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## **Feminist Consciousness and the Potential for Change in Campus Based Student Staffed Women's Centers**

By Teri Ann Bengiveno, Ph.D.

Despite a thirty-year history of campus-based women's centers, relatively little research has been generated. Much of the research that does exist deals primarily with northeastern centers, and it exclusively focuses on the campus-based women's centers which are professionally staffed (National Women's Training Project 1980; Stineman 1984). Thus there is little if any research about student run/student funded centers.

Many reasons have been given to account for the dearth of research conducted on student-run women's centers. The main problem stems from the lack of continuity caused by a high turnover of women staffing the centers. Bonnie Clevenger, who created a profile of campus women's centers, notes that because "student-run centers are organized, staffed, and funded by students, they are highly transient and generally uneven in quality, and their level of activity varies widely from year to year." (Clevenger 1988, 3) Furthermore, there are not many written documents to rely upon when conducting research on student-run centers.

Survival on a daily basis, including being able to keep the doors open and having someone to answer the phone, has been the highest priority.

This article will add to the research on campus-based women's centers by focusing on a West Coast student-run center that was created in 1971 and still exists today. It will discuss the origins and current status of the Women's Resource Center at San Jose State University (SJSU) which is funded by the Associated Students (A.S.). SJSU is the oldest public university (1857) in California, and it is one of twenty-three campuses in the state university system, which enrolls over 320,000 students. SJSU has an average annual enrollment of 27,000 students from many racial and ethnic backgrounds reflective of the community at large.

The Women's Resource Center is one of the oldest centers in the system and in the country. It has remained student staffed/funded since its creation. SJSU represents one of two systems of public higher education in California. There are nine campuses in the University of California (UC) system. Of the nine universities, eight have professionally staffed women's centers, and one has a student-run center. Of the twenty-three campuses in the California State University (CSU) system, seven campuses have professionally staffed centers, and eight campuses have student staffed centers. Three campuses combine a women's center and re-entry program, and five campuses have no women's center.

Student-run centers try to offer the same kinds of services and activities as professionally staffed centers despite a general lack of support (both in terms of dollars and administrative commitment). The purpose of this study is to examine the problematic relationship of student-run centers that want to act as political change agents and at the same time provide a variety of services to the campus community. To gain information about student-run centers, twenty-two women were interviewed including former SJSU Women's Center Coordinators and faculty advisors as well as women who coordinate various centers across the county. In order to examine the relationship between women's

centers and activism there will be a brief overview of their history, an examination of the problems of campus-based women's centers and recommendations.

### **Women's Centers' Herstory**

The unique identity created by a women's center is a collective one resulting from a change in awareness. Such a change implies opposition to traditional views growing out of naming and identifying sources of oppression and developing a feminist consciousness. Historian Gerda Lerner, in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, suggests that the development of feminist consciousness includes an awareness of a wrong, growth of a sense of sisterhood, autonomous definition by women of both their goals and strategies for changing their condition, and formulation of an alternative vision for the future (Lerner 1986, 241). Lerner's outline focuses on a vision of power that is transformed into social change. In terms of this definition, campus-based women's centers foster feminist consciousness on their respective campuses. Their development involves an awareness of the inequality in society, and an autonomous definition of goals and strategies for change. Through this process, a sense of sisterhood develops.

Women's centers were a product of both the liberal and radical arms of the feminist liberation movement in the 1970s. Liberal feminism, or egalitarian feminism as it is sometimes referred to, was reformist in its nature, and it worked within the systems of capitalism and patriarchy to bring about change. Liberal feminists sought to achieve equal political, economic, social, and educational opportunities for women.

The centers were established within the institutions of higher education, and thus they tried to reform from within. Due to the hostility women encountered on campuses, the need for women's centers grew, and the service aspect of the first centers was reminiscent of domestic feminism.

In the 1970s the slogan "the personal is political" proved to be a rallying point that drew more women into the second wave of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). The issues facing women (ie child care, reproductive choice, sexual harassment, etc) had political ramifications.

This relationship between advocacy and activism continues to be a problem for women's centers today. The dilemma stems back to the debate regarding the appropriate spheres of women's influence. When the centers are viewed as service agencies, they represent the traditional sphere. When they are seen as change agents, they threaten the traditional structure by demanding equal opportunity. The first campus centers were service agencies.

In the 1960s with the creation of the Continuing Education for Women (CEW) centers and the advent of the second wave of the WLM, the stage was set for the modern day women's center. The (CEW) centers were the precursors to the campus-based women's centers which emerged in the 1970s. One of the many goals of the CEW centers was to help non-traditional women students (meaning over the age of twenty-five) adjust to campus life. They concentrated primarily on returning women and provided information, education and career counseling for students (Bertelsen 1974; Rettke 1979; Rossi and Calderwood 1973; Thom 1975; Wetzel 1988).

Many of the CEW centers later expanded their services to additional groups of women. Judy Bertelsen, in her 1974 women's center survey, discusses the problems of trying to define the boundaries between CEW centers and the newly founded women's

centers. Some of the CEW centers that expanded the services did so without a name change. For example, Bertelsen discusses the role of the Center for Continuing

Education for Women at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, founded in 1964. While it was created to bring returning women into the mainstream of university life, the Center later extended its counseling services and sponsored panel discussions, lectures and conferences for all women in the campus community (Bertelsen 1974, 71). Not all of the centers expanded their services, and thus many campuses continued separately to offer re-entry services for non-traditional students.

The CEW centers were one vehicle for the development of the women's centers; however many of the women's centers that emerged in the 1970s developed around the needs and expressed desires of younger women on campus. The different origin of the 1970s centers is directly related to the rise of the second wave of the WLM and an increased feminist consciousness. Many of the women on college campuses (including students, faculty, staff, and administrators) met informally to discuss the importance of having a place on campus to disseminate information and organize activities for women.

The previous scenario explains how the women's center at SJSU was created. In the early 1970s there were half a dozen consciousness-raising (CR) groups which met in women's San Jose homes. There were also CR meetings on campus, and it was at those meetings that a group of women (primarily students) began talking about a women's center and how important it would be to have one on campus. According to Janice Osborn-Zajac, the first paid student coordinator of the center, "the women interested in liberation, social change and sisterhood, some of the things the Center now stands for, met in a small room upstairs in the Student Union." They felt it would be a good idea to "center" their efforts.

The first thing the women did was adopt a strategy which included a proposal addressed to the A.S. President for start-up funds, and thus what was to become an unending struggle with the A.S. officers began. Temporary funding for 1971-72 was granted, and the San Jose Women's Center opened its doors in February 1972.

The Women's Center at Barnard College also opened in the early 1970s. Jane Gould, in "Personal Reflections on Building a Women's Center in a Women's College," notes how she was inspired by the possibility of breaking significant "new ground." (Gould 1984, 4) She became the Director of Placement and Career Planning in 1965 and soon came to see the necessity of a diverse women's movement that would address all aspects of women's lives as well as the impact of the patriarchal tradition (Gould 1984, 6). Younger women as well as older women witnessed the reality of gender discrimination on college campuses regardless of their roles as faculty members, students, staff or administrators. In 1970 a group of Barnard women including faculty, administrators, students and alumnae came together to begin to discuss the relationship between the larger social revolution and the experiences of women on campus. This assorted group believed Barnard should do more. Fortunately for the Barnard women, two task force members were alumnae trustees who secured seed money for the center. The Women's Center opened in 1971.

In 1985 at the University of Virginia, a survey was distributed by women faculty members who formed various subcommittees to examine issues on campus. The survey reported:

Lack of a positive attitude towards women among faculty and a low level of awareness of existing, but poorly publicized, policies and procedures on sexual assault, discrimination, and harassment, were contributing to the perpetuation of an inhospitable climate for women throughout the university. Strong and visible action was needed from the presidents and deans. (Thorner 1989, 4)

A commitment was made to establish a women's center and to strengthen the Women's Studies Program. At both Barnard and the University of Virginia, the centers had strong administrative and alumni support, which in part explains their success.

The examples from the University of Michigan, San Jose State University, Barnard College and the University of Virginia represent a diversified yet determined commitment to secure campus-based women's centers on college campuses.

### **Problems of Campus-Based Centers**

Radical feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s understood the connection between patriarchy as a system of power and the involvement of the government to protect that power. Colleges and universities are part of that patriarchy. From the radical wing of the movement, women's centers learned the value of activism. Women in campus centers now have the knowledge and the tools to act as change agents. However women's centers, like the larger women's movement, have always had to deal with the problem of marginalization. They are caught between a domestic sphere which includes a service component and a form of egalitarian feminism which is seeking much larger institutional changes, and as a result they have to balance on the margins.

The challenge of centers is to create an agenda and implement a plan of action that moves forward toward the goals of equity and liberation. In order to further such an agenda, feminists need to be aware of the history of the movement and their own organizations. The women in the centers, like most feminists, have experienced a change in consciousness which will influence the rest of their lives. As a result, over the past thirty years the emphasis of many centers shifted from personal support and direct service to advocacy and institutional change (Chamberlain 1988, 92). It is not enough to assume that once women achieve a heightened feminist consciousness that the institutions will automatically change.

This situation provides a great challenge to feminists. How will women's centers continue to be advocates and bring about institutional change and combat the backlash against them? In California, the most current fervor of backlash includes higher education budget cuts and an anti-affirmative action agenda. Mariam Chamberlain in *Women in Academe* remarks with reference to a few hundred professionally run campus-based centers that "it is noteworthy that despite serious changes in institutional priorities, the political climate for women, and extensive budget cuts, almost all have survived." (Chamberlain 1988, 92) It is even more remarkable that student-run centers have survived the backlash.

The history of women in higher education suggests that continuous progress cannot be assumed without setbacks (Chamberlain 1988, 360). Setbacks, in the form of backlash, are nothing new to many women in higher education, especially when they go beyond the domestic sphere. In the early 1970s women on college campuses were aware of both the internal and external barriers preventing gender equity. Some of them put

their energy into building women's centers to raise the consciousness of women and address the many barriers to women in higher education (Freeman 1983; Gould 1984). As a result of the creation of women's centers, problems with university administrations ensued from the delicate relationship between activism and advocacy on the center's part and the way the administration views its functions. Many campus centers, in particular those that receive student body funds, are seen as service agencies rather than political agencies. As service agencies, centers have avoided political stances, but members are free to take whatever position they deem necessary.

Once again the SJSU's Center provides an excellent arena to examine this problem. The San Jose women wanted to provide services for the campus community and at the same time further the goals of the women's movement. These goals would be difficult to achieve because of the problematic relationship between the Center and the A.S. It began when the women had to compromise their goals in order to secure a center on campus because any organization receiving A.S. funds cannot be political in its mission. Since the Center's inception, the women involved had to carefully negotiate between the acceptable domestic sphere and the more threatening goal of equality. The women oftentimes had to be circumspect about their activist intentions.

A center that is activist in its mission and orientation can also achieve the goal of empowerment, but the process is complicated when the center is viewed as a service agency. Programs and services (including workshops; peer counseling; library etc.) are essential components of a center, but they should not define it entirely. The coordinators have struggled with the mission of the SJSU Center and have tried to be activist despite A.S. regulations which stipulate that the Center remain a service agency for all women on campus.

Most student-run women's centers focus on the service aspect because that is their stated mission. When the San Jose Center has been too activist in its pursuit of equality, its existence has been jeopardized. The administration has threatened to cut funding. The Center even changed its name in the 1980s, to the Women's Resource Center, to indicate to the administration that it is primarily a service agency. Yet, coordinators try to maintain a balance between their individual activism and service. For example, members of the Center can attend a pro-choice demonstration, but the Center itself cannot sponsor such an event.

Furthermore, the coordinators have a distinctive view regarding their relationship and the relationship of the Center to the larger women's movement. Several of them feel that there is an initial relationship between the Women's Center and the WLM which prompts women to come to the Center. For Melinda Walton, the SJSU Women's Center is the place where people can get involved and make the movement real on campus. To Linda Gonzales it "is a symbol of the Women's Movement in that it is one of the places where the WLM can have a voice and have a focus."

Cherri Gomez compares the Center to the National Organization for Women (NOW):

NOW has traditionally been more elitist women, more white, more middle class, and the Women's Resource Center is trying to reach out to people in poverty, women of color. In a way NOW is trying to do that, but they have their history

behind them. The Center on this campus is more in tune with what needs to be done to get women united than NOW is.

It appears to many of the students involved with the Center that NOW represents the institutionalization of the struggle for women's rights. NOW by definition is a national organization, and to the students recently introduced to feminism and the women's movement, the organization may seem too far removed from their daily experiences. The women in the Center view themselves as being more involved in grassroots organizing than NOW. Because NOW has been challenged on such issues as racism, classism, and homophobia, women of color, poor women, and lesbians have had to question their allegiance to an organization they did not feel adequately represented their needs. Several student coordinators believe the larger WLM has much to learn about grassroots organizing and the challenges of diversity from women's centers on college campuses. These coordinators hear the everyday experiences of women who mostly are students but are very diverse in terms of age, ability, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and therefore they believe they deal with a larger range of women's issues. Several Women's Center coordinators believe women's centers and the WLM are completely connected. Karen Hester, a coordinator at SJSU from 1981-1984 feels the Women's Center and the movement are intertwined. Hester said, "we were consciously involved in the Women's Movement and the community: NOW and the Billy de Frank Gay and Lesbian Community Center. We consciously reached out to the community and saw ourselves as part of that wider movement." The centers and the larger WLM have dealt with some of the same problems and issues including sexual harassment, reproductive choice, pay inequity, childcare and violence against women. Mimi Bombersbock, the graduate student center director at California State University at San Bernadino says:

We are the WLM on our campus. Anyone who works in the Center is very much a feminist. Without our Center, there would be no place on campus for people to go if they shared those views that women are oppressed and that women have problems. Without a center there is no validation of women's issues on campus.

The centers are a microcosm of the larger WLM at universities, she feels, and they identify issues for women on their campuses. According to Mary Jeffries, a Women's Studies graduate and organizer of a feminist-run business: "Because the women's movement depends upon women coming together, women's centers have been essential to the growth and stability of the movement." (Jeffries 1986, 29) Once the issues are identified by the centers, they have provided a number of services and programs in an attempt to level the playing field between men and women at campuses across the country. However, an increased feminist consciousness can cause problems in a university when the centers try to move beyond their accepted role as service agency.

### **Recommendations**

Campus programs that encourage gender equity, including women's centers, deserve institutional support. Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action Programs must be maintained. Women faculty, staff, students and even administrators must fight to strengthen not end such programs, and it is crucial that feminist voices be heard in the

restructuring dialogue. Women's centers can play a significant role in promoting equity as long as they are viewed as central vehicles in the equity process and are able to avoid marginalization. They are caught between the public and private spheres of influence. On the one hand, they continue to provide necessary services to campus women, and yet they also try to encourage larger societal changes through their activism. The centers, not the university administrations, seem content to embrace both spheres. Throughout history, women have had to rely upon traditional roles to secure advancements whether it was access to higher education or the right to vote.

Centers today negotiate their way through both spheres, but their potential is not being fully realized. Women's centers already exist on most campuses, and therefore new committees and commissions do not need to be organized unless a campus does not have a center. The centers should be strengthened and re-vitalized--not re-invented. The commitment must entail reallocation of resources so that more resources including professional staff are granted to centers to help connect them with the rest of the university. Nett Hart states that money and power are closely linked together, and therefore "Power cannot become power of the people without sharing resources." (Edwalds and Stocker 1995, 87)

At the end of the report "Increasing the Effectiveness of Women's Programs on College Campuses," the National Women's Center Training Project identified four areas of concern for women's centers/programs: shrinking institutional resources, need for responsiveness to various client populations, dealing with quality of life issues in a data-based context, affecting policy and decision-making on campuses (National Women's Centers Training Project 1980, 44). Recommendations followed these stated concerns, and they remain as relevant today as they were in 1980. Central to all of the concerns is the maintenance as well as the ability to increase the visibility of student-run centers. This task is made difficult due to lack of staff continuity in student-run centers.

However, there are certain areas where visibility could easily be increased. For example, centers can participate in student orientations. In this way, the center becomes visible through printed material and the participation of coordinators, volunteers, or interns in the orientation workshops. One additional way to increase visibility would be to mail the first newsletter of the academic year to all new students. This method has been quite successful at Miami University where many new students request to be on the Center's mailing list upon receipt of the first one.

For the most part, the student-run centers are not connected with other campus programs/organizations fighting for gender equity, and therefore they must take part in coalition building and align themselves with these other organizations on their campuses in order to affect policy changes. For example, there are educational equity committees in every college at SJSU. The Center could benefit from aligning itself with several of these committees, but because of the student status of the Center and the minimal participation of students on educational equity committees, such an alliance will be difficult to establish and maintain.

All of the women interviewed voiced the need for more money to achieve their goals, but a lack of resources in student-staffed centers creates a much more acute problem because they function on a fraction of the budget that professionally staffed centers do. More resources would include space as well as funding. Paid professional staff coordinators for student-run centers are necessary and would signal the universities'

commitment to promoting gender equity. Furthermore, professional staff would legitimize the Center in the eyes of the University. Unfortunately student organizations are not often taken seriously or viewed as valuable assets to the campus community. Paid staff and faculty are much more connected to the university than students. Overwhelmingly, the interviewees advocate full-time staff coordinator positions, which ultimately would also give the Center(s) some consistency and increased visibility. Only one woman advocates a full-time paid student coordinator.

The benefits of a professionally staffed Center far outweigh the advantages of a student-run Center, and student coordinators do not need to come at the expense of professional staff. Student interns, co-coordinators, and volunteers complement professional staff at the majority of centers. Professionally staffed centers also have greater potential to be connected with the larger community. The seven professionally staffed CSU centers (Fullerton, Fresno, Los Angeles, Pomona, Sacramento, and Sonoma) provide far more services and programs than the CSU student-staffed centers. Professionally staffed centers across the country have proved their value over the past thirty years, and they benefit the entire campus. Centers, like SJSU's, must examine other professionally staffed programs and centers on campus in order to ascertain how they achieved their status. The Center can compliment existing campus services. By late 1995 SJSU Counseling Services was reduced to five full-time counselors to serve the entire campus. A professionally staffed Center could more efficiently assist Counseling Services and the rest of the campus. Finally perhaps a professionally staffed Center, which would have greater campus and community connections, could move the Center to become more politically active. The SJSU Center, currently located in a broom closet in the Administration Building, is more isolated in 1999 than it was in 1972. The Center is also providing fewer services than when it was founded. However, these facts do not indicate that the need for women's centers no longer exists. The facts are indicative of the challenge centers face in keeping feminism alive on their campuses. Thirty years ago the second wave of the WLM was just getting underway. Today, the movement has survived several periods of backlash and continues to meet the challenge of addressing a large platform of women's issues as well as passing on the feminist legacy to future generations. Women's centers are an integral part of this process on college campuses. However, because of the feminist consciousness fostered by the centers, universities feel threatened. Centers across the country will have to continue to fight for the right to act as political change agents.

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