

"A Short History of Women's Studies at UIC"

by Judith Kegan Gardiner

After students at Kent State and Jackson State Universities were shot by National Guardsmen during protests against the U.S. war in Vietnam in 1970, many campuses across the country, including UIC, sponsored teach-ins to discuss their universities' connections with the war and with contemporary movements for social change. I and a few other women involved with New University Conference, a politically radical but not feminist group, found ourselves defending the recent Women's Liberation Movement against charges that feminism was trivial, exclusively personal, or divisive to left activism.

As we defended feminism, we began to study it and join local women's organizations. Philosopher Sandra Bartky and I, along with other women no longer at UIC, allied with women students who were active in campaigns for university-sponsored childcare and adequate health services. On February 15, 1972, we held our own teach-in to celebrate Susan B. Anthony's birthday and focus on women's issues. We formed a new student and faculty women's group called the Circle Women's Liberation Union that affiliated with the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, a city-wide umbrella organization for feminist activists who were also committed to fighting against racism and U.S. imperialism. (UIC faculty member emerita and feminist historian Peg Strobel has written about the history of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union.) The Circle Women's Liberation Union in its first year developed a five-part proposal that many of us have been working to implement ever since: an academic Women's Studies Program to make knowledge by, about, and for women in all fields accessible to students; a campus center for women's services; free, full-time childcare on campus for the children of all students, faculty, and staff who wanted it; a women's research and resource center; and adequate health services on campus for women. In over three decades of organizing effort, we achieved most of these goals, although sometimes in scaled-down or revised forms. For example, we helped establish the Circle Children's Center on both sides of campus, an excellent provider of child care with innovative pedagogy and sliding scale user fees that is small in comparison to the potential demand. And we have expanded our scope to foster scholarship and teaching about gender and sexuality in diverse social contexts.

The campus has several sources for research about women, including the collection of women's manuscripts and documents in the library's Midwest Women's Historical Collection and the Jane Addams Hull-House collections and museum. The Women's Studies Program was active in collaborating about women's health with the College of Nursing and in founding the Center for Research on Women and Gender, which encourages faculty research and sponsors conferences, especially in the area of women's health. The Women's Studies Program also campaigned for an office for Re-Entry Women that survived only a few years before falling to budget cuts and for the Office of Women's Affairs, now headed by Rebecca Gordon. Women's Studies Program faculty, students, and staff have also served on the Chancellor's Committees on the Status of Women and on the Status of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns.

Trying to establish independent Women's Studies courses and also to integrate the new scholarship on women throughout the UIC curriculum has demanded continuous time and effort. Faculty and students studied together to design the original Women's Studies courses, an experimental interdisciplinary sequence first taught in 1973 by a teaching collective that included undergraduate and graduate students and faculty volunteering on unpaid overload. After a few years in which Women's Studies courses remained popular with students, the Women's Studies Committee persuaded the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences to add these courses regularly to the catalog, to include them as part of the faculty's regular teaching loads, and to fund one half-time teaching

assistantship. Developing and overseeing the WS courses and program was a volunteer, self-selected Women's Studies Committee that was recognized and then appointed by the Dean of the College.

In line with our feminist ideals, the Women's Studies Committee sought to behave in an egalitarian and participatory fashion that would empower its members and involve them in all decisions. For many years, roles, tasks, and spokeswomen rotated; at least two committee members routinely met with campus administrators or representatives of other units; all decisions were made by consensus, even when this led to protracted meetings; and all meetings ended with a round of "criticism/ self-criticism" that encouraged self-consciousness about group process and the group's adherence to feminist goals. We also tried to implement feminist democratic ideals in the teaching collectives and in all our courses. Over the years, the governing committee has changed as it has expanded: there is more division of labor, for instance, although we try to maintain accountability and consensus on key decisions. The committee now includes all UIC faculty with official appointments in the Program and Assistant Director Maureen Madden. This committee still serves as the chief policy-making body for the Program.

In early 1977, after steady lobbying, we were given an office and opportunity to hire a staff person to coordinate the program. Marilyn Carlander, who took this position, had graduated as the first UIC student to construct a "Women's Studies" major through the student-designed curriculum. Peg Strobel, an African historian recruited from UCLA, became the first faculty director of the Women's Studies Program in 1979. Under Peg's directorship, the Program grew to include a graduate concentration. In 1990, psychologist Stephanie Riger became the Director. She initiated our internship program and our popular workshops on gender, race, homophobia, and pedagogy, and she organized conferences that connected campus women with those in community organizations. In addition to continuing faculty Sandra Bartky (Philosophy), Stephanie Riger (Psychology), Peg Strobel, and Judith Kegan Gardiner (English), in the 1990s several scholars joined the Program, all with joint appointments with other units: Norma Moruzzi (Political Science); Katrin Schultheiss (History); historian Lynette Jackson (African American Studies), and John d'Emilio (History), a pioneer in Gay and Lesbian Studies, who also served as Director. Additional faculty who have joined the program in recent years include Gayatri Reddy (Anthropology), sociologist Elena Gutierrez (Latin American and Latino Studies), Jennie Brier (History), and political scientist Cassandra Veney (African American Studies). Founding member Sandra Bartky and former Director of GWS and of the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum Peg Strobel are faculty emeritae. To reflect the expanded nature of the field, the Program changed its name to Gender and Women's Studies, and an undergraduate bachelor's degree began in 2006, adding to the existing undergraduate minor and graduate concentrations. Affiliated faculty with joint, zero percent appointments in the Program now include LAS Dean Dwight McBride, Associate Dean Beth Richie, Head of Sociology Barbara Risman, and sociologists Laurie Schaffner and Anna Guevarra.

In addition to our core faculty, over fifty faculty members from other departments teach courses cross-listed with Gender and Women's Studies or serve as GWS graduate advisors. As the Program has grown, its office has assumed more responsibilities under the supervision of Maureen Madden, Assistant Director, aided by Geri James and student assistants.

Some famous feminist scholars began their teaching careers at UIC. The roster of distinguished faculty in liberal arts no longer on campus includes Teresa Cordova, Latin American Studies and Women's Studies; Susan Cole, Classics and History; Sharon Emerson, Biology, who was awarded a MacArthur fund "genius grant"; Jody Enders, Peggy McCracken, and Ellie Ragland, French; Susan Gubar, Arabella Lyon, Jane Marcus, Leah Marcus, Jaime Hovey, and Carol Poston, English; Grace Holt and Vashti Lewis, African American Studies;

Lauren Rabinowitz, Julia LeSage, and Linda Williams, Cinema Studies; Itala Rutter, Italian; and Joan Scott, History.

Major projects of the Program have included grants by the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities to facilitate the incorporation of material on women worldwide and U.S. women of color into university curricula. We have organized conferences and speaker series for campus and community women about women and the law, science and mathematics, housing, women's work, gender and race, gay and lesbian history, international women's rights, and violence against women. Conferences we sponsored on connections between research and activism have brought community women to campus and marked the widespread integration of research on women into many academic disciplines. In 2006 Katrin Schultheiss organized the nation's first conference on international women's rights, patterned after the popular model United Nations programs, for Chicago area high school students and their teachers. We are currently working with the African American Studies Department and the Latin American and Latino Studies Program on expanding joint graduate-level interdisciplinary curricula.

I credit our clear and reasonable goals, good organization, and persistent effort for our achievements so far, as well as a wonderful assemblage of feminist scholars. We faced only a little overt opposition, mostly from people so unfamiliar with Women's Studies that they believed caricatures of it as separatist or intellectually without substance. The Gender and Women's Studies Program has always been able to keep the continued success of the program at the fore. Throughout our history we have worked together, as I hope and expect we will continue to do, in behalf of women and men, the program, UIC, and our vision for a better feminist future in a just and egalitarian society for all.

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