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A Goal for MLA Women: Success with Integrity

As a former director of women's studies at three universities (1971-85) and an ardent participant in the development of women's studies during those years, I recall with nostalgia the warmth, the communal spirit, and the depth of commitment characterizing that earlier period. Frequently we felt exhilarated, knowing we were on the forefront in transforming the disciplines. We were highly supportive of one another rather than critical. Since then, scholarship and theory have become increasingly specialized. Now, for many, consciousness springs not from political action but from books; the use of "gender" rather than "women" misleads some into thinking sisterhood is "old-fashioned"; and the focus upon diversity at times takes us beyond the extremely important recognition of our differences to doubts that we have anything in common.

We still yearn to embody the tolerance and patience that should accompany our awareness of "feminisms" and "multiple perspectives." Yet we sometimes have elitist attitudes, a readiness to criticize, and anxieties and silences sparked by our competitiveness and mutual mistrust. Can we judge each other's theoretical positions while keeping a sense of solidarity? As our numbers increase on the faculty, do we find it more difficult to bond? Are we failing to remember our past and to imagine our future?

One young woman who teaches in my department wondered:

How can we unite when we are not women making up a universal Woman?
How can we expect our needs to be met when we are Hispanic, over 50,
white, Jewish, gay, under 40, African-American, Asian-American, straight,
and so on? We have come so far in intellectualizing our differences that we
are no longer a collective.

Her comments express current fears that we are failing to bond, unable sufficiently to encompass our differences. She wrote this remark on a questionnaire I distributed to the women in my department. I wanted to learn about their past experiences as women in male-dominated universities; I also wanted to know what their chief concerns are today.

Their past experiences detail a sad but predictable range of sexist incidents. Jokes about rape and insults to women were socially acceptable in the '50s: "one day when a female professor did not appear for class, a male student said, 'Maybe someone raped her. I've often thought about it myself.'" (Women in the class were expected to join in the laughter--and did)." In another class, when a professor was absent, one of his colleagues, an ordained minister, arrived to teach the class. "The first thing he said to the class was, 'I'd like all the girls to cross their legs.' He then said, 'Now that the gates of hell are closed, we can go on with the class.'" This, too, was supposed to be funny.

Others remember blatant job discrimination. When one colleague was interviewed for her first job in 1957, the dean of faculty and department head told her, "We discriminate against women. If we hire you and a man at the same time, the man will get a larger salary, and each year he will get a bigger raise." When she began work, the female instructors warned her that he "was a notorious lecher." When another woman got her Ph.D., her department chair took her aside and said, "You know your husband will always come first, don't you?" At a session on getting jobs in 1960, another was told that "women would get a job at one level lower than what they deserved." At that same university there were no women on the English faculty.

Another faculty member recalled the painful process of changing an all-male state college into a coed one in 1970. The alumni and the faculty voted against accepting female students. As a compromise, to forestall admission based on merit for the next four years, a few women were simply added each year to the normal number of men in the freshman class. To prepare for the arrival of women, the female faculty member was sent to the physical education department to discuss how the coaches might adjust to this event. They spoke seriously of what they had been taught about women in graduate school: "females could not roll on their stomachs; no balls should be thrown towards their chests; no swimming should be allowed on certain days of the month." A committee fussed over what to do about the lack of shower stalls in the dormitories, since women require more privacy. The changes were tolerated, that is, until a graduate student in history mentioned the curriculum. She dared to suggest that its content should be modified, for she

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could not find in her history books any mention of the suffrage movement. Hearing this, the dean of faculty was outraged. He slammed his hand down on the table and exclaimed very loudly: "If this curriculum has been good enough for the boys, it's good enough for the girls!"

Other women responding to the questionnaire reported sexual harassment. In 1983, when an undergraduate told her senior project supervisor she was being tested for bone cancer, he put his hand on her knee and asked her if she would like to make love. In the late '80s an instructor became depressed and dropped out of a Ph.D. program because of patronizing attitudes and intellectual harassment. Two women referred to a recent sexual harassment case. "The female students who filed the claim were treated as outcasts, disbelieved and turned into the perpetrators rather than victims by the men in power in the department and the college. Two of these students left school." Female faculty who supported the students "were made to feel as if *we* were the ones who were in the wrong, as if we had opened a closet in a relative's house and weren't supposed to react to the dirty little secrets that were hidden there." In time, the dean and provost became convinced of the man's guilt and he was dismissed, but the men in the department, without any way of really knowing one way or the other, are still absolutely convinced of his innocence.

Today, incidents continue to suggest conscious or unconscious hostility toward women: one semester the male department chair omitted from the schedule three courses taught by three different feminists. Another chair listed the male program directors in the schedule as Professor Such and Such but listed equivalent female directors without their titles. After losing a promotion at the university level by one vote, another woman learned the committee was all-male. Too many people in positions of power are still not willing to focus on avoiding discriminatory practices.

Harassment and discrimination continue to drive women away from jobs they love. One young man resented a female colleague because of her seniority and popularity in his field of study. He successfully turned the male department chair and the dean against her by portraying her as a bitch. She achieved tenure but was so distraught that she took a job elsewhere. Another woman who had been hired at a rank and salary below her qualifications was denied any help from the dean in raising her rank and salary, yet a less qualified man was given a \$7,000 raise two years later. At another university a woman whose book was already published was denied tenure while extraordinary efforts were made to get a male colleague's book published so he could be awarded tenure. When the men failed to locate a publisher

(despite calls all over the country), they took a colleague's name out of the acknowledgements and made him a reader to recommend publication to their university press, the same press that had published the woman's book.

My female colleagues listed the forms of discrimination of greatest concern to them today: first, patronizing attitudes, and then invisibility (or a sense of not being heard), intellectual harassment, insulting remarks, and lack of freedom to express concerns. Not surprisingly, students at Old Dominion University praise their women's studies classes for making them feel respected and their voices heard (Fellman and Winstead 96-97). The faculty responding to the survey listed gender as the #1 handicap in academe, followed by age, race, looks, sexual preference, and weight, in that order. They prioritized the issues feminists, male and female, should continue to address in the '90s, beginning with the tenure and promotion of women and continuing with intellectual harassment of women faculty and students, sexual harassment, hiring of more women faculty, curriculum transformation, child care, and campus safety.

What strategies for success--with integrity--can we have in this non-supportive environment? First of all, we shall succeed by doing good research, teaching well, and performing adequate service despite the environment. Even today a woman usually has to accomplish much more than a man for the same reward. This labor will best be done with a strong support system, primarily a support system of women. Until about four years ago, women gave me every opportunity I had to present papers and to publish. Only now that my status is higher have men begun to play a supportive role in my professional life. A community of women helps us to weather the slaps and hits and keeps us clear about what is worthwhile, that is, scholarly work about which we care deeply--what Barbara DuBois calls "passionate scholarship" (105-13). When we care deeply about what we are studying and are eager to share our insights, the rewards for publishing are much more than just merit increases and promotions. For me, involvement in women's studies and applying feminist perspectives created a passionate connection between my life, my research, and, of course, my teaching.

As we work, however, we must stay alert to discrimination and harassment. Sexism is no longer as blatant as it was in the days of rape jokes; greater political discernment is necessary to detect what is actually going on in terms of power and privilege. Without a community of women, subtle and covert discrimination can make us feel isolated, crazy, and paranoid. Those who note discrimination and quickly intervene discourage future attempts. Those who are its victims require support when they stand up to those who

perpetrate it (Benokraitis and Feagin 156, 160-61).

The first challenge, then, is to carry on passionate scholarship despite obstacles. The second challenge is to recognize sexism and misogyny in men and women in order to combat them and prevent their recurrence. We can stay informed and aware and have a community of women willing to take action when necessary. To avoid backroom decisions, we must insist, too, upon public, democratic decision-making. Although we may not always win, what goes on secretly behind closed doors is sure to be worse.

The third challenge is to continue to create a more supportive environment by providing leadership and education for colleagues and by bonding, intellectually, emotionally, and politically, as women. We can create change by being educators and resources for others in the area of feminist theory and scholarship. Reading feminist books, learning through teaching women's studies courses, and creating and attending faculty development conferences are some of the ways teachers, female or male, will lose their fear of the word "feminist" and join the feminist academic community.

The feminist community nurtures our commitment, energy, and intellect. Through mutual support, we maintain our integrity and take action. The ability to trust one another is essential. Some women expect to succeed without sisterhood. But bonding is crucial because, despite our diversity, we do have our gender in common. Attacks based upon gender have not ceased. When sexist incidents occur--and they will--no female should find herself alone. Moreover, we thrive upon the energy we can spark in each other.

To succeed with integrity is to achieve personally while working collectively to create an enlightened community in which we are free to teach, do research, and write articles like this one without censoring ourselves out of fear. The pain of the past lingers on; our utopian vision of the future is yet to be realized. Let's not forget that today, as much as ever, both for solace and for celebration, we need one another!

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