Russian and Sociology Departments.<sup>15</sup> Now students were given greater options and opportunity to take classes within a wide array of departments. This new shift in perspective allowed for greater expansion of a Women's Studies Program. Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature elevated the mission of a liberal arts institution by encouraging partnership between colleagues and departments about Women's Studies scholarships during this era.

### **Title Changes: Shifting the Identity of Women's Studies**

The Bowdoin Women's Studies department experienced several name changes since its establishment in the 1980's. The program evolved with the expansion of the student body and scholarship. When the Women's Department was founded in 1988 their mission aimed to:

explore the relationship between disciplinary approaches to women's roles and emerging perspectives in the arts, humanities, and natural and social sciences. The program addresses women's experiences on its own terms, and using gender as a category of analysis, explores the status of and the relationship between men and women<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> English and Senior Seminar Departments, 1975-1976, Bowdoin College Course Catalog, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>15</sup> Women's Studies Department, 1988-1989, Bowdoin College Course Catalog, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>16</sup> Women's Studies Department, 1988-1989, Bowdoin College Course Catalog, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

In these early years, the department focused on the social construction of gender and its involvement with larger social contexts. In 2000, after several years of petitions a minor was created for Gay and Lesbian studies. The department created courses that “examine the role of sexuality in culture; consider the specific cultural achievements of lesbians and gay men; and take a critical perspective on the experiences and depictions of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals.”<sup>17</sup> In 2005, the title changed to Gender and Women’s Studies to encompass the fluidity of gender and encourage those who do not identify as women to take the courses as well. With an expanding student demographic there became a need and desire for courses that discussed sexuality. For fifteen years students could minor within the Gay and Lesbian Studies Department, but a major was never created. In 2015, the Women’s and Gender Studies Department merged with Gay and Lesbian studies to create what is now called Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies. The combination of the two programs allowed for greater funding and opportunity. The Bowdoin Women’s Studies Department, similar to other colleges and universities at the time, changed their title to acknowledge the growth of both the student body and a growing ethos in scholarship.

### **Black Women Studies at Bowdoin**

After many years as an all-male and as a predominantly white institution, Bowdoin transitioned into accepting women, particularly women of color. In 1975, the first Black woman, Saddle Smith graduated from Bowdoin. While the college had an established Africana Studies program in 1969, representation of women, specifically women of color, within the curriculum did not exist. There were classes that discussed the intersectionality of men and race such as The

---

<sup>17</sup> Gay and Lesbian Studies Department, 2000-2001, Bowdoin College Course Catalog, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

*Black Man in American Society Since Reconstruction* taught by Mr. Levine in the spring of 1976.<sup>18</sup> The focus on male perspectives spoke to the male dominated administration, faculty and student body. In 1983, a course titled, *Women in American Society: Implications of Race, Ethnicity, and Class* was introduced by Ms. Bolles.<sup>19</sup> This was the first course at Bowdoin that discussed the intersectionality of women and race. The integration of new courses spoke to the changing demographic of Bowdoin Students. While the college saw a need for this new area of scholarship in the 1980's they have continued to struggle in providing courses regarding the collaboration of women and race. In the Spring of 2022, there were no classes taught on the intersectionality of race and women. In the fall of 2022, two courses will be offered. Professor Judith Casselberry will teach *Black Women, Politics, Music and the Divine* and Professor Donato Fhunsu will teach *African Women as Peacemakers*. The ongoing difficulty in retaining faculty to teach courses among these topics demonstrates the drawbacks of a small liberal arts college. Bowdoin has a long way to go in developing a consistent curriculum that represents all students and faculty.

### **Conclusion**

The implementation of a Women's Studies curriculum at Bowdoin correlates with the trend of changes occurring on college and university campuses across the country. The Black Power Movement and the Women's Movement catalyzed activism and social momentum for greater representation for people of color and women in predominantly white male institutions. The first program at San Diego State College created a domino effect across the country as more

---

<sup>18</sup> Africana Studies, 1974-1975, Bowdoin College Course Catalog, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>19</sup> Africana Studies, 1981-1982, Bowdoin College Course Catalog, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine

women were entering higher education. At larger universities and schools, they had the funds, faculty, and resources to implement a program rather quickly. Evidently, change did not come quickly at Bowdoin, but took many years of proposals, letters of advocacy, and meetings to convince the administration to create a Women's Studies Program. Similar to other institutions, the change and advocacy came from the women faculty and student body. They saw a dire need for the representation of women within the curriculum and to shift the focus away from solely male-dominated scholarship. At Bowdoin and other colleges and universities, Women's Studies Departments organized support networks and programs across campuses. Institutions transformed current buildings into Women's Centers, affinity groups established, and funds directed towards programming and advocacy. These necessary social and community changes transformed previously male-centered into co-educational spaces. The changes on Bowdoin's campus provide a case study of the evolving trends across the country. While a Women's Studies Department created greater representation for women, it is important to note that many early programs did not discuss women of color, a disparity that still exists today.

Since the first Women's Studies Program was founded, greater awareness has been directed towards the social construction of gender and sexuality inspiring the fundamental changes within the area of study. Women's Studies were a revolutionary advancement within colleges and universities, but they still have a long way to go. A college curriculum should represent and engage with all students every semester. It should be relevant and involve community participation and organizing. While Bowdoin has progressed since the first women stepped on campus, there is more to be done in the classroom and beyond.