

**QUESTIONS FOR A NEW CENTURY:
WOMEN'S STUDIES AND INTEGRATIVE LEARNING**

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Past efforts to assess the field of Women's Studies include Ford Foundation sponsored reports by Catharine Stimpson (1986) and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1995). A FIPSE-funded study was led by Caryn McTighe Musil and yielded three 1992 publications. Recent assessments are lacking, and there is a contradiction between the field's assertion that it is at the forefront of educational change and the reality that program goals, student outcomes, and assessment methods have changed little in a dozen years. Women's Studies must engage in renewed assessment efforts in order to maintain its leadership position, and this document offers a snapshot of the status of the field.

I. Why have there been no recent assessments of the field?

Many feminists distrust assessment. The onerous task can be used to deny them resources. Smaller programs report difficulties in gaining access to data, which is collected primarily around students' major fields. To overcome these barriers, Women's Studies faculty should work with existing assignments and structures, and institutions should provide programs with the same data available to large departments. The emphasis on self-reflection in Women's Studies lends itself to portfolio assessment, and electronic portfolios offer opportunities to gain digital literacy to students who might be intimidated by technology. Practitioners should therefore develop better strategies for using portfolios.

II. What do students learn in Women's Studies?

Web research on multiple programs reveals common learning outcomes. Students at all levels should demonstrate increasing understanding of the differences between sex and gender; women's contributions to humanity; variations in women's experiences; interlocking forms of oppression; situated knowledge; the social construction of gender; the gendered construction of knowledge; systems of privilege; womanism; major issues pertaining to contemporary women; key concepts in feminist theory; and the history of feminist activism.

Additionally, graduates should demonstrate competence in applying cross-cultural and global awareness to "big questions" about gender; taking multiple perspectives; thinking critically about one's self and others; recognizing sexism and racism; connecting knowledge; using gender as a category for analysis.

Depending on their resources, Women's Studies undergraduate programs also share certain elements: a required introductory general education class; cross-listed electives including courses focusing on women of color or lesbians; a required feminist theory class; capstones or research projects; a service learning or activism component; and feminist pedagogy. Graduate programs have common elements as well, including a required feminist theory class; feminist research methods; an extended research project or thesis; required courses on globalism, U.S. women of color, LGBT issues, or some combination thereof.

III. What are Women's Studies assessment strategies?

Strategies include pre- and post-tests; essays coded with a rubric; exit interviews; alumnae surveys; focus groups; portfolios; course evaluations; sampling; and class observations.

Most programs combine qualitative and quantitative methods. Women's Studies practitioners are encouraged to involve students in assessment because evaluation itself is an essential skill.

Graduates may be asked to assess information; workplace processes and structures; budgets; and the alignment of mission to goals. The history of student participation in Women's Studies programs makes them ideal sites for developing best practices in this area.

IV. What about program reviews?

While program reviews are time-consuming, their results are generally positive. Figures on credit hour production and costs often reveal that, rather than draining institutional resources, Women's Studies programs serve large numbers of undergraduates inexpensively. Other useful indicators include student and alumnae achievements; faculty publications, grants, and service; and programs' resources.

Feminist evaluators can lend credence to staff recommendations when they serve as participants in an on-going process of reflection rather than as gate-keepers. External reviewers should also comment on the campus climate because this factor has a significant effect on programs.

V. What are new questions for assessment?

1. What is the relationship between Women's Studies and STEM learning?
2. How do we build coherent programs with incremental skills development when students pursue increasingly complex paths through college?
3. How do students become engaged in large introductory Women's Studies courses?

4. In what ways are Women's Studies classes rigorous? How do they challenge students to do their best work and to apply knowledge to "real world" situations?
5. How do Women's Studies courses prepare women for nontraditional careers?
6. How does the emphasis on an "ethic of care," hands-on learning, and social justice prepare our students to be productive citizens? How can we better integrate knowledge about women of color (in the US and internationally) throughout the curriculum?
7. What are the effects of on-line Women's Studies courses? How can we promote digital literacy among women?
8. What new assessment techniques are appropriate to Women's Studies?
9. What can other disciplines learn from our leadership in these areas?

The climate of accountability in higher education focuses more on numbers than on posing these "what" and "how" questions. Yet graduation rates, GPAs and job placement figures do not indicate whether individuals develop skills necessary for the global workplace, empathy and a willingness to help others, or abilities to learn throughout life. For these reasons, it is imperative that we continue assessment efforts and use what learn to lead in higher education innovation.