

Women's Studies Graduates And The Labour Market: New Thoughts And New Questions

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ABSTRACT

Despite almost three decades of formal study of women and gender at university and college levels, there is a noticeable paucity of debate and documentation over how Women's Studies programs relate to the domain of the vocational and how Women's Studies graduates fare in the labour market. This essay explores some of the reasons why the vocational elements of Women's Studies have, with isolated exceptions, been overlooked in most debates about the future of Women's Studies and examines cogent arguments for a more systematic consideration of these questions in the future.

RÉSUMÉ

Malgré près de 30 ans d'étude formelle sur les femmes et les sexes au niveau universitaire et au niveau collégial, il y a un grand manque de débat et de documentation sur le lien qui existe entre les programmes d'Études des femmes et le domaine professionnel et comment les diplômés des programmes d'Études des femmes réussissent dans le marché du travail. Cet article explore quelques unes des raisons pour lesquelles les éléments du programme d'études des femmes, à part quelques exceptions, ont été négligés dans la plupart des débats sur l'avenir des études des femmes et étudie le manque d'arguments convaincants pour qu'il y ait une considération plus systématique de ces questions à l'avenir.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist scholars and educators have generated considerable debate around questions of gender, employment and the workplace, drawing attention to a wide range of issues including women's entry into non-traditional degree programs and career paths, the phenomenon of the "glass ceiling" and on-going concerns for childcare, pay equity and discrimination. It is surprising, therefore, that one of the least discussed aspects of Women's Studies should be its specific relationship to the labour market. Despite almost three decades of formal study of women and gender at university and college level, there is a noticeable paucity of debate and documentation over how Women's Studies programs relate to the domain of the vocational and how Women's Studies graduates fare in the labour market. In many instances, when we as teachers or course advisers are called upon to answer the question of "what you 'do' with a major or minor in Women's Studies," we can usually offer only the most general of responses, frequently a list

of occupations or employment sectors which we believe could or should accommodate graduates with a demonstrated competence in feminist and gender issues. Whether, or to what extent, they actually do, often remains a matter of conjecture. The bottom line is that we have seldom gathered the types of information that would enable us to answer the question of "what do you 'do' with Women's Studies?" in a detailed and informed fashion. Even less attention has been paid to the vocational aspirations with which students enter Women's Studies programs and to the question of "what do you *want* to do with Women's Studies?" This article examines arguments for a more systematic consideration of these questions in the future.

ADDRESSING THE DATA GAP

The lack of attention to the vocational dimension of Women's Studies may seem puzzling at first, given the strong interest generally shown in these programs and their students. Even a cursory

survey of Women's Studies journals and edited collections would suggest that Women's Studies students represent one of the most closely monitored groups of humanities or social science students today, particularly in the United States and in England. A great deal of attention has been focused upon the personal, political and intellectual needs and demands of Women's Studies students (see Culley et al 1985; Dunn 1993; Gawalek et al 1994; Raymond 1985; Schniedewind 1983; Skeggs 1995); upon appropriate models of teaching and learning to address those needs (see Bulbeck 1991; Klein 1987; Ruggiero 1990; Shrewsbury 1993); and upon how students respond to the experience of enrolling in women's studies (see O'Barr and Wyer 1992; O'Barr 1994; Griffin 1994). There is also a variety of studies which focus on the impact of Women's Studies on students' post-class and post-graduation behaviours, although these have tended to focus primarily on the on-going personal and political impact of their studies (see Pence 1992; Stake and Rose 1994; Thomsen, Basu and Reinitz 1995) rather than on the study-to-work transition or upon graduate career paths.

There is a number of possible reasons for this trend. Women's Studies programs, as we know, emerged from strategic political and intellectual agitation by women rather than from employer pressure for specific skills or knowledge. Programs have therefore conventionally viewed their primary roles in terms of women's empowerment with their primary links being to the wider women's movement, rather than to the employment sector. It is perhaps natural then that the types of change anticipated, looked for, and documented among our students should belong to the arenas of personal and political transformation. The precise institutional positioning of many Women's Studies programs may well have played a part, too, since the majority of programs have historically been located within the liberal arts, an academic area which has seldom considered explicit engagement with vocational outcomes among its primary functions, but rather couched its benefits in terms of more "intrinsic" rewards such as individual self-development.

Likewise, the concentration of Women's

Studies programs at the more elite end of the educational spectrum and at some distance from the technical and vocational educational arena has also doubtless contributed to the absence of significant debate around more pragmatic educational outcomes. Added to this, the strenuous efforts required of feminist educators over the last three decades to establish the intellectual and scholarly credibility of Women's Studies within those same institutions and the concomitant "race for theory" (Christian 1987) may have proved difficult to reconcile with more than a passing concern for the vocational elements of Women's Studies. The fact that Women's Studies takes different political, intellectual and philosophical forms in different institutions has also probably contributed to the lack of broad-based debate around this issue.

Arguably, also, for many feminist academics who situate themselves in critical, even oppositional, relationships to the dominant paradigms of economic fundamentalism which pressure academics to justify and legitimise their teaching and research programs in terms of narrowly conceived, market-driven outcomes, the very idea of entering into the discourse of graduate labour market outcomes may be problematic. That is, it may present the political dilemma of requiring feminists to engage with the very structures which elsewhere they work to critique and resist. Yet we would argue that, as Women's Studies practitioners, we resile from facing this dilemma at our peril for, as Beverley Skeggs has articulated so clearly in relation to Women's Studies in the United Kingdom, it seems the issue we face is no longer whether we should engage with the processes of economic fundamentalism, but how. Skeggs identifies Women's Studies students' own increasing concern for employment outcomes as a significant dimension of both the current reconfiguration of higher education in many Western societies within a broadly consumerist discourse and the growing rates of unemployment and underemployment among university graduates in those same societies. "The increasing demand for Women's Studies," she suggests, "is as much about, and a mixture of, a need for occupational tickets, desire for women's knowledge, and the perception

of any easy course, etc." (Skeggs 1995, 477). Further, we would argue that feminist research on the post-graduation labour market experiences of Women's Studies graduates ought to be able to exceed the requirements of mere institutional legitimation, offering instead, ways of challenging and problematising the limiting and delimited objectives of economic fundamentalist models for understanding the relationships between educational goals, economic benefits and labour market outcomes. Just as we may hope that our critically and politically literate graduates will be placed in employment and take this opportunity to challenge and transform their places of work and - at the macro-level - the nature of work itself, we argue that it is necessary for feminist academics to intervene in and, we hope, transform the existing terms in which discussions about graduates and the labour market take place.

RAISING THE QUESTION

The question of Women's Studies vocational outcomes has been raised - directly and indirectly - by a number of different practitioners over the last two decades. As early as 1979 in the United States, a systematic review of Women's Studies vocational and career questions was carried out under the auspices of the National Institute of Education in Washington which subsequently published two related works in their Women's Studies Monograph Series. Part of a series of eight studies which endeavoured to assess the impact of the first decade of Women's Studies, *The Relationship Between Women's Studies, Career Development and Vocational Choice* (Bose and Priest-Jones 1980) and *Women's Studies Graduates* (Reuben and Strauss 1980) together attempted to find preliminary answers to the questions "what is the impact of women's studies on students' career aspirations?" "why major in Women's Studies?" and "what do women's studies graduates do?" Each volume surveyed the available literature and data, offering promising if sketchy accounts of the positive impact of Women's Studies on students' subsequent labour market experiences, but their findings were far from conclusive.

Indeed, both sets of authors argued with conviction that without more detailed and coordinated studies at a national level, the picture would inevitably remain partial and there would be few definitive, measurable outcomes for practitioners to point to. Among the combined recommendations of the two studies were the need for comprehensive national data gathering and graduate tracking, longitudinal studies of Women's Studies cohorts, systematic examination of students' changing aspirations across the period of their Women's Studies enrollment, the development of definitions and measures of the professional and personal transferable skills fostered within Women's Studies, and profiling of the different types of Women's Studies programs emerging.

While the political, educational and employment climates have altered considerably since these reports were published, it could be argued that the need for carrying out the number and type of studies they outline has only increased over that period of time. Indeed, as we noted above, more and more Women's Studies programs, in common with other areas within the liberal arts, are being asked to justify their activities on the basis of precisely this type of information, particularly as the goals of higher education institutions become more market-oriented. It is interesting therefore to note how few of their recommendations have been taken up in practice since then and how few published studies have followed. Chris Stearns, in a 1994 essay, gives a brief account of a comparative survey of Women's Studies graduates from two US universities (Towson State University and Wake Forest University), in which questions relating to the vocational impact of Women's Studies featured prominently. She argues that the collective responses to the survey "reveal the transforming effect of a WMST education" with graduates generally indicating significant direct and indirect correlation between their Women's Studies enrollment and the "work they do" (66).

Brief as they are, the instances where her respondents articulate how they understand the connection between their undergraduate studies and their chosen careers or graduate enrollment are certainly thought provoking. Considerably more

detailed is Barbara Luebke and Mary Ellen Reilly's book-length qualitative study, *Women's Studies Graduates: The First Generation* (1995) which profiles eighty-nine Women's Studies graduates from a range of programs across the United States, again offering accounts in the graduates' own words of how they relate their studies to their subsequent study, career and life paths. Through the revealing testimonies of its graduate informants, Luebke and Reilly's work admirably demonstrates the flexible nature of a Women's Studies qualification and the extent to which Women's Studies' ethic of empowerment readily translates from classroom or campus to the workplace.

MOVING FORWARD

Together these particular studies are valuable in that they appear to confirm several key assumptions with which Women's Studies practitioners have generally been working. They suggest, for example, that Women's Studies is indeed an enabling qualification that opens up rather than closes off opportunities for its graduates. They also demonstrate that Women's Studies graduates are able to articulate a range of direct and indirect benefits of these programs for their careers. And more importantly perhaps, Luebke and Reilly's work offers insights into the ways in which different students derive different vocational benefits from their studies, choosing to engage with the ideas and concepts encountered in Women's Studies in ways that are strategically useful to them. The insights graduates gained from their studies, write the authors, "made them better at what they have done since graduation" (199). Graduate tracking of this kind, whether qualitative or quantitative, is clearly an important element in understanding the experience of Women's Studies graduates in the labour market, but evidently a great deal more work needs to be done in this area. In addition to limited national data, there are, for example, no comparative international studies that would enable practitioners to construct an extremely revealing snapshot of the differing career paths taken by Women's Studies graduates, and thus the differential social and cultural impact of

our work, across a variety of national domains.

In addition to the "slice of life" studies which tend to focus on graduates' early labour market experiences or on a single point in their post-graduation working lives, longitudinal studies of graduates' career movements over time also need to be considered. As we know, one of the acknowledged limitations of the traditional early career or "first destination" graduate survey method is that it tells us little about the longer term vocational rewards of specific programs of study (Coyte 1985, 1). If we are to gain a more complex understanding of whether and in what ways studies of feminism and gender issues impact on Women's Studies graduates' longer term career choices, directions and opportunities, systematic tracking of graduates over longer periods of time will be necessary. Such studies may also assist us in learning not only how individuals' careers are shaped by their studies, but also whether Women's Studies graduates as a cohort are making a collective contribution to changing the nature of different workplaces, increasing their receptivity to the ideas and concepts addressed by Women's Studies. As Diaedre, a graduate student cited in Chris Stearns' article, observes of the future labour market impact of her peers, "We are also opportunistic. We will virtually be in the vanguard of women looking to create employment opportunities for which [Women's Studies] backgrounds would be an asset.... Once we're in the door, we can begin the work of educating our employer" (67).

But graduate tracking, no matter how comprehensive, can really only provide one part of the picture; namely, where graduates go. One thing such studies can't tell us about is employers' recruitment principles and their attitudes to Women's Studies, information that is clearly crucial to the success our graduates will find in the workplace. Despite the obvious growth and success of Women's Studies within the academy, it still remains something of a well-kept secret for many outside that domain, suggesting that much work remains in establishing dialogues with the broader community about the meaning and value of Women's Studies. Personal experience would seem

to indicate that comparatively few people outside the immediate university or college environment, including the friends and families of colleagues and students, have a detailed understanding of what Women's Studies is, believing it to lie somewhere between home economics, biology and consciousness-raising. For some, then, the question "what do you do with Women's Studies?" is really another way of asking "what *is* Women's Studies?" And a fair degree of humour, incomprehension or nervous laughter often greets the explanations. Indeed, this semester, one group of undergraduate students in our program was so animated by seminar discussion of this particular issue that they elected to conduct a survey exercise on public understanding of, and attitudes towards, Women's Studies for their final research project in that course.

Given what appears to be the low level of awareness of Women's Studies outside the academy, it seems only reasonable to inquire what potential employers make of our students' academic transcripts. Obviously employers in women-centred organisations, the community and educational sectors could be expected to respond positively and with some understanding of the field, but what of other areas? If we accept that upwards of 40 to 50 percent of new graduate opportunities are open to graduates of any discipline (Perkins 1992, 27), it is likely that many of our graduates are presenting themselves before mainstream graduate recruiters. What image or understanding, if any, do these potential employers have of the field of Women's Studies? What knowledge and skills, if any, do they associate with its graduates? Do they view a knowledge of women, gender and equity issues as an asset or a liability in a potential employee? Would they hire a Women's Studies graduate?

Anecdotal evidence would seem to suggest that many students anticipate meeting varying degrees of ignorance, hostility and ridicule in the recruitment process, but to date, no major study of employer attitudes that would answer these anxieties appears to have been carried out.¹ It would seem, however, to represent a significant new area for consideration and one that would offer us a twofold benefit. Not only would we gather

substantial new information on how our field is viewed in the wider employment sector and thus how our graduates might fare, but in talking to and interviewing recruiters, human resource managers, career counselors and personnel officers, we would also be playing a positive role in raising awareness of the field of Women's Studies and in debunking any existing myths or stereotypes that may be present. Such contact has the further potential to pave the way for the development of new industry placements and internships, practices that have been shown to have a very positive impact on graduates' future employment prospects (Australian Association of Graduate Employers 1997, 26). But we must also be willing to listen to and learn from employers and from the existing debate on graduate outcomes generally, as these might allay some of our own and our students' fears and doubts. Research suggests, for example, that the vast majority of employers recruiting graduates with generalist degrees are far more interested in graduates' transferable personal skills (i.e. communication skills, team working, verbal reasoning, confidence) than in the specific knowledges gained from their studies (Perkins 1992, 27-30). This suggests that the field of Women's Studies could perhaps benefit from encouraging its students to recognise the vocational strengths of the empowerment and personal transformations they experience, together with the feminist process skills in communication, organisation and interaction they develop through their studies.

To move this discussion beyond speculation about what we think or fear that prospective employers may or may not know about the kinds of knowledge and skills graduates of Women's Studies bring to the workplace, and how these knowledges and skills are valued, focussed research with employer groups is required. As part of our exploration of these questions, we plan to survey and selectively interview graduate recruiters, personnel officers, careers counselors and human resources managers to discover what level of awareness they have of Women's Studies as an academic program, what feelings or attitudes they may have toward such a program, what skills

and knowledges they believe Women's Studies graduates might have, what skills and knowledges they seek in graduates generally, and how they view a knowledge of, and commitment to, gender and equity issues in a prospective employee.

INTEGRATING EXPECTATIONS

To the strategies outlined above, we need to add a further research dimension. We need to examine the expectations of students entering Women's Studies programs, exploring in detail how they understand the relationship between that enrollment decision and their anticipated career paths, thus replacing the question "what do you do with Women's Studies?" with "what do you *think* you can do with Women's Studies?" or "what do you *want* to do with Women's Studies?" It will be instructive to learn whether, or to what extent, our students do indeed view their enrollment in vocational terms and how directly they perceive the skills and knowledges developed through Women's Studies relating to and building towards their subsequent career plans. Is this why they chose Women's Studies in the first place? Or are they relying on their other majors for these types of outcomes? Do our students perceive Women's Studies to be vocational in ways we've never considered? What do they think we're offering them? What do they imagine they'll be getting?

Our experiences to date in undertaking the pilot phase of research on the labour market expectations of currently enrolled Women's Studies students and in analysing the preliminary findings confirms our view of the importance of this type of research (on several levels), both for those involved in the delivery of the teaching programs and for the students themselves. The responses of Women's Studies staff in other institutions to invitations to participate in the research were overwhelmingly positive. The proposed research clearly struck a chord as those contacted not only agreed to participate, but expressly inquired whether the data for their programs could later be returned to them for their own use. Discussion among staff participating confirmed the general sense that we all had much to learn from the results. Preliminary

analysis of student responses to questions about the relationship between their long-term career plans and the skills and knowledge they acquire through Women's Studies points very strongly to the importance of career plans in their choice of Women's Studies as part of their degree program. To elaborate, in the sample of first-year Women's Studies students from Deakin University, which boasts the largest enrolling programs in Australia, the responses of the seventy-eight students asked to complete the statement "I view the knowledges and skills I develop in Women's Studies as ..." break down as follows:

- a) central to my later career plans
14 (18%)
- b) of some importance to my later career plans
60 (77%)
- c) unrelated to my later career plans
4 (5%)

It is clearly important that such a small percentage (5%) of students see no relationship between their studies and their later career plans, with the remaining 95% being divided between those seeing their studies as "central" or of "some" importance to their post-graduation aspirations. Of still greater interest to us, and suggestively pointing to an area in which more work needs to be done, is the significant possibility that a failure on our part to address adequately the degrees to which Women's Studies programs are already vocational and the ways in which the skills and knowledges we teach are transferable to a variety of employment contexts may be at work in the very large percentage (77%) of students choosing option (b) to complete the statement. Clearly, more research is needed to determine the degree to which students responding that they view their pursuit of Women's Studies as having "some importance" to their later career plans make this response in an informed way. Qualitatively and quantitatively, we need to know whether the response "some importance" expresses the view that Women's Studies is not as important as other courses they study to their long-term career plans (and on what bases students form this view) and/or the view that

the students themselves are hopeful, but not quite sure, what the relationship might be.

Carrying out this kind of research will help us to understand more about what brings students into our programs in the first place, assisting us in making sure there is some logical fit between our current teaching and learning objectives and our students' needs, desires and aspirations. After all, it is one thing for us to establish a set of course objectives and outcomes and quite another to test those against the objectives and outcomes the students have established for themselves. Jean Fox O'Barr framed this issue succinctly when she observed that "if connections are going to be made between what I am teaching and what students are learning, I have to learn much more about the students themselves" (1994, 266). This includes discovering where students wish to take the skills and knowledges they encounter and build in our classrooms and admitting of goals and experiences for them that lie beyond the campus and beyond graduation. Further, surveying students across the period of their enrollment in Women's Studies will also provide some clues to the ways in which the programs themselves foster, modify and inspire particular vocational emphases. Two additional benefits may flow from this particular research avenue. It could prove to be a productive way of addressing the anxieties and discontent some Women's Studies students have expressed about their voices being lost or ignored in the important institutional decisions and processes that affect them (see Quinn 1997). It could also provide a wholly new and productive way to intervene in what have, to date, been rather negative discussions concerning students, feminism and "careerism." These discussions have primarily revolved around skeptical fears among certain academic practitioners that women students may "use" feminism to further their careers, especially academic careers (Kolodny 1988, 30). But the same practitioners have largely ignored the voices of those women students and the wider issue of vocational outcomes for Women's Studies (see Hantsis and Looser 1995; Looser 1995). This may be a pertinent moment to add a positive inflection

to this issue, establishing new grounds for legitimising students' own understandings of the connections between their choice of major and their choice of career.

In advocating a greater focus on these issues, we are not suggesting that the employment anxieties of students influence what we teach those students. We are suggesting, however, that the rise of economic fundamentalist concerns about the vocational relevance of teaching programs, which now increasingly appear to overlap with our students' own concerns in this regard, may be viewed as providing us with an opportunity to increase our own knowledge and understanding of these factors, and to engage productively with them to inform what we teach and the ways in which our programs are delivered. Further, the capacity to address in a serious and informed way the post-graduation aspirations of our students in the programs we teach those same students also has the potential to open up further avenues for dialogue between the academy and the world beyond it, something which has been centrally important to the development of Women's Studies programs and their relationships with larger feminist movements and projects. However, all these arguments remain on the level of speculation in the absence of informed understandings of what the expectations, and indeed anxieties, of our students are with respect to the relationship between their study and their long-term employment prospects.

CONCLUSION

Research of the type that we are advocating here will fill a major data gap in the field of Women's Studies. It will clearly enable us as practitioners to integrate more successfully the expectations of students, teachers and employers, ensuring that our educational objectives mesh productively with our students' ambitions and labour market demands. The data gathered will also be of assistance to us in advising successive generations of students on their graduate career options. However, while the benefits to our students of this type of labour market-related research are abundantly clear, it is also becoming

apparent that shifts in political and institutional priorities will make it increasingly difficult for us as teachers and researchers to continue operating our programs in the absence of this type of information. In an educational environment that is progressively dominated by the discourses of economic rationalism and the marketplace, Women's Studies is frequently in the firing line when economic rationalist arguments are made against maintaining "useless" and "non-vocational" programs of study. In the coming years, it will be crucial for us to be able to stress the creative and interesting ways in which we are already vocational - and to have the data to back it up.

ENDNOTE

1. Stearns cites in a footnote a telephone survey of over a hundred local employers who were asked "Would you view a degree in [Women's Studies] as an asset, a liability, or would it make no difference in an applicant's educational background?" but unfortunately she gives no detail of the data gathered or conclusions made (1994, 69 n2).

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