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EDUC 2285: Research Paper

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14 April 2022

Women's Studies and Higher Education

Part I:

- **Where did Women's Studies come from?**
- **How did this field of study change over time?**

American society changed drastically post-WWII; traditional gender roles shifted massively leading women to find work outside the home. Unsurprisingly, these new careers required higher levels of education, so more women began to enter higher education institutions. There was also a “postwar expansion of higher education through the GI bill...[and] across the country as statewide systems were established to accommodate new constituencies... student populations mushroomed.”¹ While attending these colleges, women yearned to see their struggles and accomplishments reflected in curricula. In the early 1970s, San Diego State University developed the first Women's Studies department in the United States. This was a monumental moment for the future of women, especially those who would attend college and university. This kickstarted the Women's Studies Movement, which “grew out of the extraordinary activism and energy of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and was inseparable, at least in the beginning, from the intellectual excitement and political commitment of that time.”² Like other social movements at the time, the fight for Women's Studies was inextricably linked to greater liberation movements. Just as the fight for Black Studies was tied to the Civil Rights Movement,

¹ Boxer, 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>.

² Rothenberg, Paula. “Women Studies - The Early Years: When Sisterhood Was Powerful.” Essay. In *Evolution of American Women's Studies: Reflections on Triumphs, Controversies, and Change*, 67–86. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

the call for Women's Studies was a result of the gaining popularity of the Women's Liberation Movement.

The beginning of the Women's Studies Movement was propelled with the help of women participating in the Women's Liberation Movement. In fact, "many women's studies courses and events were advertised through flyers, mimeographed newsletters, and by word of mouth."³ It is important to note how radical Women's Studies was in its early years, and many "women's studies scholars worried that their association with the field would reflect poorly on them and derail their careers in their various disciplines."⁴ In spite of this, the women who led the movement continued on and defied odds. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the movement, colleges and universities were able to cross list classes in Women's Studies and another discipline, which helped to gain popularity for the study. That being said, women found it very difficult to convince administration and their fellow students that Women's Studies had a legitimate place on college campuses. In 1971, Roberta Salper wrote in an article, "university-based programs can create links with other sectors of society, traditional divisions - student vs worker, black vs white, man vs. woman -... will be weakened."⁵ This is just one way that women found success in implementing women's studies courses and programs on campuses. The interdisciplinary nature of the subject, the influx of women into higher education in the postwar period, and its ties to the Women's Liberation Movement, all contributed to the explosion of Women's Studies programs in the United States in the late 20th century and the programs continued popularity.

³ Ginsberg, A. "Triumphs, Controversies, and Change: Women's Studies 1970s to the Twenty-First Century." Essay. In *Evolution of American Women's Studies: Reflections on Triumphs, Controversies, and Change*, 9–37. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Salper, Roberta. "San Diego State 1970: The Initial Year of the Nation's First Women's Studies Program." *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 3 (2011): 656–82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23069927>.

Alice E. Ginsberg talks about the motivations behind creating Women's Studies programs in colleges and universities in her essay, *Triumphs, Controversies, and Change: Women's Studies 1970s to the Twenty-First Century*. She notes that "personal is political", meaning that the current answers and scholarship around certain topics are there because of who is in charge, not necessarily because of what is the truth. Often, we must ask why certain narratives are not present, especially Women's Studies.⁶ In addition to feminist scholars advocating for Women's Studies around the country, students were extremely active in the fight for programs on their own campuses. These 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...graduate students also initiated and taught many of the early courses, for menial cost to dollar-strapped institutions."⁷ This fierce spirit and determination was a main reason that these programs were so successfully implemented into our universities and colleges curricula.

As the field of Women's Studies grew and spread to many college campuses across the country, people started to expose the limitations of its current content. Many people, correctly, pointed out that Women's Studies was only tailored towards white, straight, conservative, and often Catholic women.⁸ The field excluded many important diverse voices; these women also contribute to defining what it is to be a woman, but their experiences were missing. In the 1980s, "[these] programs, however, were severely attacked over the course of the decade in the face of the growing conservative nature of American politics under the Reagan administration."⁹ Amid

⁶ Salper, Roberta. "San Diego State 1970: The Initial Year of the Nation's First Women's Studies Program." *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 3 (2011): 656–82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23069927>.

⁷ Boxer, 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>.

⁸ Boxer, Marilyn J. "For and about Women: The Theory and Practice of Women's Studies in the United States." *Signs* 7, no. 3 (1982): 661–95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173860>.

⁹ Ginsberg, Alice E. "Triumphs, Controversies, and Change: Women's Studies 1970s to the Twenty-First Century." Essay. In *Evolution of American Women's Studies: Reflections on Triumphs, Controversies, and Change*, 9–37. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

controversy, the growing number of programs continued to grow in the U.S., and women began to graduate with B.A. 's in Women's Studies. This forced scholars to create a foundation of core courses for Women's Studies majors and minors. As a result, feminist theory was born. Feminist theory aims to understand gender inequality and to try and dismantle patriarchal ideals from systems. This theory has been and continues to be criticized for leaving out many women's voices.

Because of this exclusion, it became apparent that the title of Women's Studies and its contents needed to change. Originally, "the advent of the title *Women's Studies* was significant in that 'the apostrophe blurred the differences between studies by, about and belonging to women.'"¹⁰ But still, more women were asking for more change. Questions of inclusivity, gender, and race "were pervasive in the 1980s and are still highly relevant and controversial today despite a raised consciousness about cultural diversity throughout academia."¹¹ This increased cultural awareness led many departments and programs to change their names over time. Women's Studies changed to Gender Studies, to Gay and Lesbian Studies, to Queer Studies, and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies. This change is typical of area studies; Chicano Studies has changed over time to become Latin American Studies and Latin American, Caribbean, and Latinx Studies, in order to include more identities. The terminology continues to adapt as activists encourage administrations to highlight diverse experiences and identities.

As mentioned previously, the current conception of Women's Studies is not possible without the dedication and work of student activists on campuses. Similarly to other area studies, the push for departments and programs started with passionate students and faculty.

¹⁰ Ginsberg, Alice E. "Triumphs, Controversies, and Change: Women's Studies 1970s to the Twenty-First Century." Essay. In *Evolution of American Women's Studies: Reflections on Triumphs, Controversies, and Change*, 9–37. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

¹¹ Ibid

Part II:

- **How did this field of study develop and change at Bowdoin College?**

On one side of the country, Women's Studies was being introduced as a legitimate field of study, but on the other side of the country, in Brunswick, Maine, women were just beginning to gain acceptance into Bowdoin College. Similarly to the rest of the country, the fight for Women's Studies at Bowdoin was influenced by immense external and internal pressure. The first woman to graduate Bowdoin was a transfer student named Susan Jacobson, and she did so in 1971. But 1971 was not the first time that women stepped foot on campus and since Bowdoin had been participating in exchange programs with other small colleges for a number of years beforehand. It wouldn't be until 1987, that Women's Studies was in the conversation of faculty and staff. Surprisingly, though, it was 100 years before that, that Joshua Chamberlain stated in his inaugural address that "women too should have part in this higher calling. Because in this sphere of things her "rights", her capabilities, her offices, her destiny, are equal to those of man."¹² While it took a long time to introduce women to Bowdoin, as soon as they arrived on campus they started to make their mark.

In the early 1980s, there were classes offered at the college that could be classified under what we now know as Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. These course catalogs listed specific classes which covered topics such as Women's histories and other similar topics, but it wasn't until 1987 that there was a minor created. Before faculty even discussed the possibility of a program at Bowdoin, a group of students wrote a petition to start a Women's Studies program at Bowdoin in 1986. They wrote that "the interdisciplinary nature of a Women's Studies program

¹² Bowdoin College, "Joshua Chamberlain's Inaugural Address" *Bowdoin College Archives* – sc1-page-8 and 9

could help fulfill the college's commitment to progressive liberal arts education."¹³ At first, there was some struggle back and forth, as professors tried to advocate for this minor. Firstly, people were concerned about what the department would be called. The program committee has chosen to name the program Women's Studies, instead of Woman's and Gender Studies and this "issue had received considerable attention within the committee but that they had decided to retain the name. Although the program would involve gender studies as programs usually do, the program had evolved out of the study of women and [they deemed] it was quite appropriate to the history of such programs to call them Women's Studies."¹⁴ One other big point of contention was the apparent lack of a program director. Hiring a full or assistant professor would be expensive, and some faculty argued that other departments needed these positions first. After some deliberation, the committee concluded that they would establish "a women's studies program, the creation of a standing committee to administer the program, the establishment of a minor in women's studies and the appointment of a program director without specifying the level of sent."¹⁵ Students and faculty were thrilled by this movement and commended the college for their efforts; some students took to the Bowdoin Orient to sing their praises. The President of the Bowdoin Women's Association, Rachel Dobkin stated that "[the program] will bring a lot to the college - it will really enhance every department."¹⁶

In 1974, the first course about Women was taught. It was called *Perspective in Women's Studies Senior Center Seminar*, and the course covered topics including "Historical View, Images of Women in Literature and Art, Women and Psychology, Women and their Bodies, Women and

¹³ Bowdoin College, "Caroline Westtort and Liz Brimmer To Bowdoin Faculty" (1986). *Bowdoin College Archives*. Letter, 1986

¹⁴ 282. Bowdoin College, "CEP Minutes and Reports 1986-1990" (1987). *Faculty Records, Minutes, and Reports*. Series Number A01.07.04 Volume 5 Page 79-80

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Bowdoin College, "Bowdoin Orient" (1988). *Bowdoin Orient* 11 March 1988

the Family, National Organization for Women, National Women's Political Caucus."¹⁷ This course was a sort of all encompassing history and analysis on the social role of women. After the introduction of this course, there were an increasing number of courses taught, examining all things to do with women. The official Women's Studies minor was created in 1988, and the major was established in 1992. As a result of these changes, women and men were given freedom to explore feminist theory, women's history, etc. Even though there was now greater inclusion and support for these studies, student activists pushed to include even more voices and lived experiences into Bowdoin's curriculum. This included the LGBTQ community, and in April 1997, there was a petition passed around campus in support of a minor in Gay and Lesbian Studies: it received 242 signatures from students. Then in 1998, there was another petition signed from the student body in support of an introductory course on Gay and Lesbian Studies. Finally in March of 1999, there was a proposal for a Gay and Lesbian Studies minor and in 2000, Gay and Lesbian Studies was officially offered at the college.¹⁸ This minor, similarly to Women's Studies, is very interdisciplinary. The minor required one introductory course, and four other courses that were cross listed with other departments; some of these classes were called film studies, sexuality and gender in the opera, constructions of the body, and the sociology of gender.¹⁹ This department merged with Women's Studies in 2015, and became what it is today: Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies.

Similarly to most other colleges and universities, Bowdoin College's curriculum changes were adopted and implemented into the college because of extensive student activism. Not only

¹⁷ 256. Bowdoin College, "Bowdoin College Catalogue (1974-1975)" (1975). *Bowdoin College Catalogues, Course Guides, and Academic Handbooks*.

<https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/course-catalogues/256> page 163

¹⁸ 282. Bowdoin College, "Bowdoin College Catalogue (2000-2001)" (2001). *Bowdoin College Catalogues, Course Guides, and Academic Handbooks*.

<https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/course-catalogues/282>

¹⁹ Ibid

did women, and men, fight for Women's Studies on Bowdoin's campus, extensive programming was implemented to make women feel comfortable at Bowdoin, which helped a large support network for students. Many of these communities are still present at Bowdoin today. The Women's Resource Center at 24 College St. was opened in the late 1970s and is running today as SWAG. The center worked closely with the Women's Studies Department and program, and together they brought many inspirational women to campus. They held many events on campus, including dinner parties, course selection help, and conferences.²⁰ The introduction of Women's Centers provided women with a safe space to organize and advocate for these institutional changes.²¹ In 1994, the Women's Resource Center and the Women's Studies program sponsored the annual Women's Studies Conference in Maine which brought Bell Hooks and Angela Davis to campus. This conference highlighted a one-day workshop for women and careers and panels on "sexuality in the workplace, women's career choices, sexual discrimination, and gender stereotyping in the employment market."²² Students published *WomeNews*, a flyer that announced safe space events and gave women information on how to be "Street Smart" and to avoid being a victim on a very male-centric campus.²³ All of these events made Women's Studies an accessible space and department on campus, and this legacy continues today.

The most important component to the success of the fight for Women's Studies at Bowdoin College was student activism and dedication. These students pushed for the faculty, staff, and administration to be more inclusive as well as working hard to make their own spaces

²⁰ Bowdoin College, "Women's Resource Center Flyers and Posters", *Bowdoin College Archives* (1986-1999) Call Number: A03.21, Volume/Box 1, Item One

²¹ Susan B. Marine, Gina Helfrich & Liam Randhawa (2017) Gender-Inclusive Practices in Campus Women's and Gender Centers: Benefits, Challenges, and Future Prospects, *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, 10:1, 45-63, DOI: [10.1080/19407882.2017.1280054](https://doi.org/10.1080/19407882.2017.1280054)

²² Bowdoin College, "Women's Studies Program Committee Annual Report", *Bowdoin College Archives* (1989-1990) Call Number: A03.21, Volume/Box 1, Item One

²³ Bowdoin College, "WomeNews", *Bowdoin College Archives* (1994) Call Number: A03.21, Volume/Box 1, 3.21

feel more welcoming. It is important to note that like many other Women's Studies programs, Bowdoin did not include women of color's voices or lived experiences in the curriculum. So while women at Bowdoin fought for the program, they were largely fighting for white, anglo, euro-centric curriculum. Today, the college and professors are striving to diversify these classes and curricula in response to calls from student activists. There is still a long way to go, but it is clear that legacies of advocacy and community are inextricably tied to Bowdoin, and will continue on.