

Spring 2005

## Women's Studies Assessment Plan, March 2005

Women's Studies

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## Women's Studies Program Assessment Plan, March 2005

### 1. What is the mission of your department or program in terms of student learning?

The Women's Studies Program takes its mission to be three-fold: we intend to foster a critical awareness of and intellectual sensitivity to content, method, and real-life implications of the field:

i) to engage students in the intellectual content of the discipline: women's issues, the role of gender, and the relationship between gender and other politicized aspects of "identity," including race, class, age, religion, sexuality, etc.

ii) to instill in students an appreciation of the holistic character of Women's Studies. Women's studies scholarship is not just a question of content, but also of method—methods which are inflected by the interdisciplinary of Women's Studies. Students explore how WS treats women's issues in different disciplines, such as literature studies, political science, sociology, communications, philosophy, biology, etc., as well as developing students' understanding of these issues from an interdisciplinary perspective as well (i.e. one that takes into account and sees the interconnections between this array of disciplines)

iii) to show our students the real-life implications of their academic engagement. That is, we challenge students to see the relationship between theory and practice: to see how the academic study of women's issues and gender is informed by and has the power to transform real lives—both others' and their own

### 2. What are the goals of your curriculum and other components of the major in terms of student learning?

Our curriculum is not sequenced, and, therefore, students may enter through various courses. We have both a core curriculum ("Issues in Feminism," "Cultural and Social Methods," "Feminist Theory," and Senior Research), as well as a body of elective and cross-listed courses. For "Methods" and "Theory," the student must have a previous Women's Studies course or instructor consent. There is no prerequisite for "Issues." Senior Research is reserved for majors. Each course may fulfill many goals, and there is a great deal of overlap, but the ones listed are those we hope to address most directly in each course.

- ∞ Our introductory core course, "Issues in Feminism," helps students develop the "critical awareness" of gender and its relationship to other issues that we describe in goal i above. This class, along with all of the other classes in the "core curriculum," also seek to achieve goal ii by covering material in an interdisciplinary way. The class sets out to examine some aspects of institutionalized sexism in contemporary America, such as differential role socialization and its consequences; legal inequalities; job discrimination; reproductive issues; and violence against women. It also introduces students to the complexities of such issues, by

asking how each of these issues is inflected by other aspects of identity, including race, class, age, religion, sexuality, etc. Of course, even in an intro course, we often begin to address, and sometimes quite directly, the material implications of issues (goal iii).

- ∞ The “Cultural and Social Methods” class, another of the core courses in our curriculum, directly addresses goal ii. It seeks to expose students to a variety of methods of approaching intellectually the content of women’s studies. It challenges them to think about how the way in which they conduct their research might be as significant as the topic on which their research is conducted. (Similarly, classes offered in women’s studies often employ a feminist pedagogy, not just cover women’s issues in terms of content.) This practice also asks students to begin exploring the issues raised in goal iii, by calling upon them to think about how their method of research relates to their own intellectual and socio-political goals. The course examines scientific methods, social analysis based on empirical research, and the interpretive strategies that have developed out of the humanities. It examines the epistemological issues that underlie research in women's studies, the ethical and political questions involved, and the assumptions that shape various methods. Students apply the methods learned to their own research projects. This class also seeks to meet goal ii by crossing disciplinary boundaries and looking for their interconnections.
- ∞ The “Feminist Theory” course tackles goals iii directly by exposing students to questions of both theory and practice, but it also seeks to deepen students’ understanding of content (goal i) and method (goal ii) by giving them theoretical tools to examine the issues in (content) and processes of (methods) the field. Theories studied may include feminist psychoanalytic theory, cultural materialist feminist theory, postcolonial feminist theory, liberal feminist theory, radical feminist theory etc. Particular consideration will be given to issues raised by multiculturalism, women of color, womanist perspectives, queer theory, class concerns and international feminist movements. Students are encouraged to become reflective about their own theoretical stances and to think about the ways in which various theoretical positions have political consequences, which addresses goal iii directly.
- ∞ Our cross-listed courses address goal ii by offering a disciplinary look at method, but also goal i by given them a disciplinary look at content. Majors are required to take courses from across the four divisions (choosing two—one from the social sciences or sciences and one from arts or humanities).
- ∞ We also require majors to take one course focusing on women of color or on women in developing countries to support and deepen all three goals.

These courses may challenge them, like a course from a disciplinary perspective, to look at content, method, and theory in new ways.

- ∞ Our Senior Research component asks students to demonstrate their understanding of all of the above goals by offering, in their project, a complex understanding of gender in the social framework (goals i). While students may take up a particular disciplinary perspective, their work should reflect an understanding of women's studies interdisciplinary richness (goal ii) and consider its methods (goal ii) and its theoretical approach (goal iii) as central in the process of developing and executing the project.

### **3. What measures do you use for assessing student academic outcomes in the major?**

We will retain electronic copies of all final projects in all "Issues in Feminism" classes, as well as all of our Senior Research. In four years' time, we will have the "Issues" paper of anyone who declares a major at any time in his/her program. In the first three years, we will ask graduating majors to supply a copy of a paper from their "Issues" class, so we don't have to wait a full four years to have a complete "record" for comparison. We will also ask all of our current majors to supply their "Issues" paper and their Senior Research.

Annually, the senior research and "Issues in Feminism" papers from graduating students will be evaluated by a scholar in Women's Studies outside of the Denison community using the checklist below. This checklist was developed from our Mission Statement and curricular goals.

We will use responses of the outside reader, comparing the performance of students in "Issues in Feminism" to their Senior Research to determine whether or not our students attain, over the course of their program, our curricular goals.

Our curriculum is not sequenced, and there is no guarantee that our majors and minors will take "Issues in Feminism" as their first course, but they must take it before they complete senior research, so while the measure will not be without complication, it should give us some insight into student learning.

### **4. What methods did you use to analyze the data you gained? In what setting or settings did this analysis and subsequent reflection on the information you received take place?**

We plan to have a programmatic meeting devoted to a review of the data. Prior to a meeting, we will analyze the numeric data, to determine whether or not the leikert numbers on the checklist suggest that our students are attaining our curricular goals. We will also compare the "Issues" papers and Senior Research ourselves.

In four years' time, when we have gathered a critical mass of data, we will assess our assessment process.

**5. What results did your analysis yield? What did you learn?**

We haven't yet collected enough data.

**6. What have been your feedback mechanisms? How have you factored what you learned back into the curriculum?**

Formulating this assessment plan has already helped us clarify our goals as a program, which is especially important since we are not a department, but a program that draws from the talents of (an often rotating) committee of willing servants.