

# Does Intersectional Training Endure? Examining Trends in a Global Database of Women's and Gender Studies Graduates (1995-2010)

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**Michele Tracy Berger** is Associate Professor in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and the Director of the Faculty Fellows Program at UNC-Chapel Hill's Institute of the Arts and Humanities. Her books include *Workable Sisterhood: The Political Journey of Stigmatized Women with HIV/AIDS* (Princeton University Press 2004) and the co-edited collections *Gaining Access: A Practical and Theoretical Guide for Qualitative Researchers* (Altamira Press 2003) and *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy Through Race, Class and Gender* (University of North Carolina Press 2010). *Transforming Scholarship: Why Women's and Gender Studies Students Are Changing Themselves and The World* is her most recent co-authored book (Routledge 2011).

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## **Abstract:**

The undergraduate experience remains a cornerstone in the foundation of Women's and Gender Studies yet scholars know little about how graduates retain and demonstrate highly valued skills and concepts like intersectionality. This paper intervenes by answering the questions: How does intersectionality show up in graduates' reflections on their training? How do graduates utilize intersectional thinking in their personal and professional lives? Drawing on quantitative data from a large, institutionally diverse and global survey of Women's and Gender studies graduates, I demonstrate that intersectional training does endure and that graduates use intersectional concepts in the personal and professional life, in complex ways, long after graduation.

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## **Résumé**

L'expérience de premier cycle reste un pilier dans la fondation des études sur le genre et les femmes, mais les chercheurs savent peu de choses sur la façon dont les diplômés retiennent et manifestent des compétences et des concepts hautement appréciés comme l'intersec-

tionnalité. Cet article intervient en répondant aux questions suivantes : Comment l'intersectionnalité se manifeste-t-elle dans les réflexions des diplômés sur leur formation? Comment les diplômés utilisent-ils la pensée intersectionnelle dans leur vie personnelle et professionnelle? En me servant des données quantitatives tirées d'une enquête de grande envergure, de grande diversité institutionnelle et mondiale sur les diplômés en études sur le genre et les femmes, je démontre que la formation intersectionnelle persiste et que les diplômés font appel à des concepts intersectionnels dans leur vie personnelle et professionnelle, de façon complexe, longtemps après l'obtention du diplôme.

## Introduction

In the field of women's and gender studies, one of the often overlooked areas demonstrating the importance and value of intersectionality is how graduates reflect on their training. Intersectionality is a defining theoretical rubric in the field of women's and gender studies as evidenced through scholarship production and curriculum development at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (Howard and Allen 2000; Weber 2004; McCall 2005; Berger and Guidroz 2009). Intersectionality has a long intellectual history with its roots in the early nineteenth century writings of Anna Julia Cooper and others that argued that Black women's realities were intertwined with sexism and racism (see Guy-Sheftall 1995; May 2007; Hancock 2016). Multiracial feminist activism and theorizing over the past 40 years brought this body of knowledge into academic communities (see Dill 1979; Davis 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Chow 1987; Crenshaw 1989).

The concept of intersecting oppressions, commonly known as intersectionality, was highlighted as a unique facet of learning among the first women's studies undergraduates ever surveyed (see Luebeke and Reilly 1995). In describing what potential students gain through majoring or minoring in women's and gender studies, many departments use language that emphasizes intersectionality as a defining feature of their training and education. The undergraduate experience remains a cornerstone in the foundation of women's and gender studies yet scholars know little, as a field, about how students learn, retain, and demonstrate highly valued concepts like intersectionality. Complicating this issue is that intersectionality, while widely debated regarding epistemological and methodological questions, has not been assessed in ways that help educators understand if and how students employ it after they graduate and which benefits may accrue to them because of their knowledge of intersectionality. It is also unclear if intersectionality is primarily thought of by graduates as a concept, skill, set of practices, or all of the above. This gap in the assessment of intersectionality reflects a larger issue of the lack of shared definitions of women's and gender studies concepts and/or skills at the undergraduate level (Friedman 2002) and the lack of empirical data on these topics (Dever 2002).

This paper addresses this gap by answering the following questions: How does intersectionality show

up in graduates' reflections about their women's and gender studies education and what do they say about it? How do graduates utilize intersectional thinking in their personal and professional lives? How translatable is intersectionality to the professional world? Finally, how does this knowledge help educators reflect on their pedagogical choices and approaches in teaching intersectionality?

For the purposes of this analysis, I am working under two assumptions. One is that the majority of women's and gender studies students are introduced to the concept of intersectionality at some point in their education. The second assumption is that students are taught to have a working knowledge of some of the basic analytical tools that comprise intersectionality that include (but are not limited to): exploring and unpacking relations of domination and subordination, examining privilege and agency, understanding the politics of location, conceptualizing the implications of subjects being simultaneously privileged and oppressed, and the legacy of multiracial feminist theorizing (see May 2012).<sup>1</sup> Although intersectionality, as Vivian M. May (2012) states, is neither a "static or unified" set of intellectual practices, it does have a recurring set of arguments commonly presented in women's and gender studies undergraduate teaching. Guided by these assumptions, I employ the term "intersectional thinking" as a broad umbrella. It includes the above facets of intersectionality and takes into account the varying styles and approaches used to teach intersectionality in the women's and gender studies classroom.

In this paper, I present analyses of survey data collected from a non-probability, but institutionally and globally diverse, large sample of women's and gender studies graduates (graduating from colleges and universities from 1995 to 2010). Over 30 countries are represented in the sample. I demonstrate that intersectional training plays an important role in graduates' lives and that they value it and draw on this training in their personal and professional life, in complex ways, long after graduation.

I first examine the responses that students report based on the question: "What is the most important concept gained from your women's and gender studies degree?" I then examine the responses students report based on the question: "What is the most important skill gained from your women's and gender studies

degree?” For each of these questions, I highlight where intersectionality shows up. Finally, I analyze open-ended survey responses for how students discuss their employment of intersectionality, primarily as a concept, in their professional and personal lives. I also reflect on the possible benefits of conceptualizing intersectionality as a skill or set of skills. This paper provides new empirical and theoretical lenses on the continued institutionalization of intersectionality as reflected in the experiences of the second generation of women’s and gender studies graduates.

### Literature Review

There are several reasons why little empirical work has been done on women’s and gender studies students’ use of intersectionality. The reasons cluster around the field’s emphasis on graduate education and the lack of research on concepts and skills in women’s and gender studies.

For the last decade women’s and gender studies has been involved in debates about graduate education and the state of the field (see Scott 2008; Wiegman 2002). While this work is necessary, deeply provocative, and thought-provoking, this conversation tends to overshadow other important, and I would argue, immediate work that is before us as a community of educators. This emphasis on graduate education has left a significant gap in understanding and assessing undergraduate utilization of the field’s concepts and skills. Why is this important? Across the globe, the undergraduate experience remains a cornerstone in the foundation of women’s and gender studies, but there is little empirical data on the concepts and skills women’s and gender students learn and how they translate beyond university experience. In an era of increasing emphasis on assessment within higher education that is used to justify costs, coupled with attacks on the liberal arts and its ability to meaningfully educate and employ graduates, it is advantageous and strategic for interdisciplinary fields, such as women’s and gender studies, to empirically know more about what we do and how well we do it. And, women’s and gender studies is primarily institutionally situated in undergraduate education.

Despite the increased number of doctoral programs in women’s and gender studies (currently 25) and the steady growth of master’s programs in the United States, the numbers of students graduating every year

with an advanced degree pale in comparison to undergraduates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, on average, about 1,200 students a year graduate with a major, minor, or concentration in women’s and gender studies in the United States. Many women’s and gender studies curricula emphasize intersectionality as a core feature of its training. Many textbooks and readers used in women’s studies classrooms highlight intersectionality as an important analytical tool. Yet, what we know about how graduates use the concepts and skills learned in the women’s and gender studies classroom and integrate them into their professional and personal lives is slim and heavily reliant on anecdotal or small qualitative studies (see Boxer 1998; Lovejoy 1998). This is true for many women’s and gender studies concepts, but especially intersectionality, an epistemological approach that, as May (2012) contends, “impacted curricular, pedagogical, methodological and theoretical work in the field” (156).

Barbara Luebke and Mary Reilly’s (1995) critical text *Women’s Studies Graduates: The First Generation* still serves as foundational in examining skill development grounded in an empirical approach. This book explored the first generation of graduates from 1977-1991. The authors distributed 375 questionnaires to the first wave of women’s studies graduates. Their final sample included 88 women and one man. They found that graduates could clearly identify a range of skills and competencies gained through their major course of study, including developing self-confidence, learning to think critically, understanding the role of difference in women’s lives, and understanding and recognizing interrelated oppressions or intersectionality. The importance of intersections was highlighted throughout graduates’ discussions about the value of the degree. However, *Women’s Studies Graduates* did not include a copy of the survey nor did the authors provide a detailed discussion of their questionnaire and the process by which they coded and analyzed the data. Thus, the study is less methodologically transparent and not replicable.

Given the importance of intersectionality in the field, current and more nuanced work is warranted.

### Methods

The data for this work comes from an online survey of the types of career and employment paths peo-

ple who graduated in women's and gender studies have pursued during the last fifteen years (1995–2010). All data was gathered in 2010. Research participants consisted of adults (18 years of age or older) who completed a major, minor, or concentration in women's and/or gender studies from a college or university either in the United States or internationally. This paper reports on the open-ended survey questions.

### Survey

Respondents were informed of the online survey through an email that was sent to the undergraduate department and program heads of active women's and gender studies departments and programs from which they graduated or through notices posted on various organizations and individuals Facebook page. There is no one standardized list of all women's and gender programs and departments globally. My research team relied on the lists of programs and departments, all of which are located in the U.S., that were maintained through the National Women's Studies Association's (NWSA) website. An email was sent to every institution listed that offered any women's and gender studies curricula at the undergraduate level. My research team also conducted multiple online searches for women's and gender studies programs outside of the U.S. Department chairs and program heads were asked to send an email with the survey (as a link) to the alumni of the program. By contacting all active programs and departments, a purposive, non-random sample was obtained.<sup>2</sup>

The three major areas of the survey included general demographic questions (e.g., age, sex, gender, racial/ethnic identity, country of origin, etc.), the characteristics of the participant's undergraduate degree experience (year that undergraduate degree was completed, type of degree—major, minor, concentration, name and location of college or university for the women's and gender studies degree, internships, etc.), and life after graduation (contact with department or program, opinion on preparation for the job market, assessment of the top skills and concepts learned as part of the degree, as well as any advice for potential women's and gender studies students).

More than 900 participants initiated the survey. Due to attrition (non-completion of the survey), failure to meet study criteria (e.g., degree outside of study time period, a graduate degree in women's and gender

studies, or no degree in women's and gender studies), or lack of response to the question, the final sample size was n=571.

Table 1 displays basic demographic data about the sample. With over 100 institutions represented and over 30 countries, it is the most institutionally and globally diverse sample of women's and gender studies students.

**Table 1**

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA		
Demographic		Percentage
Sex	Female	95%
	Male	4%
	Intersex/Other	1%
Country of Origin	US	82%
	Canada	9%
	Ghana, Germany, South Korea, Australia, Kenya, Russia, Norway, Japan and China, Trinidad, Switzerland and other countries	9%
Race and Ethnicity	Asian/Pacific Islander	3%
	Black/African American	5%
	Hispanic/Latino	3%
	Middle Eastern	>1%
	White	80%
	Other	8%

Percentage of graduates who majored in WGST

61%

### Coding the Data

Coding the data occurred in a multistage process. During the initial phase of coding, I, the primary investigator read through the responses to the questions: “What is the most important concept gained from your women and gender studies degree?” and “What is the most important skill gained from your women’s and gender studies degree?” After reading through the responses, I assigned numerical thematic codes to the cases. Besides coding by the primary researcher, three additional independent coders were given the same coding sheet and then were assessed on intercoder reliability. I also consulted working definitions of commonly taught and assessed concepts and skills in women’s and gender (see Levin 2007).

For this article, I analyzed the open-ended responses to the questions: “How did you use this concept in your personal and professional life?” and “How did you use this skill in either your professional or personal life, or both?” Because of length and richness of the data, these responses were not translated into numeric codes. Instead, I employ a descriptive analysis that contributes to a nuanced understanding of how graduates discuss the influence and use of intersectional thinking in their personal and professional lives.

### Findings

We first turn to the role of intersectionality in top concepts reported by graduates. The research questions guiding this analysis are:

- 1) How does intersectionality show up in questions about concepts and skills?
- 2) How do women’s and gender studies graduates discuss using intersectionality in their professional and personal lives?

**Table 2**  
**Top Five Concepts:**

Gender	N= 279 (49%)
Intersectionality	N=216 (38%)
Inequality	N= 34 (6%)
Equity	N=22 (4%)
Empowerment	N=17 (3%)

The top five concepts that students identify as most meaningful are gender, intersectionality, inequality, equity, and empowerment, in that order. Almost half of the sample (49%) indicated that gender was the most important concept gained during their degree. Thirty-eight percent of respondents cited intersectionality. There is a significant drop from the first two categories to the next three—almost 90% listed either gender or intersectionality. Just 6% of respondents cited inequality (how economic and social rewards are distributed across society unequally) as the most important concept learned. Equity, which includes ideas about compassion, fairness, justice, and equality, was cited by just 4% of graduates. Empowerment refers to ideas about the importance of self-advocacy, as well as advocacy on the behalf of others (i.e., feminist collective struggle), and was cited as important by 3% of respondents. It is striking that intersectionality shows up so strongly here. The emphasis on intersectionality may be a reflection of its increasing importance in undergraduate teaching over the past two decades. I discuss this finding in depth in the discussion section. Now we turn to looking at if intersectionality shows up in reference to a graduate’s skills.

**Table 3**

Critical Thinking	Knowledge	Communication	Awareness	Empowerment
N=262 (45.9%)	N=85 (14.9%)	N=114 (20%)	N=67 (11.7%)	N=33 (5.8%)

Multiple/ Diverse Analytical Perspec- tives	Gender Aware- ness	Speaking	Patience	Leader- ship
Planning and/or Evaluat- ing	Theory	Writing	Tolerance	Persever- ance/ Tenacity
	Research	Listening	Accep- tance	Agency
	Praxis	Inter- personal Skills	Empathy	Autono- my/ Indepen- dence
	Intersec- tionality	Network- ing	Sensitivity	Personal Strength
	Diversity	Equanim- ity	Openness	Assertive- ness
	Ethics			Work Ethic

The skill that was reported with the highest frequency by graduates was critical thinking skills. Almost half of the respondents (46%) indicated that critical thinking was the skill that they attributed to their degree. The second highest reported skill was communication. This skill set included a number of attributes (speaking, writing, listening, networking, and equanimity) and 20% of undergraduates in women's and gender studies reported this as an important aspect of their degree. The third area of skills reported by graduates was knowledge. This skill was reported by approximately 15% of the sample. The skill coded as knowledge reflects applied ideas about core curriculum. Specifically, topics such as theory, research, and ethics along with gender awareness, intersectionality, and diversity make up this category. The fourth top skill reported was awareness and includes a set of skills that can be seen as interpersonal, including building empathy, developing tolerance, and openness to new ideas. This skill was re-

ported by 11% of the sample. Empowerment is the fifth top skill reported by 5% of the sample. Empowerment includes ideas about praxis, agency, and leadership.

Although graduates identified intersectionality as a top concept learned during their women's and gender studies training, it was not identified as an important skill. Intersectionality shows up marginally within the "knowledge" skill.

These findings demonstrate the ways in which intersectionality shows up in graduates' recall of the most important skills and concepts. However, this material alone does not provide a sense of how students use this concept and/or skill nor how it is used beyond their undergraduate career.

We turn now to a descriptive analysis examining the open-ended question: "How does this concept assist you in either your professional or personal life, or both?" Three themes emerged from the descriptive analyses of open-ended questions: professional development, connection to others, and intersectional thinking infusing one's worldview.

*Theme One: Intersectionality and Professional Development*

The first theme focuses on professional life. Respondents made numerous and specific references to how they apply intersectional thinking in the workplace and their professional lives. Many described it as an asset and something that enhances their ability to be good at their job. They also referred to intersectionality as helping them to be aware of how issues of power, diversity, and privilege are constituted in the workplace. The following quotes are representative of how people described using intersectionality in their professional lives:

It has positioned me in various jobs to take a leadership role in working to make organizational change in areas such as diversity.

These concepts, together, keep me from thinking and writing in rigid binaries and push me to always investigate power dynamics within texts and relationships. Particularly in the 'development' or fundraising field, it is crucial to examine power dynamics and avoid the pitfalls of 'donor-recipient' binary thinking.

I manage volunteers for [a] Family and Community Health [Center]. We treat clients who are disadvantaged in almost every way. Some volunteers don't understand why they don't 'just get a job' or 'stop going back to him.' Women's Studies gave me vocabulary to explain the contexts in which most of our clients live.

These concepts are empowering for me personally, but also allow me to be more effective in advocacy and empowerment work.

Enables me to understand how multiple oppressions/standpoints affect scholarship applicants in my work, allowing me to serve women more effectively.

It helps me to assess what problems others may face multi-dimensionally; i.e., a patient's mental illness may be related to social factors.

I think it makes me a marketable candidate...I can relate to many people. I understand how the facets of our identity make us all individuals, but how this interconnects all of us.

There is a great deal of occupational diversity in this sample; respondents are entrepreneurs, public sector employees, artists, lawyers, campaign managers, etc. However, there are also a high number of health-care workers (e.g., medical doctors, nurses, researchers, etc.), social service providers, and educators. People from these three professional backgrounds often provided detailed examples about the usefulness of intersectionality. Healthcare workers, ranging from clinicians to midwives to technicians, felt that intersectional analysis was crucial in administering care and thinking about structural inequality. People working in the social service field used the word "justice" to describe how intersectionality helped them relate to clients and problem-solve together. K-12 and college educators talked about its value in a classroom to identify with underserved students' needs and also to bring up issues of difference. Graduate students and professors talked about intersectionality shaping their intellectual interests and providing them with an important foundation for later work. These comments underscore the above points:

I am thinking of applying this concept in my PhD re-

search, which will be heavily focused on how gender and raced relations shape globalized lives in our societies.

Understanding the barriers that are faced by individuals who have intersecting minority identities has been crucial for me. It has helped me be effective both in teaching minority children and in interviewing inmates.

In my professional life, I try seeing issues from multiple perspectives. Particularly, I hold in high regard the stories of the HIV+ people we work with. I am empathetic to the barriers they have faced in every aspect of their lives—including health care access.

Since I am going into urban underserved primary care, this framework will be central and has been central to my understanding of patients' and communities' situations who I work with.

This has helped me immensely in learning how to develop a more equitable healthcare delivery system.

It actually helped form the basis of my dissertation, which is a study of how domestic service was a site of racial formation for domestic workers in nineteenth century New York.

In the field of counselling, clients may be experiencing simultaneously obstacles and privileges. Understanding that this can exist simultaneously better prepares me to assist my clients and understand their needs.

[Intersectionality helps] teaching undergrads, my research, understanding where different people are coming from, understanding power/privilege of others and myself.

### *Theme Two: Intersectionality Strengthens Connection with Others*

The second theme that emerged from the data is that intersectionality gives respondents the tools to connect in a meaningful way with others. Respondents talked about intersectionality as contributing to helping them operate with more compassion, tolerance, and open-mindedness. They also said intersectionality aided awareness of the needs of people who are different than them, contribute to their cultural competency in the world, making it "easier to see where people

are coming from.” Many mentioned that this concept helped them with being a good ally (e.g., cisgender or white). This was often tied to thinking about privilege (especially white privilege) in one’s life. These ideas were conveyed throughout both respondents’ personal and professional lives:

It forces me to consistently think about how/why certain groups are disadvantaged, and reminds me to keep my own privilege in check.

Helps me to see the ways in which things are connected. It also helps me to recognize my class, race, and religious privilege instead of focusing on the fact that I ‘don’t’ have gender privilege.

It helps me be a more aware person, and allows me to see the connections between social justice movements and the need for us all to work together.

[Intersectionality] helps me to see and attempt to understand the world from perspectives other than my own. These concepts have also been key in allowing me to be a productive ally of groups to which I do not belong.

It helps me understand the complexity of different people, which gives me patience, empathy, and intelligence in social situations.

### *Theme 3: Intersectionality Infuses Worldview*

The final theme is that of intersectionality infusing and shaping a worldview. Respondents described the manner in which intersectionality structured and influenced their thinking in ways that made little distinction between personal and private life. These respondents were also more likely to say that they apply it every day. Their comments tended to focus on the big picture of dismantling macro-structures and their role in recognizing and changing oppressive systems. Unlike respondents above who often described their thoughts from an interpersonal perspective, these respondents tended to see a bigger picture. Comments stressed that intersectionality helps one to understand the “systemic nature of oppression,” “greater oppressive systems,” and how one can operate out of that “web” to make positive individual and group decisions. For many graduates, in-

tersectionality structures much of their worldview:

Intersectionality opened my eyes to the relationships among race, sex, class, ethnicity, religion, ability, etc. Studying intersectionality has improved my understanding of racism, classism, sexism, and other obstacles people face in their personal and professional lives.

The intersectional nature of oppression is the cornerstone of my worldview, activist efforts, teaching, and scholarship. I think about it and apply it daily.

That we, and all the oppressions, are all interconnected. It assists me every day in both my professional and personal life. From what I eat, to how I drive, to when I decide to ride a bike, to where I work, to who I give legal advice to, to how I give advice (‘gatekeeper’), to where I spend my money, what I spend it on, how I take care of myself and my family, to having the ability and privilege to make all these decisions.

Race, class, gender and sexuality is in play during every single moment of people’s lives. It can have an effect on how a patient acts when they walk in through the clinic door, to the kind of treatment and medical care they receive. In my personal life, I find aspects of race, class, sexuality, and gender are present in the news, advertisements, all forms of entertainment, and how the people I know live and react to their day to day lives.

I live and work in Detroit so I interact with people from all walks of life, many of whom have faced or still face huge barriers due to race and class. Learning about intersectionality and reading theorists discussing race and class while in college has helped me to be a better contributor in my community.

Again, it’s sort of the whole point—‘helping’ through an anti-oppression lens, which demands that individuals be more than their identity categories, and that the service I provide be centred around my clients’ definition of justice and not my own.

I see gender as inextricably tied to race, class, sexuality, ability, and other dimensions of difference. Thus, I don’t treat ‘gender issues’ on college campuses as something separate from the rest of who students are or from ‘racial issues,’ etc. In my personal life, one example is that in my



friendships with white women, I try to keep race and racialization, power and privilege, etc. on the table—try to challenge friends to learn to see their whiteness the same way they see their gender.

## Discussion

In this survey, intersectionality as a useful concept is what emerges most strongly among graduates' responses. Intersectionality helps them to continue to reflect on oppression in its multiple manifestations, work in tangible ways to combat it, and draw on it as an analytical perspective in their area of employment. Attention to intersectionality allows them to be aware of and challenge a pattern of binary thinking. Doing so aids them in understanding how their personal and professional decisions could reverberate across multiple communities. Respondents also provide insights about the value of intersectional thinking in cultivating empathy and civic engagement. Many graduates who work in the fields of healthcare and social work spent time discussing intersectionality's important uses in their respective fields.

In contrast, as noted above, intersectionality also shows up in the skills question under knowledge though rather weakly. Graduates in these few cases, however, shared similar observations with those who used it as a concept. They described intersectionality as useful in the professional context. The two responses below are representative of the comments:

I am able to understand people around me in a way I would not be able to without having studied GWS.

[It is a] key skill as an academic and extremely useful for future work (starting this summer) at the American Embassy in London.

There may be several reasons why intersectionality shows up only modestly under skills. One reason may be that intersectionality may not be discussed by instructors as a type of skill. Respondents' exposure to the breadth and depth of intersectionality may have also varied from class to class. It also may reflect differences in intersectional training across countries. Although there is heightened emphasis on skills in the rhetoric of undergraduate education, it is unclear if students are taught to identify skill-based learning. Students and

graduates may also have a difficult time thinking about and articulating skills in the way that faculty members and deans do. We also do not know if intersectional thinking was discussed with respondents while undergraduates as a key skill (or concept) that would aid with professional development.

Interest in and scholarship on intersectionality has grown exponentially in the field of women's and gender studies and across the academy, sparking conferences, symposia, special issue journals, and numerous scholarly articles and books. These findings point to the stability, central positioning, and value placed on intersectionality, post the first graduates of women's and gender studies, within the undergraduate curriculum. This may be welcome news for those who wish to see the role of intersectionality even more fully realized and less contested (see May 2012; Crenshaw 2010).

Moreover, employers are routinely cited as stating that they want culturally competent, globally aware, and ethically grounded graduates. In a recent United States study about employer preferences for skills, the majority of employers surveyed said it was important that candidates that they hire demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, and the capacity for continued new learning (Association of American Colleges and Universities and Hart Research Associates 2013). In another survey of employers, they highly ranked the ability to work in a team and possessing interpersonal skills (defined as relating well to others) as important for graduates (National Association of Colleges and Employers 2016). It is possible that students who utilize intersectional thinking may be attractive as candidates. These kinds of applied skills can be difficult to document and assess in typical undergraduate assessment tools. Moving forward, women's and gender studies administrators and faculty have an opportunity to support students to even better understand and describe the value of intersectionality.

Many questions, however, arise from these findings. On one hand, these findings confirm intersectionality's visibility in the field and reflect its emphasis in the undergraduate curriculum (and by extension graduate training). Conversely, it raises other questions including: What do we expect intersectionality to accomplish at the undergraduate level? To contribute to lifelong civic engagement? To help graduates in the employment world? Is intersectionality an approach that should be

fused seamlessly into all women's and gender studies education? Is intersectionality primarily in the curriculum to function as a concept or is it a skill? And if so, what kind of skill? Is it a concept that enables other skills? Is it the ability to critically discern who or what is missing from a set of situations or scenarios? Given that intersectionality did not show up strongly as a skill, is this a pedagogical challenge? What are the kinds of things we want students to do with intersectionality after they leave the college or university setting? Graduates are often engaging intersectional thinking as a set of practices, behaviours, and approaches that keep them open and aware of diverse perspectives. They strongly value having learned about intersectionality in a way that offered them a lens from which to operate. In the responses, there was much emphasis on personal learning and development. I flag this finding not to suggest that intersectionality being identified as a set of "soft skills" is wrong or "too personal," but to encourage us to continue to think about how intersectional thinking can be applied to an increasingly complex, segmented, and global workplace. The argument here is not that only one model of intersectional training (tightly focused on outcomes or securing employment) is needed, but that more thought should be given to ways that programs and departments can highlight this unique feature of undergraduate training as one that distinguishes them from their peers and that also may be highly useful in the workplace.

Thus far, in this paper, I have focused on understanding the survey data where respondents rank intersectionality as an important concept. Although it did not show up prominently under skills, I think there is more to consider about the relationship between intersectionality and skills. I offer these thoughts as a beginning point for a larger discussion in the field. First, the data suggest that intersectionality functions as an analytical tool or approach when learned in the classroom, but when put into practice operates more as a skill and potentially facilitates the enabling of other skills. What are the possible benefits of thinking about and claiming intersectional analysis also as a skill (or set of skills)? There could be several benefits. Conceiving of intersectionality as a skill may encourage a deeper engagement with the intellectual history of intersectionality. Ange-Marie Hancock (2016) and Vivian M. May (2012) have both documented the ways in which,

despite intersectionality's long history, intellectual rigor, and transformational potential, it is sometimes used "in name only" or as description (May 2012, 162). When educators consider a certain practice a particular skill, they often have to make conscious pedagogical choices (e.g., how do these particular readings or exercises support and encourage the skill of critical thinking or research analysis?). Interpreting intersectional thinking as skill-based could support that kind of engagement.

Thinking of intersectionality as a skill might offer new opportunities for curricular integration. Educators could take a critical lens to their curriculum and consider: How does intersectional thinking, as a skill, develop from an introductory class to a senior capstone? They could also ask: How can intersectional thinking be utilized in multiple ways across the curriculum that could help to anchor students' work in internships, senior seminars, study abroad, etc.? Conceptualizing intersectionality as a set of skills at the undergraduate level may also help students recognize and articulate the value of intersectionality prior to graduation.

Clues about how one might approach intersectional thinking as a skill lie in the varied ways that researchers are grappling with methodological questions inside and outside of women's and gender studies. Researchers are continuing to wrestle with the complexity of intersectionality and trying to apply it to varied projects. Increasingly, a methodological framework for intersectional research attends to the social location of the researcher (e.g., race, class, and gender), looks at relationships of power from multiple dimensions, and reveals systems of power that can be micro- or macro-focused (see Weber 2004; Berger and Guidroz 2009; Choo and Ferree 2010). There is also particular interest in these questions about projects that involve the complexities of operationalizing and making decisions about interacting with human subjects (see Cole and Sabik 2009; Thing 2010). These considerations might constitute a type of scaffolding for intersectional thinking as a skill.

I understand that some may be troubled by this discussion and believe that the down sides of focusing on intersectionality as a skill is that such a move will seem like a narrow operationalization or stifle creative thinking as well as lean heavily on the aspects of intersectional thinking that can be assessed in a quantifiable

way. As addressed above, I believe the gains of understanding intersectional thinking as a skill outweighs the potential harms. Emphasizing intersectional thinking as a skill provides an opportunity to make this facet of women's and gender studies education more visible to students as well as to other stakeholders in the academy (e.g., deans and provosts). It also provides another mechanism for job-seeking graduates to highlight the value of this work to employers.

Although this is the most institutionally and globally diverse sample collected from graduates graduating over a fifteen year period, there are some things to keep in mind. These findings show us strong patterns, but are not generalizable. There is not a comparison group to other liberal arts majors. Additionally, some have argued that self-reports from students are less reliable than other forms of data for assessing undergraduate skills (Arum and Roska 2011). And, finally, although the sample is diverse by country, the United States and Canada represent the majority of respondents. Despite these caveats, this work raises a useful and compelling picture of intersectionality and fills in long standing silences about women's and gender studies students' understanding and use of concepts and skills.

## Conclusion

This paper has made an empirical contribution to the literature of concept and skill development in women's and gender studies. Questions, however, remain about what to emphasize in training students about intersectionality and how to assess intersectionality. While I agree with Michele Fine's assessment that teaching intersectionality is about how to "theorize with complexity" (Guidroz and Berger 2009, 72), that formulation leaves open a wide field of interpretation. The majority of the discussion of pedagogy as connected to intersectionality in the undergraduate classroom has focused on supporting faculty to deepen their knowledge of intersectionality, techniques for how to apply it in their classrooms, strategies for managing resistance, and intersectionality as a type of feminist practice (see Naples 2009; Crenshaw 2010; Alejano-Steele et al. 2011; Davis 2010; Jones and Wijeyesinghe 2011; Lee 2012). This line of inquiry, however, does not offer insights into how teaching about intersectionality might help students utilize it after graduation in professional and/or civic life. Understanding how students grasp and re-

tain ideas about intersectionality may point to the kinds of pedagogical trajectories that will continue to be most productive to nurture.

This paper also makes an argument for understanding intersectional thinking as constituting a skill and/or enabling the facilitation of other skills. Such a move would potentially serve students better, encourage increased curricular coherence about intersectionality, and suggests a maturation of intersectionality's importance in the field. In an era of increasing emphasis on assessment within higher education that is used to justify costs, coupled with attacks on the liberal arts and its ability to meaningfully educate and employ graduates, it is advantageous and strategic for interdisciplinary fields, such as women's and gender studies, to empirically know more about what we do and how well we do it. Continued nuanced empirical research about the retention and impact of intersectionality (and other highly valued concepts) in undergraduate curricula can only strengthen the field.

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## Acknowledgements

I am grateful for comments on earlier versions of this paper given by Lisa Pearce and Karolyn Tyson. I am also deeply appreciative of the comments I received from graduate students during fall 2015 in my WMST 890: Exploring Intersectionality course. Sarah Pederson, a research assistant, also deserves thanks. And, finally, I thank the reviewers for their helpful and insightful feedback.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Vivian M. May (2012), in her essay "Intersectionality," gives a creative and detailed list of ten of intersectionality's critical practices. I have borrowed and condensed this list to those that are most likely touched on, albeit briefly, in most women's and gender studies classes. As of May 2017, NWSA no longer maintains this list.

<sup>2</sup> Survey is available upon request to the author.

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