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Pressure and Popularity Spur Variety In College Women's Studies Courses

Women's studies courses have become the vogue on colleges around the country, rapidly increasing not only in the number of campuses on which they are offered, but also in the depth and variety of courses given.

Like the Black studies of the last decade, women's studies are entering academics on the momentum of a movement. Teachers and students in the new courses tend to identify closely with the women's liberation movement and its grievances, manifesting the consciousness of women established by organizations such as the National Organization of Women and the National Women's Political Caucus.

Dozen at Barnard

While students almost unanimously applaud the new courses, the concept of expanding them into full-fledged degree programs is meeting some institutional resistance. Some administrators say they fear it may be more of a fad than a discipline, while others say they are concerned that a student who majors in such studies might find a cool reception in the business world.

During this decade, 885 colleges and universities across the country have offered 4,658 courses in women's studies. Now, 112 of these colleges offer programs, some of which include the granting of bachelors

and masters degrees as well as one program leading to a Ph.D. degree.

Barnard College, for example, provided a dozen women's studies courses within 11 departments this year. The religion, history and French departments offered, respectively, "Women and Religion," "Images of Women in American Intellectual History" and "French Women Writers."

The State University of New York at Binghamton gives students the option of creating their own majors, such as "Women's Studies" or "Women in the American Experience."

"The Faculty and administration express general approval of women's studies," said Prof. Mary P. Ryan, coordinator of the Ph.D. program at the State University that concentrates on women's history.

Although courses in women's studies at the State University are credited, and classrooms are mostly full, she said, limited faculty and a lack of funds have made the development slow and problematic.

Petitions Circulated

At Brooklyn College next fall, students will be able to elect a double major of women's studies, combined with some other subject leading to a B.A. degree.

Prof. Renate Bridenthal, coordinator of the program, said the double major would

help reassure prospective employers who might be skeptical of such an untraditional major such as women's studies.

Two years ago, Professor Bridenthal recalled, students began collecting signatures on petitions and lobbying the departmental chairmen. The student women's liberation group and the Brooklyn College Women's Organization fought to get the major program approved.

Prof. Domna C. Stanton, who teaches a French course, "Female and Feminism," at Barnard, described women's studies as "compensatory" education, echoing a commonly voiced rationale.

"History was always male history, and literature was male literature," she said, adding that, by having courses for and about women, "it will help women to get a fair share of the pie in society, to become professionals by virtue of education."

Students commonly speak of anger, frustration and fear.

Amanda P. Kissin, a 17-year-old Barnard freshman, said she found "Sexuality in Literature," was "almost a little frightening," adding:

"I feel like I'm really impressive. I'm taking this really personally. The readings strike chords in me."

Identifying herself with the "struggle" of women in society, Miss Kissin said:

"I feel the frustration. The course gives me a nice sense of being part of it. I know that it's not just my own neurotic perception; other women feel the same thing."

'I Feel Angry'

Ruth A. Leibowitz, a sophomore at Barnard, said she took "Women in Antiquity," a course in classical civilization, to find a model for her own life as a woman. Now, she says, "I feel angry, because I'm looking for that model and I don't find it" in the stereotypes of ancient civilizations.

"Women have been treated as a second or inferior class," said Beryl L. Kaplan, a committed feminist enrolled in Barnard's "Determinants of Sexuality," an interdisciplinary course combining elements of psychology and biology.

Anticipating a career in gynecology, Miss Kaplan has worked this year in an abortion clinic.

"I am interested in women's health and women's physical sense of their bodies, their sense of themselves as sexual beings," she said.

In saying that women's studies were part of the women's liberation movement, Miss Kaplan explained:

"Education is a basic foundation for any kind of movement. Women's studies is in a lot of ways—consciousness raising."

The Male View

Barney J. Schwartz, one of the few Columbia men who cross over to the Barnard campus to study "Sexuality in Literature," is puzzled by whether the course teaches literature with emphasis on the women's movement or the women's movement with examples from literature.

Mr. Schwartz, an English major, said to his professor: "Everything in literature . . . reflects the struggle between the sexes."

Condemning the teaching of the women's movement in a college classroom, Mr. Schwartz said, "If we're going to study introduction to the feminist movement and illustrate it in literature, then it's polemic."

Prof. Remington P. Patterson, acting dean of the faculty, suggested one reason why there was no total women studies program at Barnard. He said there was "a reluctance to see Barnard identified with a cause, making anything except an intellectual commitment to its students."

The real question is "whether or not this really represents an academic or intellectual discipline," Professor Patterson said.

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