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## A History of Women's Studies at Denison

Jennifer Bailey  
January 10, 1995

Women's scholarship has a long, rich tradition at Denison University. Beginning in 1858 with the creation of the Young Ladies Institute, 44 women were able to pursue higher education in the basement of the Baptist Church in Granville, Ohio. In 1887, after graduating two classes, the institute developed into The Shepardson College for Women. The college had a separate campus from Denison's uphill campus, including Burton, King, and Stone Halls, and a separate dining hall. The women of Shepardson were able to recite in classes at the University. Finally, in 1900, Shepardson College was incorporated into Denison University.<sup>1</sup> Since then, women's scholarship has been firmly established at Denison.

In addition to the long history of women students, Denison has a unique connection to women's studies. As a department, major, minor, and general education requirement, Denison's women's studies is and has been distinct and dynamic. In May, 1990, at the tenth year anniversary of the minority studies/women's studies requirement, Johnetta Cole, President of Spelman College, recognized Denison as "ahead of many institutions and many individuals"<sup>2</sup> in terms of curriculum reform. Not only may Denison be praised for curriculum reform, but for curriculum innovation. University documents indicate that Denison was the first college in the country to add a women's studies/minority studies requirement to those that make up a well-rounded liberal arts education.

Beyond the first women's studies course in the spring of 1973, which focused on a study of Kate Millet's Sexual Politics, the women's studies program made its start with the J. Requirement, the requirement of completion of a "course which focuses on some aspects of the experience, identity, and contributions of women and minority groups in 20th century America," as a condition of graduation.<sup>3</sup> Established in the 1979-1980 academic year, students of the class of 1983 and all years to follow would have to fulfill this J.Requirement in order to graduate. Different courses were offered to fulfill this requirement, and today courses that meet the J. Requirement are offered in a broad spectrum of academic interests of various departments, including Art, Biology, Communication, Dance, Economics, Education, English, History, Latin American Studies, Modern Languages, Philosophy, Political Science, Psychology, Religion, and Sociology/Anthropology.

In 1981 Denison established a 13 credit hour women's studies minor in response

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<sup>1</sup>"A History," compiled article with information from Denison, The Story of an Ohio School, Denison University Centennial History 1831-1931, and Denison University Memorial 1907, date unknown.

<sup>2</sup>Cole, Johnetta, "Women's Studies/Minority Studies: A Necessity for Us All," Special Anniversary Joint Issue of the Denison Women's Studies Newsletter and Amandla, May, 1990.

<sup>3</sup>Denison University Catalog 1994-96.

to growing interest in the field as an academic course of study. In its formulation, students had to take six courses: four "regular" women's studies courses and two from the areas of Black Studies, Latin American Studies, or other multicultural studies. Now to officially minor in women's studies, students must complete Women's Studies 101, Issues in Feminism; an advanced seminar in women's studies; one course focusing on women of color; and three electives, one to be from Black Studies/Minority Studies. Since its establishment at Denison as a course of study, nine students have graduated with a women's studies minor, and three students have graduated with a major.

In 1983 an interdisciplinary major in women's studies was established. Prior to this date, individually designed majors in women's studies were possible to create, but in March of 1983, a proposal to the Academic Affairs Council was made by the Women's Studies Committee, made up of faculty from thirteen departments and several other consultants. In the proposal written by Dr. Ann Fitzgerald, a rationale for creating a formal women's studies was offered:

Currently the Individually Designed Major Committee serves the student who wants to create a major not formally represented in the curriculum. But since we have a vital and active Women's Studies program on this campus--encompassing a number of courses and faculty as well as a minor--it seems a much more efficient use of time and resources to establish a formal major.

More important, establishing a major makes apparent to students and faculty that Women's Studies courses, as a group, comprise a coherent intellectual field.<sup>4</sup>

Following debates in the Academic Affairs Council and Student Senate, the women's studies major was officially established at Denison. Today to obtain a degree in women's studies, students must take Issues in Feminism, an advanced seminar in women's studies, two courses in Social Science or Science focusing on women, two courses in Humanities or Arts focusing on women, and senior research.

Since its establishment, women's studies has been under the leadership of uniquely strong directors. Dr. Ann Fitzgerald, author of the founding proposal of the department, served as the first director of women's studies (1979-1984), followed by Dr. Margot Duley (1984-88), Dr. Robin Bartlett (acting director, 1988-89), Dr. Lyn Robertson (acting director, 1989-90), Annette Van Dyke (1990-93) and, today, Dr. Eloise Buker (1993-present).

The women's studies department continues to be an exceptionally strong voice on Denison's campus. Themes addressed by it and corollary groups have included issues facing women: rape, sexual harassment, abuse, social problems, and experiences unique

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<sup>4</sup>Fitzgerald, Ann, Letter to Dr. John Jackson, March 20, 1983.



to women or that involve gender differences. Special awards have been designed in memory of Nan Nowik, another key figure in the development and establishment of Denison's program, in the areas of feminist scholarship of various academic foci. In addition, the department has, of course, focused on the constant change and development of curriculum and campus climate for women.

Today the women's studies department remains focused on the future. The goals of the department include continuing, solidifying, and developing the program and increasing the visibility of the program on campus. Within the next few years the number of students graduating with a major or minor in women's studies will in fact double, almost triple.

In bringing in a new director, Dr. Eloise Buker, Denison incorporated a senior scholar into both women's studies and campus life. The program has made a renewed commitment to the development of new theories and the transformation of our vision of the past, recognizing its implications on the present and future. Women's studies stresses the importance of personal as well as theoretical insights. These combined strengthen both the premise that all humans are created equal and the objective of a society in which the dignity and aspirations of both sexes are respected.