

# Introduction to "Educating Women/Women's Education: In the Postsecondary Context"

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For over three decades I have been teaching and researching in an academic discipline, philosophy, where women have, historically, constituted only a small minority of the practitioners. Even today, women are only about 25% of the members of the Canadian Philosophical Association.

I spent academic year 2006-07 as a visiting professor at Halifax's Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), where I held the tenth Nancy's Chair in Women's Studies. "The Mount" was founded in 1873 as a college for women. In 1966 it became Mount Saint Vincent University, and the following year male students were admitted for the first time. MSVU remains, nonetheless, a place where women constitute not only the majority of undergraduates (a situation that is now commonplace in North America) but also, and much less common, the majority of faculty members and administrators. During my year at MSVU, I felt as if something that had been alert and guarded inside me was able to relax. In stark contrast to my decades of experience in philosophy, I was now in an academic environment where it felt normal to be a woman.

There's something odd about the very idea of feeling normal to be a woman. After all, if one is female, as I am, surely it is always normal to be a woman. But historically, misogyny and sexism have made being female abnormal, deviant, and exceptional - in a negative sense. Male-dominated cultures operate on the assumption that being male is essential, or at least highly desirable, for participation in such human activities as politics and government, education, religion, sport, science, medicine, and business.

It has been the aim of feminism to demonstrate, both in theory and in practice,

that being male is neither essential nor even, necessarily, desirable for any of these pursuits. Indeed, the progress of feminism is marked by at least two landmarks: First, there is its success in demonstrating that one's sex - by which I mean, primarily, one's genitalia - is not relevant to the fundamental human capacity to participate in politics and government, education, religion, sport, science, medicine, or business. Second, there is its success in convincing individuals and societies not to treat an individual's sex as either an advantage or a liability for the purpose of political, intellectual, social, athletic, civic, religious, or scientific activities. To the extent that feminism has been and continues to be successful, it is gradually becoming normal to be a woman within a widening variety of environments. If individuals and societies learn to recognize that one's sex is, for almost all purposes, not relevant to what one can learn, experience, and do, then being female will not be taken as a unique disqualification for access to and achievement in all the various endeavours of humankind.

For the purpose of normalizing the presence of women in academia, it is essential that there be a "critical mass" of women at the university - among undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, and administrators (whether in student government, staff and faculty unions, or senior administration). The presence of a critical mass of women provides a community of support, and makes available mentors who can assist individuals to understand the institution and learn how to survive and thrive in it. Moreover, the presence of a critical mass reduces both the tendency for one woman to be perceived as the representative of her sex, and the propensity to assume that all women are alike. Achieving a critical mass also makes it easier for each woman to be seen as a student, a professor, a librarian, or a dean, instead of primarily as a woman. As feminist scholar Virginia Valian says,

Studies have shown that when people are asked to rate a female

candidate for a managerial job, they rate her more positively if she is one of several women in the candidate pool than if she is the only woman. The explanation for this seems to be that if you're in a tiny minority of women, you're seen in terms of your gender - and the general view of women is that they aren't so competent professionally. But if there are many women besides you, people stop focusing on your gender and start judging you in terms of your ability.

(Valian quoted in Angier 1998)

The presence of a critical mass of women normalizes being a woman so that one's femaleness no longer is taken to be one's defining characteristic.

In my dual context - embedded in the male-dominated discipline of philosophy, but working temporarily at MSVU, an institution where women are a majority - I was led to wonder about women's progress in post-secondary education. The papers in this issue of *Atlantis* arose out of a conference I hosted at MSVU in February, 2007. "Educating Women/Women's Education" explored the experiences, problems, and potential of women in/and post-secondary education in twenty-first century North America. The focus of the conference arose from the following questions:

- ▶ Is post-secondary education still gendered? Should it be?
- ▶ What are the goals of women's post-secondary education? What are the goals of educating women?
- ▶ What would a post-secondary education of and for women be like?
- ▶ Does the sex/gender of role models, mentors, and instructors matter in the post-secondary context?
- ▶ After decades of extensive feminist discussion about the heterogeneity of the category "women," is there a need for educational institutions that are primarily or even exclusively for

- women?
- ▶ Has there been any global warming of chilly university climates?
  - ▶ What are the roles of Women's Studies and of feminism in educating women?

The conference received a range of submissions, including research papers on women's post-secondary education; more informal workshops and discussions of women's experiences in post-secondary education; and philosophical and normative reflections and arguments about what post-secondary education by, for, and of women would look like. In setting the theme, "Women's Education/Educating Women: In the Post-Secondary Context," I was seeking both empirical studies documenting the situation of women in academia, and more normative arguments about where we should go from here and what the goals of post-secondary education for women should be. The papers in this issue of *Atlantis* do both, and they draw upon a rich range of experience in university learning and teaching.

Unfortunately, as the first paper in this issue, "Pyramids of Power," by Wendy Robbins and Vicky Simpson, reveals, the normalization of women's presence in academia is still far from being achieved. Although women constitute a significant majority of undergraduate students in most though not all fields, at all points farther up the academic hierarchy women's presence dwindles significantly. Robbins and Simpson argue that there is no single explanation for the paucity of women, and no single remedy for it. They conclude, "in answer to the question 'Is post-secondary education still gendered?,' the answer is demonstrably yes. For the companion question 'Should it be?,' the answer needs to be more nuanced: gender-sensitive and gender-inclusive, yes; blind to discrimination based on gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and other human rights issues, emphatically *no*."

In working to minimize these forms of discrimination, feminist politics and women's

studies are essential elements of the academy. In "A Place at the Table and a Voice in the Hall," Michele Byers and Diane Crocker present the results of their study of junior female academics in Canadian universities. Motivated by widespread theoretical descriptions of a third wave feminism that rejects many beliefs and values associated with the second wave, Byers and Crocker sought to document the existence of a cohort of third wave feminists within junior levels of the Canadian professoriate. Instead, their findings reveal a greater breadth and complexity of feminist, academic, and political identities among women academics than is reflected in some recent feminist theory. Some of their subjects did indeed identify with third wave feminism, but others identified with the second wave; some participate in women's studies while others do not.

Women's studies made a place for itself in academia during the time that women students were entering universities in increasing numbers. Some universities now offer graduate programmes in women's studies. But women's studies is not a discipline like others. It confounds disciplinary borders and was originally created as a challenge to traditional disciplinary teachings. As women's studies becomes more successful and more entrenched within academia, can it maintain its inter- and multi-disciplinary character and continue to contest standard academic claims about women, gender, and received ways of doing research? In "Disciplined or Punished? The Future of Graduate Education in Women's Studies," Pamela L. Caughie and Jennifer A. Parks explore the uneasy relationship between women's studies and post-secondary institutions. This relationship affects both students and faculty; both the teaching and learning of women's studies, and the research undertaken in its name.

The general problem is that of any new immigrant: it is the quandary of either assimilating and thus losing what is distinctive, or maintaining one's identity and enduring painful co-existence or even rejection. Without exaggeration, it might be

said that this is the choice confronting both women's studies, on the one hand, and on the other hand women themselves, who in some respects are like new immigrants to university land. Women students and faculty want to be accepted and to flourish in academia, but not at the risk of compromising their identities, denying their experiences, or surrendering their values.

Many of the papers in this collection examine methods of achieving this latter goal. They offer some practical proposals that are aimed at getting women into academia and helping them to stay there. In "I Discovered More Than Book Knowledge," Andrea O'Reilly describes and analyzes a pragmatic method of introducing women - especially women who may be older than the average undergraduate, or who come from immigrant or working-class backgrounds - to academic study. York University's Bridging Program provides a thirteen-week, pre-university course for women; any student enrolled in it who earns a grade of B or better is automatically accepted as an undergraduate at York University. O'Reilly's paper shows that this program offers its participants validation, a sense of security, an opportunity to explore academic ideas, and above all, an intellectual community.

If O'Reilly shows one way of bringing women into academic study, Samantha Brennan and Rob Corless's "Creating a Warmer Environment for Women in the Mathematical Sciences and in Philosophy" suggests methods of keeping them there - especially in academic fields where women are in the minority. Philosophy and applied mathematics are dominated by men even at the undergraduate level; so the women who choose these fields need to be encouraged, mentored, and welcomed; they need to have a sense of being part of an environment that values their ideas. As Department Chairs, Brennan and Corless both have a wealth of personal experience in creating those conditions.

Based on her experience as a philosophy instructor in a liberal arts college for women, Donna Engelmänn, in "Another

Look At a Feminist Ethics of Teaching," proposes a pedagogy based on a feminist ethics of care. This approach to teaching focuses on attentiveness and responsiveness to students. But it also acknowledges "positionality": that is, the relative power of teacher and student, and the challenges that individuals in either role face if they are female or a minority-group member.

In their paper, Angela Johnson, Sybol Anderson, and Kathryn Norlock argue for "A Moral Imperative: Retaining Women of Color in Science Education." Johnson, Anderson and Norlock advocate that we look not only for overt barriers to women's success, but also for the part that domination plays in distorting moral relationships within academia. In addition, they suggest that women's goals and motives may be different than those of their male peers: women seeking careers in the sciences tend to emphasize altruistic goals of helping others and making meaningful contributions, rather than earning money or achieving conventional success.

Suzanne Sheffield has created a professional development seminar that aims to provide its women graduate student participants with some of the knowledge and skills they need to negotiate the demands of a gendered professoriate. In "Enhancing Women's Graduate Education" Sheffield describes the workshop she devised to help students, especially women students, come to an explicit understanding of the gender imbalances within academia, and to encourage them to develop ways to avoid being disadvantaged by them.

Another pragmatic approach to boosting women's success is featured under the banner Community Voices in Donna Lisker's paper, "Reinventing Single-Sex Education: The Baldwin Scholars of Duke University." Lisker describes a new program that enables women undergraduates to study in a co-educational university but also to receive some of the benefits of a women-only academic environment. The experiences of the Baldwin Scholars confirm the often-cited observation that female students thrive in an academic context in which they can be part of

a women's community that both supports their intellectual endeavours and challenges them to do even better.

It is, of course, important both to attract women to universities and to keep them there for at least two major reasons. There is, first, the matter of justice: It is only fair that women have the same opportunities for education and self-development that men have. Second, recruiting women to academia and supporting them there is not only consistent with academic excellence, as several papers in this issue argue; it also promotes academic excellence. The enterprise of creating and passing on knowledge is enhanced when the skills and talents of half the population are not arbitrarily excluded, and when the varying ideas and experiences of women of all ages, abilities, races, and ethnicities contribute to our collective understandings of the world.

What the papers in this issue of *Atlantis* share is the idea of creating and supporting intellectual communities - communities of scholars and students that welcome individuals who happen to be women but never confine women to their gender identity. When academia becomes a place where it is normal to a woman, one can then also forget that one is a woman - forget, that is, that one is subject to social classifications and limitations on the basis of one's genitalia. In an egalitarian academia, a woman is not a token, not a representative of her sex, and not judged for the degree to which she conforms or fails to conform to social standards for her sex. In that context, post-secondary education offers communities whose members can learn and teach as individuals but also in collaboration with others, based not on spurious and confining social categories but on the love of knowledge and the commitment to the creation of new understandings of our world.

#### **Reference**

Angier, N. "A Conversation with Virginia Valian: Exploring the Gender Gap and the Absence of Equality," *The New York Times* (August 25, 1998).