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## WOMEN'S STUDIES AT BRIDGEWATER

Barbara Apstein

**M**ultidisciplinary programs have grown rapidly at Bridgewater during the past 15 years, and none more rapidly than Women's Studies. The first "Introduction to Women's Studies" course was taught on campus in 1983. Since then, the Program has expanded to include a wide array of courses drawing from nearly every liberal arts discipline: English, Philosophy, History, Art, Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, Social Work and Movement Arts. The Program currently offers an average of eight courses a semester, for a combined annual enrollment of more than two hundred fifty students. In 1988, Women's Studies was officially approved as a minor. This development of Women's Studies at Bridgewater mirrors the growth of the field on the national level, from 17 programs in 1970 to over 500 at the present time. Most major colleges in the U. S. currently offer a Women's Studies Program.

For many members of the Bridgewater Women's Studies faculty, the growth of the field has paralleled their own intellectual and political development. Sandra Faiman-Silva, a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology who is currently serving a three-year term as Coordinator of the Program, recalls that her interest in feminist issues originated in personal experiences of the "gender divide." Raising her own three sons led Prof. Faiman-Silva to think seriously about the ways in which gender is constructed in society. At the same time, gender issues were being raised in her own academic discipline, Anthropology, where men had traditionally done most of the research, writing and teaching, and women had generally been excluded from the discussion.

Prof. Kim MacInnis, who also teaches in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, traces her early interest in feminist issues to her childhood years in a traditional fishing village in Nova Scotia. "From a very young age," Prof. MacInnis reports, "I was uncomfortable with the way women were and are treated." Philosophy professor Francine Quaglio's interest in feminist issues developed during her student years: "the political and cultural climate of the years of my undergraduate and graduate study," she observes, "shaped questions for me, evoked insights about many things, including the issue of gender." Prof. Quaglio began to read widely in feminist literature and "my thought and my commitments were transformed in the process."

English professors Evelyn Pezzulich and Lois Poule also became interested in Women's Studies as a result of their experiences as students. Their college and graduate school faculties included very few women, and very few female authors were deemed worthy of serious study. "Doing my graduate work at Indiana in the '60's," Prof. Poule recalls, "the only women writers I studied were Anne Bradstreet and Mary Rowlandson." For Prof. Poule, a transforming moment occurred in 1972, her third year of teaching at Bridgewater. At the end of an American literature class, a student approached her, asking "How come you don't have any women writers on your syllabus?" What seemed at the time an irritating question stimulated Prof. Poule to discover and teach the work of many neglected women writers: the question led to "great summers in libraries" reading the fifty books of Edith Wharton and exploring the writings of Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, Carson McCullers, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison and many others. Prof. Poule collects her sense, in the early years of teaching Women's Studies, that these classes were filling an important gap in her students' academic experience. Women students, she notes, "felt repressed in other classes," due to the relative scarcity of female teachers and the lack of female representation in the subject matter. During the early years, one young woman reported that the only one of her courses in which women were included in a major way was Abnormal Psychology!

Prof. Pezzulich used a sabbatical leave to "re-educate myself in the field of women's literature" and to gather material for the course she is currently teaching, *Women Writers to 1900*. She observes that the field of Women's Studies has changed a good deal since the "consciousness-raising" days of the 1970's. For one thing, in the early years Women's Studies focused heavily on white middle class women with very little awareness of the exclusion of minority women. In addition, Prof. Pezzulich notes, the issues have become more complex over time. "The dream of work and family has proved to be a nightmare for many women with uninteresting jobs. Even for women who love their work, there is conflict and guilt over how to juggle roles and, recently, serious concern about what is happening to children in this country."

"Introduction to Women's Studies," which is currently taught by Prof. Quaglio, exposes students to a wide variety of feminist ideas and writings. The texts range from the classic work of feminist pioneers like the French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir, whose influential book *The Second Sex* appeared in 1949, to articles and essays published in the 1990's. An excerpt from Susan Faludi's book *Backlash* documents recent attacks on the feminist movement and discusses instances of negative propaganda and misinformation. Legal scholar Patricia Williams writes about the persistence of prejudice against women and minorities. Ruth Hubbard, one of a number of feminist biologists who have continued to question Freud's influential statement that "Biology is destiny," examines the social and political assumptions of biology and genetics in particular. Hubbard criticizes the exaggerated emphasis that modern genetics places on the gene as a determiner of traits and argues that equal attention must be paid to the contexts in which genes operate. Another of Prof. Quaglio's selections, Katha Pollitt's essay "Marooned on Gilligan's Island," tackles the age-old question of whether or not women are essentially different from men. Pollitt lays out the terms of the modern debate between proponents of "difference feminism" and "equality feminism." The idea that women are more nurturing, compassionate, intuitive and relational whereas men are more ambitious, as-



sertive and interested in power has a long history, as Politt points out, and "is perpetually being rediscovered, dressed in fashionable clothes and presented, despite its antiquity, as a radical new idea." Educational psychologist Carol Gilligan endorses this distinction, having concluded from her research that men and women use different criteria for making moral decisions: women employ an "ethic of care," men an "ethic of rights." Pollitt, however, claims that gender differences are not universal features of males and females but rather a matter of culture, a result of the economic and social positions men and woman hold.

Outsiders sometimes accuse Women's Studies of being anti-male, but this is a misconception. "We are not doing male-bashing," says Prof. Faiman-Silva. "We are not blaming individuals. Our focus is on analyzing and de-mystifying a system which works to privilege some people and oppress others. Our goal is to help students understand how our culture constructs femininity and masculinity and to show how deeply embedded those constructions are." Prof. Faiman-Silva cites the phrase 'the personal is political,' one of the early feminist slogans. "We want to show students that their personal lives reflect political and social realities."

Prof. MacInnis, who is currently teaching the Feminist Theory course, agrees. "Males need to be enlightened about how gender roles control most of our behaviors," she says. "I make a point of discussing male society, or patriarchy, at large, to explain injustices." In addition, MacInnis notes, men can be feminists; in fact, she often assigns books and articles by male theorists in her Women's Studies classes.

In addition to classroom activities, the Program maintains connections with other Women's Studies programs in southeastern Massachusetts. Women's Studies faculty and coordinators of Women's Centers from neighboring campuses including U Mass Boston, U Mass Dartmouth and Wheaton College were invited to a fall, 1996 workshop, which formulated plans to develop a regional Women's Studies network. Another fall, 1996 project was sponsorship of a workshop which featured representatives of the

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the oldest women's organization continuously in existence. Each spring, the Women's Studies Program hosts a distinguished lecture series. Speakers have included sociologist Dessima Williams of Brandeis University, biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling of Brown University, and political scientist Martha Ackelsberg of Smith College. In addition, the Program has recently sponsored presentations by Bridgewater poet Faye George and African-American male feminist Bill Brown.

Looking to the future, the Women's Studies faculty are in the process of reviewing the courses currently included in the minor. Some would like to see a major in Women's Studies. Others propose to broaden the Program to include Gender Studies. On a more practical level, the Program has no permanent office space. Professor Faiman-Silva would like to see an office that would provide a home base for Women's Studies students and support personnel. She is also lobbying for a new, full-time faculty position.

Several graduates of the Women's Studies Program have gone on to advanced academic work in the field. Maureen Lagasse, who received her Bridgewater degree in the

spring of 1996, is a graduate student in Women's Studies and English at the University of Virginia; she also works as a Writing Center tutor. Darlene Chase, a 1992 graduate, has completed Master's degrees in both English and Women's Studies at Eastern Michigan University.

Other Women's Studies graduates have chosen careers outside academia which enable them to act on their feminist beliefs. After graduating from Bridgewater in 1992, Anne Marie Fitzgerald was hired by The Feminist Majority, a grass-roots organization which supports feminist projects. She was subsequently employed as a fund-raiser for other women's organizations, including Planned Parenthood and the National Breast Cancer Coalition. Ms. Fitzgerald is currently Director of Development for Dance Umbrella, a non-profit organization which brings modern and culturally diverse dance groups, which include many progressive women artists, to Boston from all over the world. Evaluating her college experience, Ms. Fitzgerald recently observed that her Women's Studies courses were the most important part of her education at Bridgewater. "Women's Studies," she explained, "gave me a whole new lens for seeing the world and the role I play in it." ❧



*Members of the Women's Studies Advisory Committee at a recent meeting.*