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The First Ten Years: A Conversation Between Ann Fitzgerald and Joan Straumanis

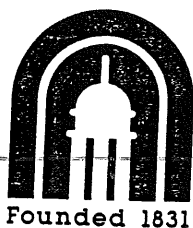
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WOMEN'S STUDIES NEWSLETTER

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INTRODUCTION

This marks the end of an era--the first era--in Women's Studies at Denison University. Ann Fitzgerald, currently Director of Women's Studies, will move on, and a new Director will take her place. In the twelve years since she came to Denison, Women's Studies programs both academic and co-curricular have developed, and Ann has played an important role in virtually all of them.

It seems an appropriate time to do a bit of oral "herstory." To capture that story, we have transcribed (with some editing) a conversation between Ann Fitzgerald and Joan Straumanis. Joan was a member of the Department of Philosophy at Denison from 1971-82 and is now Academic Dean at Kenyon College. It was Ann and Joan who laid the foundation for Women's Studies at Denison by teaching the first interdisciplinary course in Spring, 1973.

To Ann we extend our thanks--both institutionally and personally--for her work, and we wish her well in the work she now sets out to do.

A feminist analysis of women's health issues is the primary focus of this issue. In a Sociology/Anthropology course on Comparative Therapeutic Systems, students were assigned a research report on the sociocultural bases of medicine. The context for the assignment was the following statement by the professor, Dr. Kent Maynard:

Medicine is a sociocultural phenomenon. Our fundamental views about illness and the ill are not isolable from our wider social assumptions about human nature, society and cosmology. ...Therapy, therefore, also constitutes a social system. It is embedded within a set of culturally-relative structures. Such institutions reflect not only our understanding of medicine, but socioeconomic, political and other characteristics of our society.

Three papers from the class appear here in shortened, edited versions. Kathy Hickman, sociology/anthropology major and Departmental Secretary in English, writes on the relationship between woman-as-patient and male-as-physician. Cynthia Owens, graduating soc/anthro major, discusses gynecology as a form of control over women, while junior major Lisa Pittenger discusses the Women's Health Movement.

Through the research of E.L. Vogeley, we get "A Glimpse at PMS," a women's health issue receiving considerable public and professional attention.

Finally, results of research by Mary Larned, self-designed major in human development, describe women's attitudes toward gynecologists/physicians.

THE FIRST TEN YEARS:
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ANN FITZGERALD AND JOAN STRAUMANIS

(Editor's Note: What was intended to be an interview of Ann Fitzgerald and Joan Straumanis on the development of Women's Studies at Denison very quickly became an intense conversation with minimal intervention by the interviewer! Their assignment was to follow a loosely structured outline of questions highlighting major events and reflecting on community reaction and their own personal involvement in the evolution of the program. To listen to them unravel the decade was a fascinating experience in oral "herstory." They began their conversation with their arrivals at Denison: Joan in Fall, 1971, and Ann, in 1972.)

JOAN: There was a Women's Movement in the outside world, but it really hadn't come to Denison yet. There was no sign of it here. There had been a faculty committee on the status of women, and it had never met once. The first thing I did was to try to find out who, what, and what kinds of committees there were and what kinds of organizations for women, but there weren't any. But before I was able to make my own impression on the community, I was introduced at a faculty meeting by my chair as a "real feminist hell raiser," and that marked me that whole first year! It was necessary either for me to be that or to disappoint. It was a very strong initial stereotype--a gauntlet. It was the Philosophy Department saying to the community: "Look what we brought in. Look what we've got...Wait 'til you see..."

The first event that I'm aware of that was formal and feminist was the Faculty Lunch that I gave in March of 1972. That was called "What Harriet Taylor Should Have Told John Stuart Mills." Isn't that pretentious? It was a 14-point program for ending sexual discrimination in the academy. ...There was a group of women in the community--the only one remaining is Lynn McKenna. We essentially had a support group, and we celebrated Women's Week together for example. And there was Penny Van Horn who had been a feminist for years and years, a member of WEAL and was waiting for someone else to come. But there were no feminist activities on the campus until Annie arrived.

ANN: I came to Denison with a great deal of previous involvement in the Women's Movement--in fact, in a consciousness-raising group that was also a study group. In that group we read "classic" works--of Simone deBeauvoir and Betty Friedan--but, in addition, we had been reading all the pamphlets that had been printed by the New England Free Press: Notes from the First Years, "The Red Stockings Manifesto," "I Want a Wife," "The Politics of Housework," all of those, and, in fact, early chapters of the Dialectic of Sex that circulated before the book came out. And I had also participated in the design of the first Women's Studies course at the University of Wisconsin so I had had to think through some curriculum matters. So when I came to Denison I met Joan Straumanis.

- JOAN: My department was content to have me do some feminism in my intro course; they didn't object to that. But when Annie asked me if I would work with her in Women's Studies (and I was dying to do it and needed to for my own psychological survival), that was another matter.
- ANN: The English Department gave me the time to teach the intro Women's Studies course. I had developed it in many ways during the first semester. When I came, there were students who wanted to do directed study on a variety of feminist works, and so we met weekly for discussion of those works.
- JOAN: When we say that Women's Studies started here in 1972, what really started is those directed studies. The first Women's Studies course was in the spring of 1973, and it was formed from that core group that Annie had been training. During the fall semester they had been working on the materials together; in the spring they formed the first group leaders in Women's Studies.
- ANN: There had been talk, when I was hired, about the fact that at some point I might want to teach a Women's Studies course per se. Joan's department balked...so when the proposal came before Academic Affairs it was my proposal, and I was the one who went to defend it.
- JOAN: But because of some enrollment situations in my department, I was released to teach that first interdepartmental Women's Studies course with Annie. We made some decisions at that point that I think were extremely prescient. They were partly deliberate and partly lucky, but they really made a difference in terms of the popularity of the course. The decision to use group leaders, to have open enrollment, and to give Sat/Unsat grades. That was important because we didn't have to justify the objectivity of grading, and when we did political things in the course we could argue that it had to be Sat/Unsat because we didn't want to grade people in terms of their activity.
- ANN: It also gave us a great deal of freedom. We were able to help the students draw on their own experiences and learn from their own lives, through experiential assignments...
- JOAN: And we were able to involve the group leaders much more than if we had had to make fine grading distinctions. We were able to involve the group leaders as colleagues. There was a great de-emphasis on grades, although people could fail.
- ANN: Also what developed was a great deal of growth for the group leaders. We established a weekly seminar for them, and occasionally we would do additional reading. And that group seminar became a separate course which was graded and gave separate credit.
- JOAN: Team teaching the course was certainly a faculty development opportunity for me. I had had no formal academic relationship to Women's Studies

ANN: And I had had no formal academic training in Women's Studies per se. That was one of the objections of Academic Affairs when I first presented the proposal. I was asked how I thought I was going to be able to teach this course since I hadn't studied it in graduate school. There were no graduate programs that existed--there were very few courses that even existed at the time. I pointed out that I had helped design the very first Women's Studies course at Wisconsin. A second objection that was raised was that of material. Some members of Academic Affairs argued that there really was no material and that what did exist was highly politicized and that after we had examined Kate Millett's Sexual Politics that would be it! We could just pack up our bags and go home. The third objection was that students just wouldn't be interested and that there wouldn't be sufficient enrollments.--We had an enrollment of 120 that first course.

JOAN: We had a number of men from the beginning but the number of men increased year by year. It sticks in my mind that we had eleven men that first course--out of 120.

ANN: In the course of my experience the percentage of men went up somewhat, but never more than about 20%, even after the Women's Studies/Minority Studies requirement was implemented. The percentage is much higher in courses that are departmentally based. For instance, in my English class this semester (Women in Literature), men constitute over 50% of the class.

JOAN: Well, I had more men than women in my Philosophy of Feminism course the last time I taught it here. ...I remember troubles in those first years with parents--parents calling or students asking for advice for how to deal with their parents, especially male students, whose parents were appalled or humiliated that their son would be taking a course called Women's Studies.

ANN: I haven't experienced that recently at all.

JOAN: In addition to the intro Women's Studies course of a broad nature, there were theme-centered courses offered. The first one was Women in Groups and Subcultures [team-taught with Nan Nowik] in which we studied women who lived together or worked together--nuns, nurses, women in Black communities, welfare mothers.

ANN: Another one was Female Sexuality and the Politics of Health Care. In that course we looked at the way in which sexism is institutionalized in health care delivery systems. We used Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl which was a female slave narrative documenting the continuous sexual abuse against women in slavery. We looked at contemporary health issues, including the self-help movement. Another theme-centered course was Women in the Arts, an overview of women's contributions in different art fields--in music, theatre, the visual arts--as well as the way that the art world has systematically excluded the works of women.

JOAN: There was the History of the Women's Movement and other movements contemporary with it.

ANN: And there was the one John Schilb and I team-taught on Fraternities and Sororities--Groups of Men and Women in America, which was an attempt to deal with some of the real problems here in terms of the communities of men and women and then to look at the other ideas of brotherhood and sisterhood. ...A more recent course was Women and Militarism, a look at the way in which women have served both as combattants in a variety of military struggles as well as resisters to the whole idea of militarism. We looked at the interconnection of militarism and sexism, concepts of masculinity. Also there was John's course on the interaction of Black Studies and Women's Studies.

JOAN: There were things going on outside the course, and I never felt that either was isolated from the other. The course engaged people in a way that made people look at their own lives. At the same time the course was going on, Committee W was developing as a vehicle for women faculty concerns.

ANN: More women were coming as convocation speakers. Women's Week was becoming strong. There was an increase in programming in the residence halls and working jointly with members of the Dean of Student Life Staff.

JOAN: The Health and Safety Committee got more involved in gynecological care in an alliance with Planned Parenthood. All of these things were happening simultaneously, and some of them were class projects.

The Women's Coordinator position was defined during the time when Annie was gone, 1973-74. She had supposedly left Denison permanently and was at the University of Missouri at St. Louis. Committee W really came into its own. It did a study in which a job description for Women's Coordinator was incorporated to a general statement of demands which was called "positive action program"--that was Penny's term. We had a full search for the Women's Coordinator. It wasn't a device to bring Annie back in anyone's mind but mine! I did look at a lot of other people, but I never thought anyone could do the job like Annie, so we hired her back in that position. And that was my most satisfying accomplishment.

ANN: When I returned in 1974 my primary responsibility was to do research on the topic of Affirmative Action and to begin to develop procedures and eventually to write the Affirmative Action policy for the university. That indicated to me that the university was making a very strong commitment to hiring women faculty. ...By 1976 we had a formal policy in place, and it was my responsibility to work with departments to encourage people to follow the policy and to talk with them about the importance of diversifying the population of faculty here at Denison.

Simultaneously, other courses were being developed by several of the departments: Robin Bartlett's course on Women in the Labor Force was one of the earlier ones--and Women in Literature that Nan Nowik and I taught. There was a psychology course taught by Esther Thorson, and January-Term courses were starting to be developed.

JOAN: That's right. One of those courses was my course in Legal Rights of Women in which students examined rape law in Ohio and proposed legislation protecting the confidentiality of rape counselors; that's still in effect.

An important event in the middle of all of this was the denial of tenure to three women. That really mobilized the women's community to a larger extent, and everyone knows that affected the whole course of the college. It also symbolized the relationship between Joel Smith and the women's community.

ANN: And it raised, I think, in the first major public way the importance of retaining and promoting women faculty.

JOAN: The fact that one of the reasons that was given for my denial was that I was doing Women's Studies. ...That became an opportunity for the community to show where it stood not only within the women's community but within the whole community. ...The interesting thing about it is that was the time when governance entirely broke down. All the ad-hoc structures were running the college and the Senate was empty. There was no business before the Senate. That was 1975.

ANN: As part of my general work, I got together with the Provost and other faculty members to design a proposal on New Career Opportunities for Women. We submitted that to The Mellon Foundation and were funded. So in 1978 I started up The Mellon Program. I think what's important about that is that a lot of people were involved in the design of that proposal and were involved in carrying out the components so that it really reached widely into the community. And the rest is you, Mary, and all the important work that you did those next three years and continue to do. It was the first time that anything of that sort had been done in the area of women's careers.

JOAN: There are two main things that made Women's Studies and the Women's Movement at Denison special in my view, and I see this, now, as an outsider. One was that there was a great deal of emphasis on collective leadership. You might hear different things from different people, but I know that we always felt that it was very important that people would learn new skills and that leadership would pass from person to person, that the Women's Coordinator job would pass from person to person, that new people would be involved in teaching Women's Studies every year, that it would get out into the departments and that it wasn't a fixed group of people that held power and who did the teaching. We had a faculty development model in which team teaching was the means of training the next generation of Women's Studies faculty. That's one very important feature that is unusual if not unique.

ANN: There were seminars in Women's Studies for faculty to keep spreading the leadership throughout the institution. I think we certainly are at a time now when we need to re-think those seminars and offer versions that will meet the current needs. That's a main challenge for the person who is going to be the new Director of Women's Studies.

- JOAN: And the other thing which ought to be more common, but I think was unusual, was the strong alliance with Black Studies.
- ANN: That alliance was forged during the year in which the Proposal 382 (Women's Studies/Minority Studies Requirement) was debated. There was agreement on the part of Women's Studies and Black Studies faculty that we needed courses that would emphasize the interconnections of racism and sexism, would focus on the major effects of discrimination and would examine how that discrimination worked within American society. We believed that there should be an explicit link between what goes on within the classroom with what goes on outside the classroom, and we were very straightforward about saying that we hoped these courses would improve the quality of life for students at Denison.
- JOAN: The 382 Proposal which began with student initiative created the opportunity to make it clear that Women's Studies and Black Studies had not only a similar message but a similar role to play in the life of the community.
- ANN: I wouldn't call it just a student initiative because the idea for the 382 Proposal came out of joint meetings that Women's Studies and Black Studies faculty had to discuss their mutual differences. Some tensions had arisen between members of the different areas, and we thought it would be important to get together and talk about those. In those discussions, we started thinking about how we were looking at not only how we could work better together and work in support of one another, but also how we could also carry this over to the students. But it was students who formally raised the issue in the Senate; they were formal sponsors of the proposal, and it was finally the students, through lobbying efforts to members of Academic Affairs and finally through a demonstration who really convinced faculty who were only half supportive of it that we should try the requirement.
- JOAN: Then the next stage was to think very carefully and clearly about what would count as a 382 course and to examine syllabi and to think about the nature of discrimination. It was a remarkable, even an extraordinary interdisciplinary, effort taken on by that committee, chaired by Phil Glotzbach. It certainly was the first and for a long time and maybe still the only such requirement in the country in a co-educational college.
- ANN: I point to that as the work that I feel most pleased about. I think that it was a time of a great deal of stress, because there was a great deal of debate and fighting over it, but it was also in some ways the most satisfactory work that I have done because it was openly an institutional commitment to Women's Studies and to Black Studies and created a link between the two programs that I think is very, very important.
- It seems to me that in reviewing the history of all of this that it has been collective, as you said, but it's been a collection of a small group of people, including, I must say, Denison's Provost (Lou Brakeman), who was very important in the passage of the 382 Proposal.

JOAN: The Provost's role warmed from the early days, when he, like everyone else, was skeptical, to the point where the Provost is, now, a national spokesperson for Women's Studies.

ANN: He was on the board of Every Woman's Guide to Colleges and Universities, participated in the important Wingspread Conference, keynoted the Great Lakes Colleges Association Women's Studies Conference one year.

JOAN: Yes, in the midst of all of this, the GLCA Women's Studies consortium was founded, in the fall of 1974. Annie was on the committee, and we both were involved in writing programs at that first conference.

ANN: I was on the original committee, and then Julie Mulroy was the next representative. Our current representative is Bonnie Lamvermeyer. That program was very helpful, because it gave us a chance to know what was going on at other GLCA colleges. Because of the organization we were able to apply for and get substantial grants, which really kept us going.

JOAN: Denison was very prominent in the founding of the consortium, just as Denison was very prominent in the first National Women's Studies Summer Institute.

An interesting question to consider is the question of whether mainstreaming is a rival to an interdisciplinary course. I think that Women's Studies will always have to be self-examing--that is, to look at the structure of the disciplines, to look at the structure of knowledge, to begin to ask questions fearlessly and thoroughly about how the canon embodies assumptions; things like that can only be done external to a discipline.

ANN: It should be separate because it needs to constantly ask questions that won't be answered during the term of that course but that will be significant for the development of other courses. It seems to me that the primary goal of such courses should be to pose questions and help students to raise the hard questions.

JOAN: It makes sense also to think of the Women's Studies interdisciplinary course as a place where feminist pedagogy becomes a subject matter and people are examining what feminist relationships, what a feminist classroom is like, what a feminist institution is like, and these questions are too global to be confined in any particular discipline except possibly Education.

ANN: I also think that a trend which I have seen developing here at Denison and certainly nationally and internationally is a concern with global issues affecting women. ...In fact, I would hope that the Women's Studies courses would in themselves arouse interest among students and encourage faculty to make global connections.

JOAN: I think that the Women's Studies class gives a kind of permission for feminist pedagogy to be experimented with and that can influence the whole college as well. And team teaching is part of that; it's teaching in the context of vulnerability and sharing that makes the teacher obviously a learner.

ANN: And I think that working with students as colleagues underlines that process--a very important matter. What I said earlier about asking questions and not feeling that one has to say things with complete surety...

JOAN: ...that's the vulnerability. And it doesn't suggest that the instructor is less competent; in fact, the instructor has to be very competent, as well as confident, to be able to conduct this kind of exercise that doesn't have a fixed end point.

ANN: It's much more of a circular structure, and the locus of that circle is the individual student, not the teacher.

JOAN: The teacher is, therefore, in a better position than in most courses to see to it that the student fixes upon the elements of education that they really came to study. It's a very exciting kind of teaching.

ANN: It also helps the student realize that he or she can meet different goals from his or her peers in class. All of the students aren't there to learn exactly the same thing at the same rate.

JOAN: And they won't be studying the same texts--the texts being themselves, their experiences, those of their associates, their families, and so on. And I want to say that it was in Women's Studies that I learned to teach. I mean, I thought I knew how to teach when I came here. I thought that to be a good teacher is to be a good explainer, to know your texts. But I learned that that's only the beginning; it's the least part.

ANN: Where I learned to teach was in my consciousness-raising group in Madison.

JOAN: Interesting! Well, I didn't have that advantage, so where I learned to teach was when I learned from you. When I began to see that kind of teaching in operation, and I realized that that was the only goal worth having in pedagogy.

ANN: And I learned some specific things from you. I had never lectured before we team taught together. Suddenly, there I was! I had spoken a lot as a part of my Women's Movement activity, but I had never lectured, and there I was in Slayter Auditorium, facing this room of 120 people, and I had to learn how to develop those skills, and you were a real model in that.

JOAN: That's interesting, since that's just the thing that I was backing away from as rapidly as I could.

ANN: But that shows you that one has to have sort of a multiple strategy going into the Women's Studies classroom.

JOAN: We really had a good time. ...Remember, at the end of every course we had a day--the last day--which was a combination of a party and a parody which was called "The Other Side." That was because people

would accuse us of having a one-sided course--that we never gave "the other side." Of course, we would say "But that's like talking about 'the other side' of racism or the Holocaust." But if these people were really serious about hearing "the other side" there were all these other courses in the university and the world they lived in that were presenting "the other side" all the time! But we would make this one concession by teaching "the other side" on one day.

ANN: We would celebrate things like go-go dancers, sing sexist songs, act out traditional weddings, and one year we had a Miss America Pageant.

JOAN: Remember? I was sitting in the audience in my black negligee--I was last year's Miss America. And when it came time for me to give up my crown, I just couldn't do it. It was my identity. So we fought over the crown. Just then, a streaker came through. In my vanity as Miss America, I had taken off my glasses, so I screamed "Give me my glasses so I can see!" And then...

So no one could claim that we never gave attention to "the other side." In fact, we always gave "the other side" the last word.

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ANNOUNCEMENT OF
SCHOLARLY ACTIVITIES
OF WOMEN AND WOMEN'S STUDIES FACULTY

LISA McDONNELL presented a paper on "Shakespeare's Directing Hand: Visual and Verbal Cues in Romeo and Juliet," at the Shakespeare Association of America Meeting, Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 19-21, 1984.

SUZANNE COSTELLO performed in concert with Stuart Pimsler Dance and Theater, May 4 and 5, on the Denison campus. She is the associate director of that company.

MARCI McCAULAY spoke at Earlham College on April 25 as a part of the Informal Spring Seminars sponsored by the Women's Programs Office. Her topic was "Women, Psychology and Sport."

ANN FITZGERALD gave presentations on "Women and the Nicaraguan Revolution" at Kenyon College on April 3, at Knox College on April 7, and at Monmouth College on April 8.

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