Title
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For its fortieth birthday, Women’s Studies has been given the gift of an impasse. What established, tenured Women’s Studies professors, the ‘foremothers’ turned academic powerbrokers, should do now with their own creation has snowballed into a discourse of crisis. Many Women’s Studies professors continue to support their departments and students. Yet there are a growing number of established scholars who are currently arguing, within a crisis discourse, that the project of Women’s Studies is no longer relevant or even possible. Women’s Studies scholarship has been framed as stagnant and naïve, based on identity politics and revolutionary ideals that no longer make sense in our post-modern, theory-based academy (i.e. Brown, Halley).

The problem with this discourse is not necessarily the change it calls for, but rather the way it has been used to maintain power hierarchies within Women’s Studies. Women’s Studies began as a student project of integrating activist-based feminism into the university via the study of women’s lives, socio-political identities and difference (Bird 2002). This history and its implications have been muddled as many of those radical students from the 1970’s are now in positions of power. As highly published department chairs and tenured professors, these former students are able to shape the discourse of the field in the direction of their choosing. This discourse of crisis has silenced the innovative, active student population within Women’s Studies today. This can be shown in two key locations of this crisis, the politics of naming and the
growth of doctoral programs, where the Women’s Studies student has been framed as proof of
Women’s Studies failure or has been completely removed from this discourse altogether.

I propose that Women’s Studies students, viewed at best as “objects of diminished
returns,” are in fact an untapped resource (May 2002, 149). We are necessary to resituate this
crisis as merely an impasse that Women’s Studies can traverse. Providing a student-centered
standpoint is not only necessary for the survival of the field, but will also keep Women’s Studies
a project that attracts the best minds with relevant, thought-provoking scholarship.

The politics of naming has been a hotly contested issue since the 1970’s, with direct,
material consequences for academic praxis (Elam 2002). Currently a major site within the
discourse of crisis, the politics of naming is being used to preemptively identify Women’s
Studies’ demise (with the underlying question, ‘If we can’t name it, how can we do it?’ always
beckoning). Universities have responded in different ways to the politics of naming. Some have
purposely added gender or sexuality in program titles to allow for more inclusion and innovation,
while others argued such additions dilute the political and materialist importance of making
concrete change in women’s lives (Auslander 1997, Campbell and Patterson 2007).

Theoretical arguments that feminism is largely a practice of the past and that woman
cannot be a stable object of study has led certain scholars to use the challenges of naming as
evidence of that the field is incoherent, “impoverished” and not worth the effort to maintain
(Brown 1997, 81). In “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” Wendy Brown’s describes her
‘revelation’ that there is no “there there” in Women’s Studies, meaning she was unable to find an
essentialist object of which to locate and identify her department when reviewing curriculum
(Brown 1997, 82). Associating the difficulties of naming her department with assumptions about
the inadequacies of the field as a whole, Brown argues that universities should reintegrate
Women’s Studies classes and programs into traditional disciplines.

The one unacknowledged constant throughout the vast majority of this discourse is the
idea that it is completely within the professors’ power to make such substantial changes to their
departments and programs; the student voice is never incorporated. Yet, Women’s Studies
students are in fact uniquely situated to bring fresh, innovative approaches to the politics of
naming, and reframe this crisis, with its potential to dismantle the field as we know it, into an
opportunity for improvement.

A clear example of this potential is how the politics of naming was approached at Beloit
College, a small liberal arts college in Wisconsin (Beloit, “About”). Professors began teaching
Women’s Studies courses in the 1980’s, and by 2000 Beloit College had a fully funded
department with a variety of courses and multiple tenured faculty. It was at this point that the
politics of naming entered campus life. The department seemed to “lack direction and focus
[because] [a]ll the battles of previous years – for academic legitimacy, for a minor, for a major,
for a tenure-track line – were won” (Orr and Lictheenstein 2004, 8). The department had reached
an impasse that mirrors that of Women’s Studies as a whole. A group of Women’s Studies
professors, believing that the department still was a necessary part of the college but was unsure
of solutions, decided to reinvigorate the department by hosting an event titled “What’s in a
Name?” in which after a series of campus lectures on the politics of naming in feminist
academics, the department held a campus-wide vote deciding the new name (and thus, direction)
of the Women’s Studies department (Orr and Lictheenstein 2004, 8).

In their article analyzing this process, Orr and Lictheenstein describe the variety of
options and combinations written in by students, with the ultimate winner being ‘Women’s and
Gender Studies.’ This is now the name of the department (Beloit, ‘Women’s and Gender Studies’). Orr and Lictheenstein conclude this process by stating that ‘far from blindly rehearsing the desire for a disciplinary object that would cure the referential incoherence… the ‘What’s in a Name?’ campaign actually embodied (and continues to invoke) the animating features of Women’s Studies at its best’ (Orr and Lictheenstein 2004, 9). This student-centered strategy helped to build coalitions with other groups and departments, more accurately reflect the academic desires and lives of students, and ultimately revitalize the department and its relevance for the campus.

What seemed for some professors to be the potential end of Beloit’s department (despite its still high numbers of course enrollment and declared majors and minors), this ‘crisis’ was completely reconstituted as an opportunity to improve the department and solidify its role in the college. Upsetting the professor/student hierarchy created a unique forum that drastically improved Beloit’s department. The success of Beloit’s Women’s and Gender Studies department clearly illustrates how students have an untapped potential to confront and move Women’s Studies beyond impasses such as naming departments and programs.

A second site of the discourse of crisis is the Women’s Studies Ph.D. program. Young scholars are increasingly choosing to pursue a Ph.D’s in Women’s Studies to further their academic goals instead of the traditional disciplines of their second wave professors (Boxer 1998) Yet there remains vocal opponents to this development with the feminist academy. Anti-Ph.D. discourse has centered on the argument that the Women’s Studies Ph.D. is not as scholarly as Ph.D.’s in traditional disciplines, and certain established scholars have framed the Women’s Studies Ph.D. as an affront to the sacred traditions of doctoral education. Because the Women’s Studies Ph.D. is structured around an interdisciplinary field, scholars have argued that the Ph.D.
will lead Women’s Studies to a “watered down” intellectual ghetto that will shape the next generations of professors and bodies of knowledge to be “with breadth but without depth” (Coyner 1991, 354; May 2002, 135). The Ph.D. has been said to depoliticize a generation of young women activists into mediocre scholars, adding to the already assumed death of feminist activism within the discourse of crisis. For example, Romeo argues that the best way to “cool out” an activist is to put her through four to six years of graduate school, the end result being her internalization of university culture over the feminist impulse to dismantle such structures (2000, 157).

Yet when analyzed from a student-centered standpoint, the Ph.D. is evidence of how Women’s Studies students, in this case graduate students, are uniquely situated to respond to both of these critiques. Ph.D. students are bringing Women’s Studies to new academic heights via the production of innovative scholarly work, challenging traditional academic boundaries and furthering the field’s activist aims. The Women’s Studies Ph.D. provides young scholars the opportunity to locate their entire work within Women’s Studies itself. “Being accountable first and foremost to Women’s Studies is an important epistemic shift” because it empowers Ph.D. students by providing a forum in which “women’s studies intersectional theories, histories, and politics are the starting point of inquiry” unlike in traditional disciplines where these issues remain marginal or elective (May 2002, 138). Ph.D. students in Women’s Studies simply do not have the restraints of traditional disciplines, thus allowing them more freedom to pursue innovative work in their feminist scholarship. As they slowly gain tenure, new professors with Women’s Studies Ph.D.’s instead will be able to, within their own “separate academic location… control their own curriculum, schedule their own classes, and appoint faculty who are evaluated on the basis of their teaching and research on women” (Boxer 1998, 391). The Ph.D. in
Women’s Studies creates a cohort of graduate students, and eventually professors, with a unique relationship of ownership to the field quite different from their second wave professors who were trained in traditional disciplines.

The argument against the Women’s Studies Ph.D. assumes that Women’s Studies graduate education has no potential to create change in the university. This assumption constructs a false dichotomy between the university and the ‘real’ street where legitimate change occurs. In fact, Women’s Studies doctoral students are at the forefront of innovative changes within the university that greatly reflects feminist aims, and changing the university is in of itself difficult activist work that improves the material conditions of the lives of actual people (May 2002). The Women’s Studies Ph.D. functions as a “constant state of critique and reconceptualization” of what it means to be a scholar and a feminist (Romeo 2000, 148). The Women’s Studies Ph.D. challenges the assumption that a graduate students need to ‘discipline’ their work within traditional accepted cannons of knowledge that largely marginalize or ignore women’s lives. Far from stagnant, the Women’s Studies Ph.D. brings feminist activism into the center of the university in innovative and creative ways.

Ultimately, the discourse of crisis serves to silence the innoviative, active student population within Womens’ Studies departments and programs throughout the country. As seen in both the politics of naming and the Women’s Studies Ph.D., students are unqiuely located to forge Women’s Studies through this impasse. While second wave scholars, both inside and outside of Women’s Studies, may argue that the field has become stagnant, irrevant and ‘impossible,’ and that academics are leaving the field in record numbers, students provide ample evidence that is simply not occuring. Enrollemnet in undergraduate and graduate work continues to rise, students are not only chosing to structure their educations around the Women’s Studies
field, but are demanding more opportunities to do so (NWSA 2010). There are many Women’s Studies professors who are supportive of both their students and the field even though they have not published their views in the academic press. If such professors are truly invested in the long-term sustainability of Women’s Studies, they must resituate the voices of students as central. This will ensure that Women’s Studies can remain relevant, active and inspiring to future generations of students and scholars.

Keywords: Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, Feminism, Academics, Doctoral Education, Discourse, Students, Professors, Universities, Crisis
Works Cited


