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‘First in the Nation Since 1970’: Thirty Years of Women’s Studies at San Diego State University: Lessons and Strategies’

Susan E. Cayleffⁱ

Present Insights – Past Lessons

Each year, department chairs at SDSU are asked to write and articulate detailed strategic plans for the next two years. While an onerous and time-consuming task, I have found this a valuable tool for prompting faculty discussion about our direction and priorities. As we set our course we are constantly reminded that we are creating a new field of knowledge that challenges the traditional curriculum. [See: Marilyn Boxer, *When Women Ask the Questions: Creating Women’s Studies in America* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998 for a detailed and compelling discussion of how Women’s Studies has created both a “new field of knowledge” and “challenged the traditional curriculum”]. I am also aware that our goals, strategies and priorities are continuously informed by the collective lessons we have learned. We continue to pass on these insights from the department’s thirty-one year history verbally to one another.

Prime among these “guiding principles” is the need to link theory with practice. This means we must consciously combine the creation of our new knowledge with accessible, multicultural and non-institutional settings in addition to and beyond the classroom. Our university’s student body is multi-cultural, self-supporting and employed while in school. Thus, our course content must at all times center social class, race, ethnic and gender analysis. There is also a deep appreciation for community-based service learning wherein students work in agencies/schools/businesses within the community [Center for Community-Based Service learning, “Linking Class work and Community Service,” pamphlet, 2001]. Grants are available to achieve this. Complementarily, this means bringing into the classroom community activists involved in various programs and projects. This cross-fertilization enriches both the community and the academy.

These mandated yearly strategic plans necessitate that I prioritize collective goals and my individual efforts. This in turn reinforces my leadership style as de-centralized coordination. A chair cannot single-handedly spearhead all these multi-faceted efforts. By asking colleagues to assume responsibility for specific projects (e.g. undergraduate major recruitment assessment strategies, a feminist research colloquia series and so on) an environment of teamwork is fostered. This allows individual creativity and leadership to flourish, and avoids burnout for the chair. “Comprehensive strategic planning,” then, has profound implications for addressing collegial well-being and esprit-de-corps as well as setting and attaining programmatic goals.

With these complex and myriad lessons learned, we eagerly anticipate approach our next decade of work with strategies born of experience - and a strong future vision.

A History of Women’s Studies at San Diego State University

In 1998-99 I was approached as Chair of Women's Studies at San Diego State University by the folks at Ms. Magazine who were compiling a time capsule of important events in women's lives in the twentieth century. Their question seemed simple enough: who taught the first course in the widely-acknowledged first Women's Studies Department in the United States [Christine Lunardini, "*What Every American Should Know About Women's History: 200 Events that Shaped Our Destiny*," Holbrook, Mass.: Bob Adams Inc, 1994, p. 321]. The research that followed yielded a complex answer. I phoned a few of the original faculty, consulted our own archival records at the University library, searched the collective memories of administrators and consulted course schedule guides from the 1969-70 academic year. I discovered that no one individual was the first. Rather, a cluster of courses was offered Spring 1970 by 5 or 6 female faculty from areas as diverse as family studies, sociology, human sexuality and history.

This campus-wide eruption was triggered by a grass-roots insistence by students, faculty and staff that women be included in the curriculum. Thus, Women's Studies at SDSU emerged as a direct result of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s/70s [bell hooks, "Educating Women: Feminist Agenda," Feminism from Margin to Center, Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984, pp. 107-115]. In the early years, "...the committee [for the Women's Studies Program] recruited support for the program by organizing demonstrations, handing out fliers and more, even as it wrote curricula and cajoled administration." [Linda C. Puig, "Making a Connection: Women's Studies at 25 Reaching a Milestone," *SDSU Magazine* vol.2 no.4 Fall 1995, pp.19-21]. Later in the 1970-71 academic year a second program began at Cornell University. In 1971, some 600 courses and 20 programs were identified by Female Studies II (a collection of syllabi and curricula); by 1973, the same publication noted there were 80 programs and more than 2000 courses. ["History of Women's Studies," *SDSU Department of Women's Studies Self-Study*, 1989-1999, p. 9].

The collective nature of the department's beginning at SDSU was prophetic: it was a campus-wide effort that quickly garnered administrative support and was from its inception a student-driven uprising. In 1972 *The Daily Aztec*, the campus daily, carried the front-page story that "Women's Studies Begins Collective Teaching Plan." The new approach sought to minimize hierarchical distinctions within the classroom. The teaching collective... "consisted of two or more Women's Studies Program faculty members who organize and guide a class. [sic,] The teaching collective may be composed of a faculty member or members and one or more collective assistants." Assistants were selected by a "personnel committee on the basis of their commitment to the 'Women's Movement and completion of the Self Actualization, Socialization Process of Women, and Contemporary Issues classes.'" Thus classroom leaders were faculty, undergraduate students, and/or community activists. This approach was premised on the belief that "A collective society is better than a competitive society." ["Women's Studies Begins Collective Teaching Plan," *Daily Aztec* vol.52 no. 4 September 22, 1972, p. 1]. And yet, alongside this radical assertion of alternative teaching methods, another article "The Center for Women's Studies and Services is Going Off Campus," told of this group's eighteen-month unsuccessful battle to be recognized as a campus entity. Alas, they were being forced off campus by the administrators and the Foundation—forced to provide

their services in the larger community where, one collective member wrote, “we belong.” Thus just as the university environment birthed Women’s Studies at SDSU, it also ultimately proved inhospitable to activist community organizers remaining on campus. This second group, originally part of the Women’s Studies program, established itself off-campus and flourished for many years as The Center for Women’s Studies and Services (CWSS).

The first four years were very rocky due to infighting and factionalism, clashes with administration and high faculty turnover. In this combustible atmosphere, the entire Women’s Studies faculty resigned in 1974. The program was given one more chance when the Dean of College of Arts and Letters asked Marilyn Boxer, who had just been hired to teach women’s history, to Chair the revived program. Thus the Women’s Studies Department began the academic year 1974-75 with a completely new faculty of two full-time and four part-time instructors, twelve classes, and 378 students. [“History of Women’s Studies,” SDSU Department of Women’s Studies Self-Study, 1989-99 pp. 9-11]. Between 1974-80 the program became increasingly academically rigorous. [Puig, “Making a Connection,” p, 19]. These early experiences at SDSU parallel the national tenor for Women’s Studies at this time: by 1974, 500 colleges were offering 2,000 Women’s Studies courses; by 1982 there were 30,000 such courses; the vast majority reflected ever-increasing academic rigor. [Nancy Woloch, Women and the American Experience, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984 pp. 521-530].

What happened at SDSU in the years that followed is a fascinating case study in adjustment, redirection and pro-active planning. The faculty, which has had a steady core of seven since 1987, responded to and anticipated a rapidly changing environment for public education in California and Women’s Studies at the national level.

The Current Status of Women’s Studies at SDSU

From this rich if contentious past, Women’s Studies has grown steadily to our present size and strength: we have ten tenure-track/tenured faculty lines allotted in Women’s Studies only (*not* jointly appointed positions); one tenure-track faculty with a 70-30% appointment (both positions’ percentages favor Women’s Studies) [in Asian Studies,] one tenured joint appointment with French (40 –60% French/Women’s Studies), and an average of 6-8 lecturers in any given semester. Three of the tenure-track faculty are women of color, as are three of the lecturers. Thus Women’s Studies at SDSU is significantly larger and more firmly entrenched within the institution than most other Women’s Studies programs/departments surveyed nationally. According to the findings presented in the “1998-99 National Women’s Studies Association Program Administration Survey Report,” which found that “the vast majority (140 of 187) of institutions responding are structured as programs, twenty-two are organized as departments, while 21 describe themselves as “other.” Further, most schools (149 of 187) have no FTE line in Women’s Studies. [Beth Stafford, “1998-99 NWSA Program Administration Survey Report” May 2000, pp. 1 & 3]. Our departmental strength is reflected in a budget which maintains these faculty positions, a full-time office administrative coordinator, two part-time work -study students (paid via separate state-

allotted funds) and, since 1995, a minimum of four-to-eight graduate-student assistantships allotted to help support our masters level students (these funds are given by the Graduate Division).

Student Enrollments and active steps towards recruitment

All California State University system students must take courses to fulfill specified graduation requirements in multicultural, American Institutions and social science categories. Successful efforts were made to “imbed” Women’s Studies courses within the General Education Core Curriculum. Thus, “Women in Cross-Cultural Perspectives,” fulfills a generic “cross-cultural” requirement, “Women in American History” fulfills a generic American Institutions requirement, “Socialization of Women” fulfills a standard social science requirement and so on. Because our curriculum is thus imbedded, we are less vulnerable to fluctuations in student enrollments. In recent years we have also gone through the appropriate committees to insure that our two 100 entry-level courses, “Women and the Social Sciences” and “Women in the Humanities” are included in the University Foundations cluster which is open to all first year students. This further assures us of student enrollment and potential majors as they choose their foci in the years to come.

We have nonetheless experienced a gradual decline in the number of Women’s Studies majors since the Department’s inception. To redress this, in 1999-2000 we began an aggressive Undergraduate Recruitment Initiative that entails: open-house well-advertised sessions on “Why Major in Women’s Studies?” promotional literature that is distributed in all Women’s Studies classes at each semester’s end along with on-site major and minor declaration forms, panels of former Women’s Studies students who speak about their work lives after earning a Women’s Studies degree, and active recruitment in area high schools and community colleges. We also regularly provide printed materials to Freshman Orientation Days and Transfer Days when new students peruse tables with information about possible majors. And, as time and energies allow, faculty members attend these events.

While several Women’s Studies classes are accepted for credit as fulfillment for the requirements in other majors (eg: “Psychology of Women” is accepted towards the Psychology major and so on), a priority for the upcoming two to three years is to lobby department chairs whose programs do not currently accept Women’s Studies core curriculum for their majors to do so. To the frustration of many, our campus does not allow “cross-listing” of courses. Recently, however, we were able to engineer the first such cross-listed course, “Women in Asian Societies” because of a jointly appointed faculty person in WS and Asian Studies. However, this accomplishment has yet to be generalized to make better use of this method.

The Creation of the Masters’ Degree Program: 1995

While we are constantly seeking ways to increase the number of Women’s Studies majors and minors, in the early 1990s, we turned our attention to the proposal and

implementation of a Masters-degree program which began in fall of 1995. We were able to do so because of curricula strength, and a succession of three College of Arts and Letters Deans (and Associate Deans) who were former Chairs of Women's Studies and who continued to advocate for allotting excellent resources to Women's Studies. Also, our 1989 External Review Team's report that cited our strength in faculty appointment lines, courses, and scholarly productivity as reasons for why we should offer an M.A. degree.

Since 1995 we have admitted on average 6-10 students per year and through rigorous negotiations with the Graduate Division, we can now offer financial assistance to 5-8 of them on any given year. While these yearly \$4,000 stipends help us recruit excellent students, and provide tenure-track faculty with able classroom assistants, we are painfully aware of the need for these students to be granted larger stipends that more closely approximate the cost of living in our region. Beginning Fall 2001 thanks to the generous endowment gift of a donor who was doggedly pursued over a number of years prior to this gift's creation, we will allot our first-ever graduate scholarship, in the amount of \$5,000.

Also, we offer the opportunity for two or three of each group of second year students to teach their *own* introductory Women's Studies class, "Women and the Social Sciences." They are mentored by our graduate advisor. This has proven invaluable to them in determining their future career goals, securing admission into Ph.D. programs, as well as honing their own interdisciplinary skills and research. It also clearly echoes the student-faculty collaborative work of the early years of Women's Studies at SDSU.

Creation of the Women's Studies Certificate Program: 2000

After many inquiries from community women interested in a post-baccalaureate degree/certificate in Women's Studies, we explored, designed and implemented a twelve-unit Certificate program that garnered its first enrollees in Fall 2000. Students can stipulate one of three emphases: Overview, Health, or Multicultural [San Diego State University College of Extended Studies, "Certificate in Women's Studies," Fall 2000, vol. 13, issue 1, no. 3, p. 104]. Each emphasis articulates a four-course plan of study (currently managed by the Department Chair through the College of Extended Studies) from extant graduate level Women's Studies courses offered at the 500-700 (graduate) level. This Program was initiated to meet a need identified by community women, provide a more diverse in-class student composition within our graduate seminars, bolster enrollments in our graduate level courses and secure a small but very helpful additional income from the fees we garner for teaching Extended Studies students. At present we have six students enrolled in the Certificate Program and they are employed as attorneys at the District Attorney's office, in the military sector, as a Wesleyan minister and other interested post-baccalaureate scholars. As we had hoped, their presence in graduate classes has brought new insights through their work-related expertise and greater personal diversity (three of the six Certificate students are women of color).

Charting the Future: Goals for the Twenty-First Century

In the Spring of 1999 the department underwent its ten-year external review by on -and-off-campus expert evaluators. In preparation for their visit, we carefully, even painstaking, chronicled the last ten years of enrollments, faculty hires, curricula changes, program foci, community-based programs and budding international liaisons. From that exhaustive self-reflective study (in excess of 200 pages) emerged a consensus on four directions that we prioritized for the twenty-first century. These included *diversity* of curricula materials and an ongoing commitment to diversity in faculty hires; *internationalization* of the curriculum and a growing effort to make international travel and study available to our undergraduate and graduate students and the Women's Studies faculty to facilitate collaborations with colleagues worldwide. This effort is well under way. At present, we have student exchange programs with two Mexican universities, Universidad Autonoma de Baja California and Collegia el Norte de la Frontiera. Other liaisons are with the Orebro University in Sweden, Sichuan Normal University in Chengdu, Beijing Universities in China and a budding liaison with Women's Studies at the University of Costa Rica.

Integrating Activism and Academics

Our third goal is to continue to integrate activism and academics. This is aided by a relatively new campus-wide emphasis on Community Service Learning, which uses outreach by SDSU faculty and students to build links within neighboring communities through specific mutually beneficial projects.

Similarly, we offer a 3-unit internship course which places a Women's Studies major with an approved agency, group or program in the community. These include Planned Parenthood, the District Attorney's anti-violence unit, feminist health-care agencies, women's rights organizations, battered women's shelters, legal advocacy centers, archival repositories, the city-based gay and lesbian center, and so on. These groups approach Women's Studies requesting interns, or we become aware of them and contact them if a particular student is interested in interning there. The intern "contracts" with the project supervisor for 50 hours of on-site work as well as an intellectual journal and periodic reports which are submitted to the Women's Studies undergraduate advisor. We recently changed the level of the internship so that it is now an option for graduate as well as undergraduate students. Also new, Spring 2002, will be an in-class component. Here, all interns will meet regularly with a faculty advisor to form the theoretical links between activism and academics and share their experiences with one another. Beyond this internship program, individual Women's Studies faculty offer outside-of-class community-based service options as part of their required course work. One example of this is students in my upper-division American Women's History course who mentor local high school students through discussions of novels read by all. Over the course of this school year the texts include: Charlotte Temple (1790); Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1850), Little Women (1869), Bread Givers (1925); Bell Jar (1963), and Farewell to Manzanar (1975). Another scholarly-based activist component involves students researching archival materials at the local Women's History Reclamation Project

and creating traveling exhibits from those materials (relevant to women's history) that are brought into elementary and middle school classrooms. This year's content focuses upon nineteenth-century black and white women working together for abolition. My students meet after class to brainstorm and design discussion questions and "free write" prompts that are then used with high schoolers. We also meet after each trip to the high school to discuss which approaches worked and which were less successful.

These opportunities, it must be noted, are extremely labor intensive and difficult to secure. In recent years, we have been able to patch together grant monies from on-campus and community-based organizations (often weaving together several donations to equal a feasible amount for a budget) to support two graduate-student assistantships to oversee and organize the archival and high school based projects. Thus, several goals are met at once: activism is linked with academia, graduate assistantships are generated and diverse materials are introduced into high school as well as college classrooms.

Other opportunities for activism emerge through the campus-based Women's Resource Center. This on-campus student-run group is loosely under the auspices of a designated faculty person who serves as the signatory liaison. The Women's Resource Center provides workshops, phone referrals, weekly meetings, on-campus tabling of current issues, Women's History month activities, a yearly teen pregnancy conference, an annual anti-violence concert and benefit and hosts speakers on their modest budget. We also have a modestly funded Women's Studies Student Association whose activities—even pulse—are determined by each group of majors.

Finally, we utilize guest speakers to expand our community outreach. We consciously choose to invite many speakers to present at the six-times per year Feminist Research Colloquia (funded by state-allocated lottery monies) whose work and experience focuses on activism. After years of this format, next year we are opting for a more in-house research-based format. The theme "Home-Sweet-Home?" will explore how diverse disciplines conceptualize and teach about the home. During our recent faculty retreat we discussed strategies for moving from an undergraduate curriculum based on the traditional disciplines to one organized around women's experiences. We decided that a crucial first step is sharing and discussing the way that we currently teach key concepts. Toward this end we decided to replace the Feminist Colloquium (for one year only, with an option to renew) with a series on department presentations/workshops where faculty will discuss different approaches to teaching about the same concept "home." In Fall 2001, every other Wednesday afternoon, interested Women's Studies faculty will briefly present on the way they teach about "home" in one of their classes. For example, one instructor might talk about the home as a site of violence; another might discuss changing notions of domesticity, while a third might discuss women's home-based income-earning activities. The presentations will then be followed by discussions. Lecturers, graduate students and faculty associates will be invited. [SDSU Women's Studies Interdepartmental memo created by Doreen Mattingly and Bonnie Zimmerman, February 2001].

A new annual event, made possible through the generous gift of an individual donor, has allowed us to offer the Helen Hawkins Lecture and Activist Awards. Begun in 1999, this

November-held event allows us to bring in an outstanding keynote speaker with ties to feminist activism. At it, we honor three people from the larger San Diego community for their efforts on behalf of bettering women's lives. In its first two years we have honored: the director of a battered women's shelter, the publisher of a Latina/o newspaper, a moving-company owner who ferrets abused women and children to safety free of charge, the founder of a mentoring group for young Latinas, a lesbian old-age activist, and the high school teacher who co-founded the Young Women's Studies Club and with whom our graduate-student and Women's Studies classes currently facilitate events and curricula exchanges. This event, which routinely draws around one hundred attendees, reconfirms our commitment in a very public and tangible way to continuously link activism with Women's Studies. This is not to say that we don't also bring to campus those whose work focuses on "high theory." We do, but this particular event unabashedly focuses upon feminist activism.

Curriculum Development and Future Hires

We have found that it is no longer effective to think of certain faculty position as "the history line" or the "psychology position" or the "literature person." Rather, as Women's Studies has developed as its own discipline, we have come to cluster areas of expertise around certain axes. These include the body, science and technology, law and policy, postcolonial theory and nationalism. This allows us, when conducting faculty recruitment searches at both the senior and junior levels to think of new hires as being able to teach a variety of curriculum around these various axes. In short, we are moving away from disciplinary-based thinking. Thus, the goal of the "Home-Sweet-Home?" discussion series is to *transcend* disciplinary thinking and move toward a distinct methodology that emerges out of the intradiscipline – Women's Studies. In this spirit, -as we face a number of senior level retirements in the next 2-4 years, we are committed to hiring Women's Studies Ph.D.'s whose training will reflect this interdisciplinarity.

Conclusion

Thus the course of Women's Studies at SDSU is predicated upon the circular linkage of historical insights gained and conceptualized future visions and goals.

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