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The Evolution of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
at Bowdoin College and Beyond

On a sunny afternoon in early April, I found myself scanning transcripts in Special Collections and Archives at the Bowdoin College Library. Student interviews, college catalogs, and committee proposals were scattered across the table before me. Flipping through documents, history parades itself in the form of pictures and letters. The study of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies (GSWS) has expanded the confines of academia, led by the activism of several generations.

The purpose of my research is to determine **where Gender, Sexuality, and Women's studies originated, how the subject has changed, and how it continues to evolve, specifically at Bowdoin.** The research will be broken up into two parts: In part I, I will analyze where GSWS came from and discuss how it has grown over the past half-century. In part II, I will discuss the relationship between GSWS and Bowdoin.

The naming of GSWS programs varies by institution, reflecting the scope of a university's department. Some colleges study and research the aspects of GSWS individually. Other institutions, like Bowdoin, slowly merged the concepts into one singular major and minor. Recognizing the mix of terms is helpful in conceptualizing the subject area and how it has continued to shift.¹

¹ Ginsberg, Alice. 2008. *The Evolution of American Women's Studies: Reflection on Triumphs, Controversies, and Change*. Macmillan.

Part I: The Early Years and Evolution

Women's Studies was born amidst a period of immense cultural change in the United States. The 1960s represented the progression of civil rights and free speech, as well as antiwar and student power movements.² These events did not take place in a vacuum. On college campuses across the country, widespread activism contributed to the growing presence of women in spaces of higher education.³ A changing society correlated with a changing classroom, and vice versa. Concerning the introduction of Women's studies, scholars note The Women's Liberation Movement as a trailblazing group who advocated for the development of a more inclusive curriculum involving women.⁴ At the same time, African and Asian communities advocated for their greater presence in the curricula. Recognizing the expansion of higher education in a multitude of subject areas during a period of simultaneous social change illustrates the intertwined nature of society and academia.

San Diego State University was the first institution in the country to act upon student activism. After administration officials recognized a petition that received 600 signatures from students, faculty, and staff, Women's studies was born.⁵ In the fall of 1970, the university officially initiated the preliminary stages of a Women's studies program consisting of 11 courses. Ranging from *Women in Literature* to *Women and Psychology*, the course offerings represented a

² Boxer, Marilyn J. "Women's Studies as Women's History." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3/4 (2002): 43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003241>.

³ "Women, Marriage, Education, and Occupation in the United States from 1940-2000 | History 90.01: Topics in Digital History." Accessed April 12, 2022. <https://journeys.dartmouth.edu/censushistory/2016/11/03/women-marriage-and-education-in-the-united-states-from-1940-2000/>.

⁴ "About Us." *San Diego State University*. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://ou-womensstudies.sdsu.edu/about-us.aspx>.

⁵ "About Us." *San Diego State University*. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://ou-womensstudies.sdsu.edu/about-us.aspx>.

shift in how students were able to view previously established parts of curricula through a new academic perspective.

Scholar Marilyn J. Boxer is at the forefront of the establishment of Women and Gender studies in higher education. In addition to being a catalyst for change as the inaugural chair of the Women's studies program at San Diego State University, Boxer has also published numerous books on the subject of GSWS development.⁶ What was started by Boxer at San Diego State ignited the development of Women's studies programming throughout higher education in the United States during the 1970s. According to Boxer, "A hundred and fifty new women's studies programs were founded between 1970 and 1975, and another hundred and fifty were founded between 1975 and 1980."⁷ The growth speaks for itself; raw numerical data emphasizes the rapid growth of GSWS during the first decade of development.

The implementation of Women's studies programming was not monolithic in approach, nor has it been chronological in advancement. Each university that has decided to offer the program devised individual strategies of implementation that range from full-fledged departments to basic introductory classes. As programming evolved, the difficulty of defining Women's studies became more evident. Boxer writes, "Defining women's studies is similar to defining American studies, environmental studies, and religious studies. Lacking a full-time faculty of their own, interdisciplinary programs as a rule find curricular planning, class scheduling, and quality control to be sources of frustration."⁸ With the inability to strictly frame the area of study, critics pounced on the validity of the subject area. Pedagogical practices, class

⁶ "Marilyn J. Boxer Oral History | SDSUnbound." Accessed May 1, 2022.

<https://digitallibrary.sdsu.edu/islandora/object/sdsu%3A59674>.

⁷ Ginsberg, Alice. 2008. *The Evolution of American Women's Studies: Reflection on Triumphs, Controversies, and Change*. Macmillan.

⁸ Boxer, Marilyn J. *When Women Ask the Questions: Creating Women's Studies in America*. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

content, and the extent to which feminist theory contributes to class discussion all contributed to the debate over whether or not Women's studies should be considered a legitimate department.⁹ Managing criticism within academia while developing scholarly class content and research proved to be a difficult task. Scholars recognized the importance of balancing the creation of valuable instruction while also not taking away from the crucial social movements taking place more broadly in society. Alice E. Ginsberg notes in *The Evolution of American Women's Studies*, "Women's studies needed to define its mission within the academy without alienating the critically important work being done *outside* of the academy."¹⁰ Acknowledging the challenges of curricula and departmental development demonstrates the work of initial scholars in getting GSWS off the ground in academia.

One explanation as to why Women's studies broadened in scope in the 1980s lies in the criticism of the subject's focus in circles of higher education. Jennifer Stanley writes about critical perspectives in *Gender Studies: The Demise of Feminism Or the Vision of an Inclusive Curriculum?*. There, she states, "the programs lack academic rigor and due to the myopic female perspective are insular and isolated."¹¹ The evolution of gender and sexuality studies was not solely based on criticism of the Women's studies discipline. Stanley goes on to mention student interest and societal discussions around gender as broad factors that contributed to shifts in department development and structure. She believes that "by offering a broader academic

⁹ Stromquist, N. P. (2001). Gender studies: A global perspective of their evolution contribution, and challenges to comparative higher education. *Higher Education*, 41(4), 373-387

¹⁰ Ginsberg, Alice. 2008. *The Evolution of American Women's Studies: Reflection on Triumphs, Controversies, and Change*. Macmillan.

¹¹ Stanley, Jennifer M. 2013. "Gender Studies: The Demise of Feminism Or the Vision of an Inclusive Curriculum?" Order No. 3612292, Johnson & Wales University.
<https://login.ezproxy.bowdoin.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/gender-studies-demise-feminism-vision-inclusive/docview/1506966892/se-2?accountid=9681>.

perspective by including the study of masculinity, sexuality, and other gender-focused identity issues,” scholars were able to expand and intertwine the area of study in a bigger capacity.¹²

Similar sentiment about the importance of scholarly research expansion was displayed a decade later, with the development of Gay and Lesbian studies. Gay and Lesbian studies are seen as an area of study that conceptually bridged the social component of women’s studies with a more theoretical aspect of Feminist studies.¹³ The introduction of gender and sexuality studies varied from institution to institution. This aspect of GSWS discipline grew throughout the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. At some colleges and universities, Gay and Lesbian studies remained separate from Women’s studies. For example, in 2002, Hobart and William Smith Colleges (HWS) became the first institution in the country to institute a dedicated Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual major.¹⁴ Similar to San Diego State and Women’s studies, HWS links the creation of this program to social activism in the 1970s. Meanwhile, at other institutions such as Bowdoin, Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies morphed into a single department and major in the 2000s.¹⁵ Classes within these departments range from introductory courses to feminist theory to cross-listed specific areas of study. Recognizing the fluidity and frequent changes in departments is crucial to understanding the evolution of GSWS curriculum.

In a more modern context, the evolution of Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies continues to reflect the conversations and changing dynamics of social structures in American

¹² Stanley, Jennifer M. 2013. "Gender Studies: The Demise of Feminism Or the Vision of an Inclusive Curriculum?" Order No. 3612292, Johnson & Wales University. <https://login.ezproxy.bowdoin.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/gender-studies-demise-feminism-vision-inclusive/docview/1506966892/se-2?accountid=9681>.

¹³ Munt, Sally R. “‘I Teach Therefore I Am’: Lesbian Studies in the Liberal Academy.” *Feminist Review*, no. 56 (1997): 85–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395817>.

¹⁴ “History – Hobart and William Smith Colleges.” Accessed April 22, 2022. <https://www2.hws.edu/academics/critical-sexuality-and-queer-studies/history/#:~:text=In%202002%20Hobart%20and%20William,field%20of%20LGBT%2FQueer%20Studies>.

¹⁵ Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. “Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies.” Accessed April 22, 2022. <https://www.bowdoin.edu/gender-women/index.html>.

society. With over 800 programs across the country, consisting of Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D. programs, GSWS has grown substantially since its early days in the 1970s.¹⁶ Still, funding and administrative control continues to threaten the growth of departmental content and research.¹⁷ Though called different things at different institutions, Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies continues to illuminate ideas that are currently underrepresented in academia.

Part II: Breaking Down Barriers at Bowdoin

A Men's College with Women? Over 50 Years of Women's Leadership and Education at Bowdoin, a feature at Hawthorne-Longfellow Library, tracks the growth of Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies at the college.¹⁸ The exhibition illustrates a timeline of coeducation instruction and curriculum development. It also serves as a platform for understanding how women, and subsequently women's studies, have contributed to the college over the past half-century.

When discussing the development and expansion of GSWS at Bowdoin, we must first acknowledge the arrival of women at the college in the first place. Women first matriculated to Bowdoin in 1969, through a program entitled the Twelve College Exchange Program.¹⁹ The Twelve College Exchange Program shifted into coeducation instruction, with sixty-five first-year and transfer women students, graduating from the first coed class in 1975.

¹⁶ Jaschik, Scott. "The Evolution of American Women's Studies." Inside Higher Ed, March 27, 2009. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/03/27/evolution-american-womens-studies>.

¹⁷ Boxer, Marilyn J. *When Women Ask the Questions: Creating Women's Studies in America*. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

¹⁸ "A Men's College with Women? Over 50 Years of Women's Leadership and Education at Bowdoin." Accessed May 1, 2022. <https://sca.bowdoin.edu/women-at-bowdoin/>.

¹⁹ "The Fight for Coeducation." *Bowdoin Special Collections and Archives*. Accessed May 1, 2022. <https://sca.bowdoin.edu/women-at-bowdoin/the-fight-for-coeducation/>.

The presence of women on campus goes hand in hand with the establishment of Women's studies at Bowdoin. 1974 marked the first year that a course was taught with GSWS theory in the syllabus. This class, in the German Department, led to interdisciplinary study courses such as *Perspectives in Women's Studies Senior Seminar*, a course that incorporated a variety of subjects ranging from Women and Psychology to Women and Politics. The efforts of curriculum expansion throughout the 1970s and 1980s utilized different strategies to get students interested and involved. The Women's Resource Center, now known as SWAG, used newsletters and flyers. Other students wrote opinion pieces in the Bowdoin Orient.²⁰ Communication of Women's studies at Bowdoin mirrored the efforts that took place in the pilot program at San Diego State University. Through these informal styles of communication, Women's studies evolved and grew.

In 1988, after years of committee review, Women's studies was recognized as an academic minor at Bowdoin.²¹ As explained in the Course Catalog from 1989-90, the program was initially an "interdisciplinary program that incorporates into the curriculum recent research done on women and gender. The Women Studies Program explores the relationship between traditional disciplinary approaches to Women's roles and emerging perspectives in the arts, humanities, and natural and social sciences."²² For the completion of the minor, a student would have to take two required courses, (in 1989 they were *Introduction to Women's studies* and *Feminist Theory*), with four additional cross-listed classes for requirement fulfillment.

In 1992, Bowdoin established the Women's studies major. The major, similar to the minor, required three departmental courses in addition to eight other courses. Students must

²⁰ "Student Leadership." *Bowdoin Special Collections and Archives*. Accessed May 1, 2022. <https://sca.bowdoin.edu/women-at-bowdoin/student-leadership-2/>.

²¹ "Bowdoin College Catalog." *Bowdoin College*. 1989-1990. 233-34.

²² "Bowdoin College Catalog." *Bowdoin College*. 1989-1990. 233-34.

develop a concentration in the area of women and gender studies.²³ The goal of this work was to gain a multidisciplinary breadth of knowledge. The department explains, “Gender and Women's Studies combines the scholarly traditions of each field in new and productive ways to develop a culture of critical thinking about sexuality, gender, race, and class.”²⁴ The establishment of a Women’s studies major demonstrated a major turning point in the evolution of the subject at the college.

At the turn of the century, another major step in the evolution of GSWS took shape. The introduction of Gay and Lesbian Studies minor at Bowdoin began in the 2000-2001 school year. The purpose of the department was to analyze the role of sexuality in society, recognizing the contributions of the LGBT community to American culture.²⁵ Nearly 250 students petitioned for the program and it was established and ran until 2015 when it was incorporated. A faculty committee that studied the possibility of establishing a minor wrote, “We believe that the time is at hand to institute a minor that will bring together the College's various department offerings, establish an intellectual and administrative structure for a coherent program of study, and bring visibility, which is now minimal, to Gay/Lesbian Studies at Bowdoin.”²⁶ The implementation of this aspect of GSWS sought to again intertwine what Bowdoin had in place with social and cultural happenings of the time.

The terminology of the minor and major are important for understanding the evolution of Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s studies at Bowdoin. The program began as Women’s studies, shifting to Gender and Women’s in 2005, and finally being renamed to what we know today as

²³“Bowdoin College Catalog.” *Bowdoin College*. 1993-1994. 183-84.

²⁴ “Bowdoin College Catalog.” *Bowdoin College*. 1993-1994. 183-84.

²⁵ “Bowdoin College Catalog.” *Bowdoin College*. 2000-2001.

²⁶ “Proposal For A Minor in Gay and Lesbian Studies at Bowdoin College.” *Bowdoin College*. March 1999.

Gender, Sexuality, and Women's studies.²⁷ The merger with Gay and Lesbian studies is also worthy of note. The intersections of these areas demonstrate the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of the subject and more specifically display the scope of the department.

Today, GSWS and its conglomerates are as vibrant as ever at Bowdoin. Classes like *Sex and State Power* can be found in the same department as *Gender and Sexuality in Teen Cinema*.²⁸ The versatility of the departments highlights the multidisciplinary approach that Bowdoin professors had in mind when developing the curriculum thirty years ago. Student interest continues to grow, and research continues to advance societal discussions around gender, sex, and sexual orientation. After fifty years of women at the college, GSWS is representative of the progression of the subject nationally.

Conclusion: Where do we go from here?

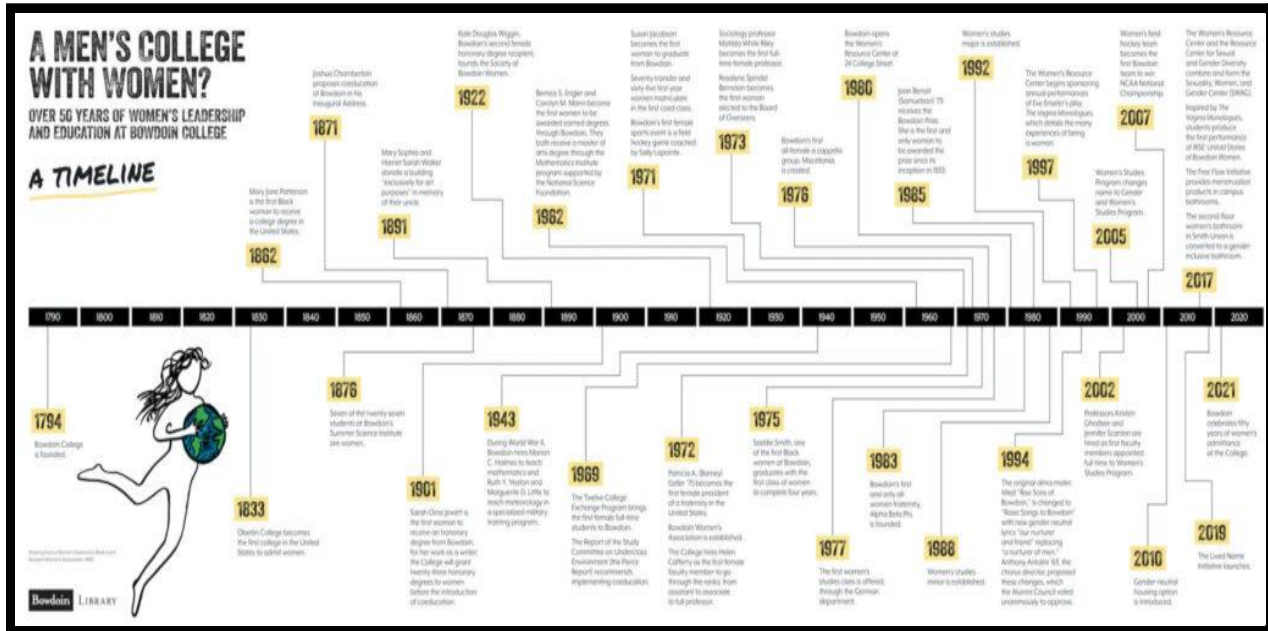
The evolution of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's studies at Bowdoin and Beyond is a testament to the degree to which protest and activism fuel academic inspiration. The area of study has come a long way since its establishment in the 1970s. With changes in society came changes in the classroom, and it has been inspiring to analyze these shifts on a more broad level. Women's studies have evolved into a scholarly analysis that incorporates ideas of gender and sexuality identity more distinctly. From here, the interconnected nature of GSWS and society will continue to impact the future of the subject. At Bowdoin, the progression of student activism, conversation, and research will inspire generations of students in the decades ahead.

²⁷ "Timeline." *Bowdoin Special Collections and Archives*. Accessed May 1, 2022.

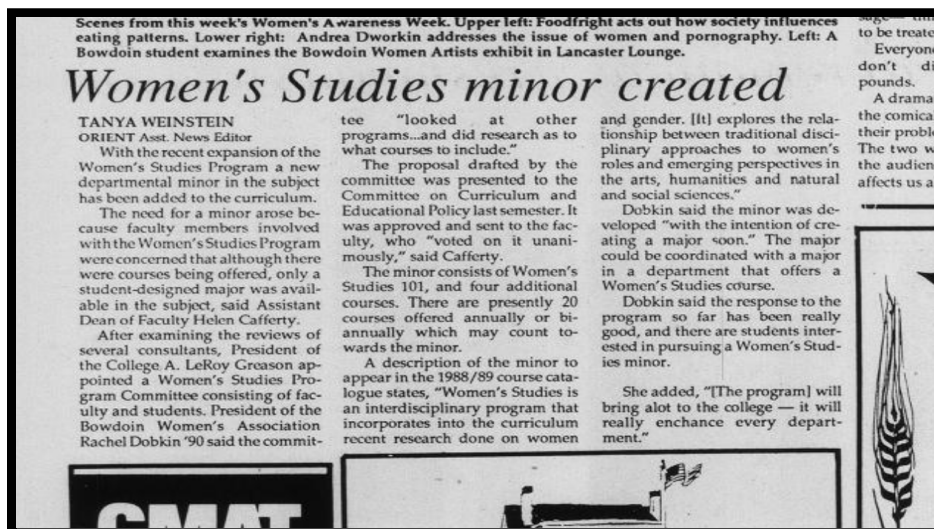
<https://sca.bowdoin.edu/women-at-bowdoin/timeline/>.

²⁸ "Classfinder." Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://classfinder.bowdoin.edu/classfinder/>.

Appendix: Relevant Images



Above: Timeline. "A Men's College with Women? Over 50 Years of Women's Leadership and Education at Bowdoin." 2021. *Special Collections and Archives*.



Above: Weinstein, Tanya. "Women's Studies Minor Created." 1988. *Bowdoin Orient*.