

Women's Studies in Focus

The Women's Studies PhD: Report from a Conference

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In early October 2001 Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, hosted a working conference entitled "The PhD in Women's Studies: Implications and Articulations." Just a few weeks after September 11, and amid an anthrax scare that was particularly palpable in Atlanta as the home of the American Center for Disease Control, the Women's Studies PhD conference brought together faculty, recent graduates, and current students from a wide variety of American and Canadian institutions. It was co-sponsored by the National Women's Studies Association and the National Council of Research on Women, and was the first American national gathering specifically about the Women's Studies PhD.¹ Participants came from almost all the universities that currently offer a doctorate in Women's Studies or are developing it.² In addition, there were faculty members from numerous other universities and colleges that offer MA programs and undergraduate programs in Women's Studies. Canadian voices included Katherine Side, the first PhD in Women's Studies in Canada (PhD, York 1997), now Assistant Professor of Women's Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University, and Susanne Luhmann (PhD, York 2002), a Sessional Instructor in Women's Studies at Laurentian University.

The conference provided a superb opportunity for colleagues who represent the past, present, and future of graduate training in Women's Studies to meet and exchange views. Frances Smith Foster, head of the Emory Institute on Women, explained at the opening session that the purpose of the conference was "to understand the collective state of the Women's Studies PhD," by bringing into conversation a wide range of voices. "Conversation" was the organizational trope for two and a half days of tightly packed sessions, and this key term recurred often. But an issue across the

entire conference was how to have conversations in which the interlocutors really would listen to one another, acknowledging frustration, anger, and defensiveness, and find ways to work toward some shared goals.

As is often the case, several conferences overlapped at this one. For some participants, the conference was a celebration of achievements in establishing PhD programmes and guiding students toward completion of this still new degree. Other colleagues, equally invested in Women's Studies, wanted to critique assumptions and challenge directions of the field. Faculty were concerned with issues in field development and funding. Students and recent graduates were concerned with mentoring and job opportunities. An overriding question for some participants was whether Women's Studies should be "settled" and institutionalized as a discipline, or whether it was more productive to retain ambiguities of many kinds. In all, feminist hopes and feminist disenchantments swirled actively among participants who came from several generations of Women Studies scholars and activists.

Three plenary sessions anchored the conference. During Plenary #1, "Construction and Implementation," representatives of six established PhD programmes discussed the history of their units. In Plenary #2, "Meaning and Purposes," the focus was on curricular design and theoretical and methodological topics. Speakers in Plenary #3 reflected on "Implications, Effects, and Possibilities of the Women's Studies PhD," for the field of Women's Studies, research about women and gender, the academy, and society at large. A format of "breakout sessions" after each plenary gave opportunities for small-group discussion. Here the topics included curriculum, graduate student issues, PhD theories and methodologies, issues of

"disciplinary" and "interdisciplinarity," implications of the Women's Studies PhD for MA programs, and connections between the Women's Studies PhD and social change. A lunchtime panel focussed on diversity in Women's Studies. In another panel, current doctoral students and recent graduates reflected on a range of topics, including how to link academic feminism and activism and how to ensure effective mentoring; a speaker in this session described her dissatisfactions with how Women's Studies is being institutionalized yet spoke clearly about her own attachment to the interdisciplinary vision of the field.

At the opening plenary, presenters from Clark University, Emory University, Rutgers University, the University of Maryland, the University of Washington, and York University told origin stories about how decisions were made to launch the Women's Studies PhD at their institutions. We learned that in some cases the impetus was grassroots and from faculty members steeped in feminist politics; in others it was top-down, instigated by deans who were being pragmatic about enrolments and cost-cutting arrangements. In all cases, supportive faculty members are keys to success; additionally, "guilt works." For the newest doctoral program in the group, at Rutgers University, legitimation came from the fact of other existing PhD programs. I spoke about York, the largest and one of the oldest such programs. I was also invited to make any comparative comments that seemed pertinent from a Canadian perspective. (See the Appendix to this essay for an edited version of my presentation.) My discussion of part-time doctoral study in Women's Studies at York drew notable response; this provision seems to be uncommon among American graduate programs.

At the second plenary, "Meaning and Purpose," faculty members from several doctoral programs discussed their thinking about interdisciplinarity and also about the centrality of theory in their program's philosophy. Some universities aim for interdisciplinarity but still are working mainly in a disciplinary matrix; in such cases, discipline-based faculty members sit on Women's Studies dissertation committees. Other universities are trying to be precise about what "interdisciplinarity" means and to shape methods

courses that represent the scholarly promises of Women's Studies as an area of enquiry. In some universities, theory and philosophical issues are at the heart of all work; in others, critique and praxis are considered more important than abstract issues of theory and method. There was wide agreement that the cutting edge of Women's Studies is to be found in current and recent doctoral dissertations and projects, and that graduate students will demonstrate by their work what it means to be trained in Women's Studies.

During the third plenary, nine speakers addressed the topic "Implications, Effects, and Possibilities," and deep commitments and challenges to Women's Studies were on rich display. One presenter, drawing on analogies and practices in Disability Studies, called for structuring Women's Studies as an inclusive and "universally usable" field that is about variety rather than sameness. Another spoke about collaborative teaching and learning as a way to think beyond one's own interests and to develop new knowledge. Several speakers criticized the "provincialism" of some American academic perspectives and called for Women's Studies programs to be more international and transnational. At the same time, there was considerable interest among speakers in focussing on the local in Women's Studies teaching and research as a way to avoid being superficial and too easily universal. One plenary presenter worried that the establishment of doctoral programs could institutionalize the "failures" of the field. She expressed concerns about presentism in Women's Studies courses and curricula, and also about the practice of entrenching the activism of second wave feminism as the ground of the field of Women's Studies. How then can Women's Studies fulfil its own heightened expectations and build upon the destabilizing challenges of new pedagogical, epistemological, and political perspectives? It is easy, she warned, to reify doctoral work in Women's Studies as part of the product-logic of the new university.

Other plenary speakers were more optimistic about the benefits that can accrue from institutionalizing Women's Studies in doctoral programs. Surveying dissertation topics as a barometer of the field, a speaker pointed out that early Women's Studies projects were disciplinary

and revisionary, but later ones charted multi-disciplinary debates within the field of Women's Studies, and more recently dissertations have been problem-oriented in ways that do not fit any one discipline or academic department. Another presenter eloquently highlighted a long list of concepts that have developed out of feminist scholarship and now provide tools and intellectual vistas for students in Women's Studies PhD programs. Playing with multiple meanings of the key term "institutionalization," she suggested that this may be understood as shutting away a subject and controlling its regimen, but that "institutionalization" also can refer to making something permanent, and ensuring an on-going collective memory.

I had hoped that I could bring back from the conference some specific answers to questions that preoccupy me as a member of York's graduate programme faculty and as a former graduate program director. How might we at York think further about graduate core courses? How might we at York make doctoral comprehensive exams even more effective in preparing students for dissertation work and for teaching in Women's Studies? How can we cultivate breadth by means of our program requirements, so that students become acquainted with analytic tools from a variety of disciplinary angles?

The conference was short on particulars, but the sessions gave food for thought. At a session on "Feminist Methods," for example, colleagues had quite different views about whether the field of Women's Studies has its own methods, and how these might be taught. Some insisted that, while we want to establish our own Women's Studies courses on methods, it still is necessary to send students to other disciplines. Others urged Women's Studies to acknowledge as "methods" approaches that have been in place within feminism for some time, notably, the move from the personal to the political; critiques for patriarchal bias; attention to silences, commitment to social justice; and analysis that combines discursive and material conditions. Several colleagues distinguished between "methods" as tools and "methodology" as philosophical issues and the politics of methods, and criticized the "mystification" of methods. "The reality," as one participant phrased it, "is that we

need multiple methods." How then might graduate programs introduce students to various tools and issues through a Methods course? One idea was to focus on a book that exemplifies how to approach a topic from various angles; Peggy Sanday's book on acquaintance rape, *A Woman Scorned* (1996), drew enthusiastic comment here. Another idea was for faculty to exemplify their own processes by identifying methods which work or do not work for them and their research. A third idea was to organize a course around student analysis of published feminist scholarship, identifying approaches and tools used in those cases.

"The PhD in Women's Studies: Implications and Articulations," was not a "feel good" conference. The doctoral field of Women's Studies is young, and much is at stake. Nevertheless, in early October 2001, at a time of world anguish, it was gratifying to be in Atlanta with ninety feminist faculty and graduate students and to struggle with institutional, curricular, and political issues relating to the Women's Studies PhD. Other conferences no doubt will follow, drawing on topics from the Emory gathering and generating other issues that need attention. At the concluding session, three veteran Women's Studies faculty members and one recent Women's Studies PhD recipient asked "where do we go from here?" The National Women's Studies Association is committed to providing forums for some of this discussion. Texts from presentations at the Emory conference will be placed on the NWSA website. Sessions will be organized at NWSA annual meetings, and the *NWSA Journal* will provide a focal point for exchange of information (e.g., syllabi of graduate courses), as well as for publication of Women's Studies research by faculty and graduate students.

ENDNOTES

1. York University's conference on the MA and PhD, "Graduate Women's Studies: Visions and Realities," took place in May 1995, with speakers and participants from Canada, America, and the UK.

2. These American universities currently offer a PhD in Women's Studies: University of California Los Angeles, Clark University, Emory University, University of Iowa, University of Maryland, University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, Union Institute Graduate School, and University of Washington. Rutgers welcomes its first Women's Studies PhD students in Fall 2002. A Women's Studies PhD program will be in place soon at the Ohio State University. Each of these programs, and York University as well, prepared a poster for the Emory conference with information about their program philosophy and structure, and with details about students and program requirements. This information will be published in the Spring 2003 issue of the *NWSA Journal*.

REFERENCE

Sanday, Peggy Reeves. *A Woman Scorned: Acquaintance Rape on Trial*. New York & Toronto: Doubleday, 1996.

APPENDIX:

For the opening plenary session of the conference on "The PhD in Women's Studies: Implications and Articulations" (Emory University, October 11-14, 2001), representatives of six established PhD programmes were asked to address several questions about the history of their units. The following remarks were made about the Graduate Programme in Women's Studies at York University.

1.) How and when was the decision made to launch the York PhD?

York University is a very large public and urban institution in Toronto. Enrollment is 40,000 students across two campuses, with three undergraduate liberal arts faculties, each with a distinctive sense of mission, a law school, Faculties of Science, Fine Arts, Business, and Education, and 38 graduate programmes. Its students mirror the diversity of Canada's pluralist immigration policy. It was established forty years ago as an off-shoot from the established Anglo traditional and strongly discipline-based University of Toronto. A new university that defined itself as different from that older model, York continues to pride itself on bringing education to non-traditional students, including older students, women, and students who are the first in their families to pursue post-secondary education. Innovation and interdisciplinarity have been features of York from the beginning.

The proposal for a graduate programme in Women's Studies grew out of a history of feminist initiatives at York. In 1970 a Royal Commission on the Status of Women had mobilized women in Canada. At York it played out quickly into a Status of Women report for the university that brought broad-band recommendations about, for example, equity issues for faculty, librarians, and other employees. Curriculum matters surfaced at the same time, with the creation of the kinds of women's studies courses characteristic of the early 70s. There was quite a bit of information gathering and dissemination about courses on women being taught across the university. Of course, the rhetoric and the realities were not always in synch. For example, York University advertised during the late 1970s that one could study feminist theory through the interdisciplinary programme in Social and Political Thought. But there was in fact no one to teach it, so as students organized, a faculty member was hired to develop courses in feminist theory. (Professor Meg Luxton was hired for that position.)

Our "origin story" includes two features specific to Canada. The first is the demographic fact of a large cohort of Americans who came to Canada during the early 1970s to teach in a new and exuberantly innovative university; this cohort had cut its academic, political, and feminist teeth in American graduate schools during the late 60s. The second feature is the British imprint within English-speaking Canada, and an orientation to the social sciences, political economy, Marxism, and activism. All this shaped a stimulating academic eclecticism at York.

During the mid-1980s, a working group was established that proposed development of both a Centre for Feminist Research and a free-standing Graduate Programme in Women's Studies. When a questionnaire to all tenure-stream faculty asked who was currently teaching or researching topics in women/feminism/gender; positive responses came from 250 faculty members (one quarter of the York faculty). Professor Thelma McCormack was named Director Designate for the graduate programme in Spring 1988, and she authored the proposal to establish the programme. Asked, "Should the proposal for the graduate programme embrace both an MA and a PhD?," the initiating group wanted both. To prepare graduates for university teaching in this new field, the PhD was clearly essential. Additionally, the initiating group also thought that pushing for the PhD would at least ensure approval of the MA. Thelma McCormack's byword was "ask for more, and then live with less if you have to."

It took three years to secure formal approval. In Fall 1991 we formed an Admissions Committee, and the first students - our "first five" - entered in January 1992.

Another part of our "origin story" is that part-time PhD study was built into our programme from the beginning. Notable early enquiries about graduate work in Women's Studies came from older students who were already established in careers but wanted upgrading, or wanted to pursue academic work that had been interrupted or set aside. Part-time degree work for adults is a feature of the York ethos and the York environment, and we made the case that a graduate programme in Women's Studies should open access to MA and doctoral work for this cohort too.

2.) What was the formal decision-making process? Was there anything particular about the Canadian process?

Because the university system in Canada is funded almost exclusively by the provinces, approval for establishing a new university programme must be sought, therefore, from provincial watchdog agencies that are charged with assessing proposals for new graduate programmes, and then recommending (or not recommending) that formal budgetary approval be given.

In our case, a proposal first was made to the York University Faculty of Graduate Studies. The proposal then went to the University Senate and the Board of Governors. The provincial government appointed External Reviewers to assess our proposal (based on recommendations of individuals that we had made). Thereafter the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS) and the Ontario Council on University Affairs considered the matter, and gave approval for us to admit students. A sign of the strength of our application was that we were allowed to open the doors to our first cohort of students before final formal budgetary approval was given.

The Province of Ontario requires that all graduate programmes go through reappraisal every seven years. The York programme has had its first periodic appraisal, and we received the highest level evaluation, based on a comprehensive appraisal brief. Prepared by programme director Professor Jane Couchman and programme assistant Agatha Campbell, the OCGS appraisal brief discussed faculty, resources, programme regulations and courses, and outcomes (including enrolment, graduations, employment, publications, and projected enrolments).

3.) How did we manage the informal political process of support and opposition?

Key features of the York story have been a climate for progressive initiatives and key feminist players in positions of authority.

During the early days of Women's Studies at York there had been some opposition to individual courses, but that settled out over time. There also had been a history of opposition to one of the earliest of "area studies," namely, Canadian Studies, but that too had been diffused, however, by the time that the proposal for "Women's Studies" came forward. By 1991, the institutional climate was right. York was home to a number of feminist organizations. A Centre for Feminist Research was in place. The position of advisor to the University's President on the Status of Women was well-established. The university had pioneered in sexual harassment work within Canadian universities. There were large numbers of undergraduate courses in Women's Studies being offered across the university.

In addition to a culture of innovation and interdisciplinarity at York that was cordial to plans for a graduate programme in Women's Studies, several key senior women and senior feminists actively shepherded the proposal through its various stages inside and outside the university. Unquestionably, we benefitted from having several very influential women in senior positions. The Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies, Sandra Pyke, gave powerful support and sage counsel at numerous points along the way, and staff members in the Dean's Office were generous with their time and effort. Another senior faculty woman, known for her probity and her research record, served as chair of the university senate, and worked on institutional issues of the university sector at the provincial level.

When the proposal for the new graduate programme in Women's Studies was due to come to the University Senate for discussion, the Director Designate, Thelma McCormack, phoned everyone, and, as she put it, "called in IOUs." Once the proposal moved out from the university into government sectors, Professor McCormack continued to rally support through her wide-ranging connections as a politically very savvy senior academic with a long career in academic and public sectors. Because of particular budget arrangements, the proposal for a new graduate programme was not thought to imperil the funding of other existing programmes. In fact, the funding formula then in place made it advantageous to have a programme that would attract new students. So, it was in everyone's interest to support a "hot topic."

4.) What has been the reception of the PhD programme across various sectors at York?

York University continues to be proud of the Graduate Programme in Women's Studies. We are part of York's ideal of new initiatives because we pursue innovative, inclusive, and interdisciplinary scholarship. We are seen as an academically rigorous programme that attracts excellent faculty members and students. Our faculty members have a strong publishing record, and this keeps our profile high. We have a significant number of full professors among our faculty. Successive Deans of the Faculty of Graduate Studies have supported the programme by providing funding for students, speaking for the programme among other deans, helping the programme to increase its course-offerings, and also supporting new appointments to the programme from within York and when new hirings are made. Our programme is well-received among other graduate units at York. While there is sometimes rivalry over resources and excellent students, in general there is an understanding that a strong interdisciplinary Graduate Programme in Women's Studies is an important balance for Women's Studies and gender-related work in disciplinary graduate programmes.

Our programme always receives many more applications from qualified students than can be accommodated. In the early years, the numbers of applications were very large, and admissions committees found it difficult to turn down students who would have done excellent work but whom we could not accommodate. In recent years, the numbers have settled down somewhat as new Women's Studies MA and PhD programmes open up in Canada and in the United States. Our current students are, as we would expect, intelligent and innovative thinkers. They are loyal to the programme and speak highly of it; at the same time, they maintain a critical stance which keeps the programme alert and open to new developments in scholarship and in pedagogy. Students serve on all our committees and play an important role in organizing our Programme Seminars. A few years ago, they undertook their own curriculum review, which had an important impact on the Programme's definition of its fields or areas of strength and on ongoing curriculum development.

Faculty members at York continue to seek appointment to our graduate programme, and we welcome those who want to work with us in developing curriculum, teaching courses, and advising and supervising students through the stages of their work. The initial membership of 39 faculty members now has grown to 76 members. Often, prospective new members decide to become more formally committed to the Programme after serving on the PhD dissertation committee of one of our students and observing the cutting-edge interdisciplinary research that is being carried out in a context which is academically rigorous, supportive, and feminist.

Within the larger community, the Graduate Programme in Women's Studies is, to our great delight, a magnet for university fund-raising. Women from our community have formed an External Advisory Committee for the School of Women's Studies, of which our PhD Programme is a part. Their main interest is in promoting the School and its goals, and in raising funds to support our students. Such is their enthusiasm for the Graduate Programme that they have endowed major bursaries for both MA and PhD students. We have more scholarships and bursaries than any other graduate programme at York. Recently, activists wanting to celebrate feminist activist Doris Anderson on her 80th birthday chose to do this by naming a scholarship for our programme in her honour, and they raised \$150,000 for this purpose.

The Graduate Programme in Women's Studies recently completed its first periodic review by the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies, and received the highest possible evaluation. This is strong evidence of support for our Programme and acknowledgement of the academic standards of our Programme, and the accomplishments of our students and faculty. Because the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies committee which assesses Graduate Programmes is made up of faculty members from a wide range of fields, their positive assessment indicates a broad admiration for the work we are doing among academics in general.

Our first doctoral graduate, Katherine Side, received her PhD in 1997, as the first PhD in Women's Studies in Canada, and now holds a tenure-stream position in Women's Studies. We and Women's Studies programmes across Canada are well aware that York is shaping the next generation of Women's Studies, for the first 51 PhDs in Women's Studies in Canada all will be from York's Graduate Programme in Women's Studies. While our PhD graduates have found positions in university teaching or in the community, they are encountering interesting dilemmas when they look for academic positions. They are of course warmly received in Women's Studies programmes, but some disciplinary programmes appear to prefer to appoint a graduate who has a PhD in their discipline to one who has a PhD in Women's Studies, even when the position is defined as requiring a women's studies or gender-related specialization, and even when the student with a Women's Studies PhD has taken graduate courses and pursued research congruent with what is required for the position. This is an issue for the Women's Studies PhD, as for other interdisciplinary doctoral degrees. How do we convince disciplinary departments to hire our graduates, just as we have been hiring the graduates of discipline-based programmes in our women's studies departments and programmes? Women's Studies is still a new academic field, and models continue to take shape for teaching and learning Women's Studies. A large programme like ours must ensure that our PhD students have the skills and flexibility to work within, and provide leadership for, quite varied undergraduate and graduate units.