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The New Normal: WGS Programs and Professionally-Driven Students

Abstract

In today's volatile economic climate, students are increasingly choosing courses and majors that are primarily focused on professionally valuable skills and employment opportunities. This trend poses challenges for Women and Gender Studies programs, calling for a shift in both instructional and institutional strategies within the field. Yet, far from finding this a detriment, we have found that Women and Gender Studies courses have considerable value for professionally-driven students. In addition, we have found that the presence of professionally-driven students in Women and Gender Studies courses present opportunities for WGS programs. This article discusses the instructional and institutional implications of the inclusion of professionally-driven students in Women and Gender Studies programs at Mesa Community College, as well as findings from the 2016 Seneca Falls Dialogues.

THE NEW NORMAL: WGS PROGRAMS AND PROFESSIONALLY-DRIVEN STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

In today's uncertain economic climate, students are understandably anxious about the cost of higher education. Fearing lasting debt, they are tending more toward programs that appear to lead directly to economic benefits, either by reducing the time until graduation or by raising their expected earnings afterwards. Cost considerations are particularly acute for students who rely extensively on financial aid to pay for their classes, and who may move in and out of student status for economic reasons on their way to a certificate or degree. Today's students "are rationing their time and money" according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* quoting Jerome S. Parker, president of Dallas County Community College (Hoover). For students like these, every course may be weighed in terms of either number of requirements a course can fulfill or the value of immediately marketable skills. Women and Gender Studies (WGS), like the Humanities in general, has seen an increase in the number of professionally-driven students who are taking these classes mainly as electives to meet graduation requirements.

The authors of this paper have direct experience developing and sustaining WGS with professionally-driven students at Mesa Community College, in Phoenix, Arizona. During our presentation and discussion at the 2016 Seneca Falls Dialogues, it became clear that our experiences were not an anomaly, as other universities, colleges, and community colleges were facing similar trends among their students as well as impacts on their programs. The thesis of this article is that Women and Gender Studies (WGS) provides important and practical

knowledge for professionally-driven students; that the rise in number of professionally-driven students offers an opportunity for sustaining and even growing WGS programs and their impact in light of this trend; and that this trend of increasing numbers of professionally-driven students in WGS classes has implications for teaching WGS.

BENEFITS OF WGS FOR PROFESSIONALLY-DRIVEN STUDENTS

We see the value of WGS for professionally-driven students in three areas: identity, interrogation of power, and community-building. First, coursework for professionally-driven students is usually focused on learning a new body of knowledge and skills to prepare them to perform a role in an existing profession such as nursing, computer science, or business. In these classes, the pedagogy is mostly didactic. Also, the learning environment promotes sameness as students learn what is expected of them in their new profession. In contrast, WGS encourages an exploration of personal identity in a thoughtful and critical manner. As bell hooks asserts in her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, education is “the practice of freedom,” in which “our work is not merely to share information but to share the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” (13). This exploration of identity is important as it is a natural stage of development for 18 – 22 year olds. Even non-traditional students pursuing a professional degree are returning to the classroom for a transformation of their lives, which includes a shift in their own self-perception. Understanding what is unique about oneself can also lead to accepting the uniqueness of others. Peter McLaren notes, “Feminist pedagogy is committed to a nuanced understanding of identity that acknowledges...the differences between and among the students” (43). WGS classrooms, with a focus on intersectionality and diversity, support what Pena, et al. refer to as “equity-mindedness” (48), an outlook that promotes fairness while acknowledging differences in identities, histories and lived experiences. For professionally-driven students this perspective is invaluable, for they will be entering new careers in an ever-diversifying society.

Second, because professionally-driven students focus on job

opportunities in established professions, courses in their majors often reinforce existing structures and cultural norms. It would be unusual for these professional skill-based classes to critique the systems and hierarchies the students are preparing to enter. In contrast, foundational teaching in WGS courses is to invite students to interrogate power through the lens of gender, along with developing an understanding of intersectionalities of oppressions. These theories go beyond the mere negation of power. In her discussion of power and intersectionality, Susanne Knudsen states, "Power is not only a matter of suppression. Rather power may be defined as productive and positive. Closely related to power is the commitment to knowledge and truth" (67). This last point is particularly relevant for professionally-driven students, who will of necessity be entering established power structures and seeking their own agency within them.

We have seen that exposing professionally-driven students to feminist issues and theories can shape their professional studies and lives. For example, one of Ursic's students became interested in supporting women-owned businesses in India and the U.S. in her field of fashion merchandising and design as a result of taking a WGS class. She designed a business proposal for developing long-fiber cotton that would benefit women in both countries. Such a tangible and immediate effect demonstrates the potential for WGS to reach well beyond academics into societal activism and change.

Third, the major courses for professionally-driven students tend to focus on the development of skills in the individual. In contrast, WGS creates a classroom environment where all students listen to and learn from each other. When class members feel themselves to be a community co-creating knowledge, it encourages respectful dialogue and mutual support. Creating time and ways for students to get to know each other and create community within the classroom is helpful, as it fosters relationships that promote a willingness to listen to and support each other (Reflexive).

Moreover, community is foundational for a feminist value system, which emphasizes a more egalitarian approach to the creation of

knowledge. Innovative techniques for creating and utilizing community in WGS classroom experience is critical, especially for professionally-driven students. Modeling less hierarchy and more collaboration and dialogue in the classroom can help students to see hierarchy and patriarchy in other classes and work environments. While didactic and hierarchical forms of teaching and learning might be appropriate for professional courses where specialized skill-building is a focus, eventually professionally-driven students will have to learn how to work collaboratively with a diversity of peers, subordinates, superiors, and clients.

Creating community with a diversity of student backgrounds, including the presence of professionally-driven students, can also be a gift for WGS class discussions because the students themselves generate the range of opinions and views regarding gender, sexuality, and truth claims that allows the professor to frame discussions with relevant feminist theories. Even today there are students who are surprised at Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, let alone E. Patrick Johnson's quare theory, and its critique of queer theory using "racialized sexual knowledge" (3). Equally important, when some students claim truth based on other sources, such as the inerrancy of the Bible, their statements offer a way to introduce alternative approaches to reading patriarchal texts and defining truth using a feminist lens. The use of alternate epistemologies also demonstrates that the WGS class can do more than just teach; it can model ways to put teaching into practice that professionally-driven students can introduce into their careers when given the chance.

WGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS

This shift in student interest in professional degrees also has implications for our educational institutions. The following discussion, which combines our own institutional experiences with those of participants at the Seneca Falls Dialogues, reveals the general shifts and realignments of WGS over the past forty years. We begin with our own experience.

Mesa Community College, where we teach, is the largest of ten colleges in the Maricopa Community College District (MCCCD), one of the largest community college districts in the nation. MCCCD has a combined enrollment of over a quarter million students (Maricopa Community Colleges: Demographics). Paralleling national trends, MCCCD faculty in the 1970s began to include women's issues within their disciplines. In the 1980s, planning began to create a women's studies department, with the intention that the courses would be taught by full-time tenured women's studies faculty. The 1990s brought institutional approval for a WST prefix in order to create courses exclusively focused on women's studies. A women's studies program was created, comprised of cross-listed courses from various disciplines, as well as new WST-only courses (Course Search). Qualifications to teach the new WST courses require a masters in WST.

While the WST prefix has remained, the larger vision of a WST department with dedicated full-time tenured faculty has never been accomplished. In the new millennium, development of WST at Mesa Community College has stalled, and participants at the Seneca Falls Dialogues reported a similar loss of WST momentum at their institutions. Even WST programs with department status have had their funding cut, their faculty reduced, and a moratorium or reduction in tenured faculty lines.

At MCC we have seen that when an academic program does not achieve its structural goals, secondary problems arise. In our case, no full-time faculty has been hired with a WST graduate degree because there was no departmental position for it. As a consequence, our core WST classes are all taught by adjuncts and there is no institutionally recognized position for WST advocacy. At the Seneca Falls Dialogues similar situations emerged, such as promises of tenure that failed to materialize, and faculty being required to take on administration of WST programs with no additional compensation.

To address the stagnation at MCC, we have refocused our efforts with a new programmatic vision for WST and we see professionally-driven students as a key to this change. Instead of seeking departmental

status, our focus has shifted to raising the profile of WST at the institution in multiple ways. The first has been to update the name and scope of the program, following a trend in the discipline, from Women's Studies (WST) to Women and Gender studies (WGS).

The second has been to expand the number of approved cross-listed WGS courses. It had been over twenty years since cross-listing was the focus of the program, and many relevant courses had been developed in other departments during that time, especially around themes of sexuality. When we initiated contact, we found these other departments were happy to expand their reach. Expanding the offering of WGS cross-listed courses has raised the profile of WGS among administration, expanded our network of WGS faculty allies, and increased interest in WGS among professionally-driven students.

A third approach has been to encourage faculty to include feminist theory in non-crosslisted courses. In an Introduction to Mythology course, Sheffield added feminist theories to the curriculum, encouraging their use in analyzing myths and their effects on cultural belief systems and social structures. In one class, a trans-female who had been performing as a male asked to perform as a goddess in a presentation, leading to a full-class discussion of performativity, embodiment, and assigned gender roles, something that may not have occurred had feminist theories not been prominent in the course.

A fourth effort has been to rethink the initiatives and programs offered through the MCC WGS committee. While the committee continues to focus its efforts on Domestic Violence Month and Women's History Month, we have been intent on using these platforms to raise awareness among our colleagues in STEM and other professional fields. For example, we chose to focus on Women in STEM for Women's History Month in 2016. This decision gave us the opportunity to contact the chairs of these departments and request that they include an agenda item for their department meetings to generate names of women in their field for us to highlight during the month. The result has been an increased awareness and appreciation of WGS by STEM departments.

Finally, we have adjusted the requirements for teaching the

WGS-only courses to allow faculty from related fields whose graduate work focused on gender to teach the WGS core courses. This action may not be applicable to all institutions, but we have realized that without at least some full-time tenured faculty teaching the core WGS courses, the program could easily disappear. This solution has also allowed us to embed WGS institutionally and reach a broader spectrum of students. A similar solution was offered by another participant at the Seneca Falls Dialogues, who found herself developing WGS modules for professional graduate degree programs such as business and law, where WGS theory has practical applications and legal ramifications.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WGS TEACHING

There are implications for WGS faculty to consider in the teaching and course structure as more professionally-driven students take their classes. First, because these students are already committed to another career path, the professionally-driven student will more often take one or two WGS courses rather than a complete WGS program or major. This trend suggests that most classes will include students taking a WGS course for the first time as an elective. As our Seneca Falls Dialogues session revealed, even at upper division and graduate levels, faculty will often find some students needing an introduction to the discipline. Building time at the beginning of the course for foundational WGS readings and lecture content will help all students in the class to participate and succeed as a cohort.

Second, a balance must be struck between the emphasis on theory and activism within a WGS course that includes professionally-driven students. While the discussion at the Seneca Falls Dialogues mirrored the ongoing debate regarding activism versus theory, further exploration showed the need for both grounded application as well as theoretical framing when teaching WGS. For students, who are seeking both new ways to view themselves and the world and new ways to integrate these revelatory insights into their lives, both theory and activism are essential. When teaching theory, it is important to remember that students who view their education in more utilitarian ways want to

know how a theory connects with their lives. In large part, we see this as a fruitful challenge for teaching because WGS theory in a vacuum may not necessarily inspire the societal change it points to. Theory becomes relevant and exciting for students when they can connect it to their own individual freedom, agency, voice, and identity, and apply new theoretical tools for social analysis and critique.

Additionally, activism continues to evolve both inside and outside of organizations, and therefore, teaching that inspires activism needs to evolve as well. As WGS research has shown, feminist coalitions are finding ways to protest within patriarchal organizations (Katzenstein). Teaching a WGS class can help students reflect and identify where they see a best fit for their particular skills and talents to work on the causes they care about. It is particularly important to educate professionally-driven students to become aware of intersectional identities in the workplace so that they are prepared to address these issues when they arise in their careers. This awareness is the foundation of activism, which can make the workplace more equitable for all and can be a potential gift for the larger economy and society. In addition, understanding how gender and sexual identities continue to evolve and how employers are responding to changing social norms and legal requirements is essential for students to understand as they embark on their careers today.

CONCLUSION

The realities surrounding today's students and their educational choices suggest that the focus on professionally-driven majors will continue. We are pleased to see WGS faculty being proactive in rethinking their programs in light of this trend as well as innovative new course offerings and partnerships on their campuses. Our experience advocating for WGS at a large urban community college has shown us the value of WGS for professionally-driven students. Our Seneca Falls Dialogues confirmed this trend for four-year and graduate programs as well. Students at all levels of higher education are not only seeking ways to change the economic realities of their lives, but they are also exploring their sense of

purpose and identity at the same time. Instead of seeing professionally-driven students as ancillary to a WGS program, we see an opportunity to have broader impact across the student body. WGS courses can bring students together from a variety of backgrounds and interests, and WGS classes can provide a cohort of support, creating change on campus and in the wider community.

The curriculum and student services challenges that MCCC and MCC have faced in the new millennium regarding Women and Gender Studies are not unique to our institution. As we have seen from our session at the Seneca Falls Dialogues, other institutions of higher learning are also facing challenges in anchoring WGS faculty and in sustaining resources and support on their campuses. Nor are the concerns currently facing WGS unique to this field. All academic disciplines must continually adapt to remain relevant to current trends and needs, both from outside and inside their institutions.

While we expect that there will always be students who pursue PhDs in WGS to become the next generation of academic and prophetic voices in the field, we recognize that serving the ever-increasing population of professionally-driven students is a different but equally important role for WGS faculty and programs. WGS offers students the education to analyze and reconceptualize the world around them and to find their voice for contributing to positive change in the world. Quite simply, when students connect their personal agency and passion with their career choices, they enter the workforce with greater confidence, focus, and purpose. WGS education for professionally-driven students is essential to students' becoming transformational leaders that shape a better world for today and tomorrow.

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