

Assessment of the Women's Studies Major Academic Year 2007-2008

Overview of the Major: The Women's Studies major is an interdisciplinary major that incorporates courses in the humanities, social sciences, and biological sciences/health into its requirements. There is a strong emphasis on multicultural and global issues. All undergraduate majors are required to complete either a second major or a concentration of course work in another field. This provides additional depth of study for our undergraduate majors and gives them another body of academic work to which they can apply the principles of gender analysis acquired in the Women's Studies major. The major in Women's Studies was approved in 1986, and there has been a consistently high level of student interest. Our records indicate that 804 majors had graduated from the Women's Studies Program through summer 2007. In December 2007, an additional 7 students graduated with a major in Women's Studies, and May 2008 brought 29 graduates. Current records show 120 declared majors.

The effect of the change in status and title from the Women's Studies Program to the Department of Gender and Women's Studies will be reflected in the academic year 2008-2009, the first academic year with the new status. The name change to Department of Gender and Women's Studies reflects curricular changes already underway for several years. These include a growing number and diversity of courses focusing on LGBT issues, the hiring of new faculty with expertise in this area, and the housing of the LGBT Studies certificate program within our office. While sexuality has always been an important focus for us, our program offerings now incorporate a broader set of issues related to the topic, and the new title reflects this. The title also reflects the already-present conviction, evidenced in the content of our courses, that our curriculum should address the societal construction of gender: both masculinity and femininity.

Learning Objectives: Already incorporating our new title, the learning objectives identified through the years by our Program, now Department, involve three distinct goals. We assume that students completing the major will:

1. Have a strong knowledge base in Gender and Women's Studies, including knowledge of the experiences of women historically, currently, and across cultures.
2. Be familiar with existing theoretical frameworks for studying and researching issues related to women, gender, sexuality.
3. Have developed strong skills in critical thinking, including the ability to read critically and independently, to use theoretical concepts, and to communicate clearly in writing.

Assessment History and Process: In the years since the requirement of a major assessment was instituted, the Women's Studies Program has always carried out an annual assessment of the major. The assessment process is under the direction of the Associate Chair, who carries the responsibility for the curriculum and student programs. The Associate Chair works with the Curriculum Committee on the major assessment. There are three main components to the annual assessment: a survey of majors, an evaluation by the Curriculum Committee of selected student papers written by majors in a range of courses, informal feedback from the Undergraduate Advisor. The assessment process for 2007-2008 was carried out as follows:

1. A survey was distributed to all students in the senior capstone seminars for the majors. Because this capstone seminar is required of all majors, the process ensures that we will survey all majors.
2. The Associate Chair read and evaluated the surveys in preparation for a discussion in the Curriculum Committee. The Curriculum Committee discussed issues raised in the surveys at a meeting and then presented the results of the surveys and their assessment of the issues for discussion at a general Program (now Departmental) meeting.
3. Student papers were solicited, with permission of the students involved, from courses in the following areas in the fall semester of 2007: humanities, social sciences, biology/health, multicultural/international, theory. These are the required areas for course work by all majors. Papers are solicited as follows: the associate chair contacts instructors from one course in each area and requests two sample papers or written assignments such as essay exams. The

samples must be written for the same assignment in order to allow comparison. The papers are assigned to members of the Curriculum Committee, who read them carefully in the context of the learning objectives outlined above. The readers report to a meeting of the Curriculum Committee, and there is a general discussion.

4. The less formal but very central component of input from the Undergraduate Advisor provides ongoing feedback from former, current, and potential majors. We consider the input from all of these groups to be a vital part of the assessment process. The Undergraduate Advisor has extensive contact with students through regular email communication, always crowded office hours, annual workshops for majors on issues such as graduate school or career planning. The Advisor also holds a meeting for potential majors at which important ideas may be aired by students regarding their expectations for the undergraduate major. Nina Valeo Cooke, our Undergraduate Advisor, is a vital and integral part of our major and also of the major assessment process. Our Program (Department) depends on her for the depth of quality of our undergraduate major experience. She is the person who enjoys the trust and confidence of the majors and has the best vantage point for their expectations, satisfaction, occasional frustrations, and future plans. Her input is a central component of all Curriculum Committee meetings and is essential to the assessment process.

Follow-up on Assessment: The Curriculum Committee and the Associate Chair found this year, as has been our experience in the past, that the undergraduate major is well established to meet both the Program's (Department's) and students' goals. Many students go out of their way to express appreciation for the manner in which the major requirements are set up, the knowledge and intellectual energy of our faculty, the mentoring provided by both instructional faculty and the Undergraduate Advisor. Particular appreciation was expressed this year for the advising offered by Nina Valeo Cooke.

The following issues were central to our assessment discussions for the academic year 2007-2008:

1. structural issues regarding course size. Smaller courses would allow more intensive work with student writing. The possibility of limiting enrollment in courses designated as Writing Intensive was discussed.
2. There was considerable discussion of helping our majors learn to write more effectively. Although satisfied in general with their writing skills, we felt that this is an ongoing learning process.
3. The papers in the selected courses displayed in general a strong base knowledge, good historical and cross-cultural frameworks, relatively nuanced application of concepts to analyses, clear communicative strategies in writing, creative as well as critical thinking. Papers were assessed from the following courses:
532: The History of the American Body (area: biology and health)
320: Topic: Gender and Welfare in Social Perspective (areas: multicultural, also social science)
421: Gender and the Media (area: humanities)
449: The Body in Theory (area: theory)
4. Students expressed strong appreciation for the variety of support activities and knowledgeable advising offered by the Undergraduate Major Advisor. Her position was seen as a key component in student satisfaction with the major.
5. The introductory courses 101, 102, 103 continue to play a central role in students' decisions to become majors. Access to 103 continues to be an issue, although not actually for majors, who had registration priority once they have declared the major.
6. At the same time, there are concerns that students who take the required introductory course (101 or 102) after taking more advanced courses in Women's Studies, often cross-listed with other instructional units, find the 100-level courses to be redundant. We can only emphasize the wisdom of taking the introductory course early in the students' programs.
7. Students consistently found that their major in Women's Studies was an enrichment to all of their other course work at the University. The interdisciplinary nature of the Women's Studies major gave them a broad set of skills that they could readily apply to other sets of knowledge.

8. The personal attention offered by individual instructors was mentioned repeatedly. It seemed to be a theme of the classroom experience in Women's Studies.

9. Majors expressed appreciation for the emphasis on cross-cultural, multicultural, and international issues.

Report prepared by
Nancy Kaiser, Associate Chair 2007-2008
nkaiser@wisc.edu 262-3503