

# THE WOMEN'S STUDIES EXPERIENCE

## *Impetus for Feminist Activism*

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The impact of women's studies courses on students' feminist activism and related behaviors was assessed through quantitative and qualitative methods. At pretesting, women's studies students (10 classes: 161 women and 18 men) did not report significantly more activism than nonwomen's studies students taught by women's studies faculty (9 classes: 73 women and 48 men) or nonwomen's studies students taught by nonwomen's studies faculty (12 classes: 107 women and 47 men). At posttesting, women's studies students, relative to the comparison students, reported more activism during the semester of evaluation, stronger intentions to engage in future feminist activism, and more important and more positive course-related influences on their personal lives ( $p < .0001$ ).

Since 1970, over 600 women's studies programs have been established in the United States. Women's studies programs challenge sexist, androcentric assumptions, provide information about women that is missing from traditional curricula, and present a feminist perspective in which women are the focus of study. Primary goals of women's studies programs are to develop a feminist consciousness and to bring about an understanding of the political, economic, and social forces that affect the roles of women and men (Lee, 1989; Weiler, 1988). This understanding is expected to lead to increased feminist activism and more egalitarian roles and relation-

We thank the teachers at the University of Missouri–St. Louis who graciously allowed us to evaluate their classes and Cathy Giotto for her assistance in data collection.

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ships with others (Klein, 1991; Lee, 1989; Shueman & Sedlacek, 1977; Weiler, 1988).

There is evidence that women's studies courses lead to increased interest in feminist causes (Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Brush, Gold, & White, 1978; Elovson & Cockcroft, 1977; Shueman & Sedlacek, 1977). However, whether this interest is translated into feminist activism has not been investigated systematically, and little is known about specific political behaviors that may be affected by women's studies. The primary aim of this study was to explore the extent to which women's studies programs are effective in promoting feminist activism.

Investigations of the impact of women's studies on feminist political commitment have usually not provided comparison data from students in classes outside the women's studies curriculum. Comparison data are, however, important for determining whether any observed changes in women's studies students are unique to the women's studies experience. Two comparison groups were included in this study. One comprised students enrolled in classes taught by women who were not affiliated with the campus's women's studies program. This group provided a measure of the impact of female instructors as role models, which was presumably independent of the women's studies influence. The second comparison group comprised students enrolled in courses outside the women's studies curriculum that were taught by women's studies faculty. Although women's studies teachers may have "mainstreamed" some women's studies content in these nonwomen's studies classes, this group was expected to have relatively little exposure to the women's studies knowledge base during the semester of evaluation. This group allowed for a test of the impact of women's studies faculty that was, for the most part, independent of the content of women's studies courses. As a second means of exploring the basis of change, women's studies students were asked to describe the aspects of their women's studies experience that had influenced them to make the changes they reported.

## METHOD

### Participants

Three types of classes were evaluated: (a) 10 women's studies classes (WS) (161 women and 18 men), (b) 9 nonwomen's studies classes taught by women's studies faculty (NWS-WSF) (73 women and 48 men), and (c) 12 nonwomen's studies classes taught by nonwomen's studies faculty (NWS-NWSF) (107 women and 47 men). Each set of classes represented a broad range of offerings in the arts and sciences college of a midwestern urban university. All courses were taught by female instructors; all instructors were Caucasian, except one women's studies teacher, who was African

American. Each of the three sets of teachers comprised faculty at the lecturer, assistant professor, and senior professor ranks. A chi-square analysis indicated that there was no significant relationship between the number of faculty at each rank and the type of class. No instructors refused our request to participate. The age range of students was: 18 to 20 years, 31%; 21 to 24 years, 35.3%; 25 to 34 years, 19.2%; and over 34 years, 14.4%. The racial composition of the students was: African American (10.1%), Hispanic (1.7%), White non-Hispanic (86.6%), and other (1.5%). The sample included 67.7% upper division and 32.3% lower division students. Chi-square tests indicated that students from the three types of classes were not significantly different in age, racial composition, or college level. Women were more likely than men to be in the women's studies group;  $\chi^2(2) = 41.36, p < .0001$ .

### Measures

The authors, all of whom were experienced women's studies teachers, developed the measures for assessing change. The measures were meant to reflect desired outcomes of feminist consciousness raising (Kravetz, 1980) and our women's studies program: political activism, changes in interpersonal relating, and adoption of new roles and behaviors.

*Checklist of feminist activism.* Feminist activism was operationalized in a checklist of eight specific behaviors: (a) kept informed on women's rights issues; (b) talked with others to influence their attitudes about women's rights issues; (c) signed a petition related to women's rights; (d) attended a march, rally, or protest related to women's rights; (e) wrote letters to politicians or newspapers about women's rights issues; (f) contributed money to a women's rights cause or to politicians who supported such causes; (g) circulated a petition about a women's rights cause; (h) worked for a phone bank, letter writing campaign, or political campaign in the cause of women's rights; and (i) participated in other activity related to women's rights.

*Evaluation of class impact.* Six Likert items pertained directly to student's perceptions of class impact. Students rated the extent to which their class had affected (a) "the way you interact with others" and (b) "your willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors" on scales that ranged from 0 (no effect) to 4 (a very strong effect). Students rated the importance of each type of change on Likert scales that ranged from 0 (not at all important) to 4 (very important). Students rated the extent to which their changes in willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors produced a positive effect on their lives on a scale that ranged from 0 (no positive effect) to 4 (a very strong positive effect). Negative effects of the changes were rated on a scale that ranged from 0 (no negative effect) to 4 (a very strong

negative effect). Students who indicated changes in their interactions with others or willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors (i.e., responded to these impact questions with ratings above 0) were asked two open-ended questions: (a) "Describe the changes you've noticed" and (b) "What about the class influenced you to make these changes?" In addition, students were asked to predict the likelihood (0% to 100%) they would participate in the future in any of the activities on the checklist.

### Procedure

During the first week of class, the checklist was administered to classes by members of the research team. Students reported their activities on the checklist separately for two time periods—during the 6 months preceding the class and prior to the 6 months preceding the class. During the last week of class, students reported their activities on the checklist for the semester of evaluation and responded to the questions pertaining to class impact. Confidentiality was maintained by using a code for matching pretests with posttests.

## RESULTS

### Checklist of Feminist Activism

The internal consistency of the checklist, assessed by KR-20, averaged .78 for the three time periods. For each of the political activity items, proportions of women and men in each class type who reported the activity were analyzed in a  $2 \times 3$  (Gender  $\times$  Class Type) chi-square analysis. Separate analyses were performed for (a) activities prior to the 6 months preceding the class, (b) activities during the 6 months preceding the class, and (c) activities during the semester of evaluation. A conservative alpha level of .01 was selected for the chi-square tests because of the number of significance tests undertaken.

No gender, class type, nor interaction effects were significant for any checklist item in the first two time periods. At posttesting, significant class-type differences were found for four activity categories. Relative to the comparison students, a greater percentage of women's studies students reported they kept informed of women's rights issues (69.5% vs. 33.6%),  $\chi^2(2) = 28.27, p < .0001$ ; talked with others to influence their attitudes (67.4% vs. 31.3%),  $\chi^2(2) = 23.36, p < .0001$ ; signed petitions (33.0% vs. 13.1%),  $\chi^2(2) = 18.48, p < .0001$ ; and participated in other unspecified activities related to women's rights (32.0% vs. 13.3%),  $\chi^2(2) = 21.36, p < .0001$ . A greater percentage of women's studies students reported participation in the four activities at posttesting ( $M$  percentage for

the four activities = 55.1%) than in the preceding time periods ( $M = 36.3\%$  and  $37.08\%$ ). In contrast, the percentage of comparison students who reported the four activities was about the same at posttesting (NWS-WSF  $M = 23.9\%$ ; NWS-NWSF  $M = 26.2\%$ ) as in the preceding time periods (NWS-WSF  $M = 25.0\%$  and  $24.4\%$ ; NWS-NWSF  $M = 22.5\%$  and  $23.0\%$ ). No other significant effects were found for the checklist activities at posttesting.

### Evaluation of Class Impact

Responses to the seven posttest Likert items were internally consistent (coefficient alpha = .89). The seven items were evaluated in a  $2 \times 3$  (Gender  $\times$  Class Type) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). A significant overall effect was found for class type,  $F(14, 302) = 3.84, p < .0001$ . Subsequent univariate analyses were performed to determine which variables yielded significant class-type differences. Relative to comparison students, women's studies students reported (a) greater class impact on their interactions with others ( $M = 2.52$  vs.  $1.39$ ),  $F(2, 308) = 13.03, p < .0001$ ; (b) more important changes in their interactions with others ( $M = 2.44$  vs.  $1.54$ ),  $F(2, 308) = 8.60, p < .001$ ; (c) greater class impact on their willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors ( $M = 2.04$  vs.  $1.15$ ),  $F(2, 308) = 8.09, p < .001$ ; (d) more important changes in their willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors ( $M = 2.22$  vs.  $1.16$ ),  $F(2, 308) = 10.20, p < .0001$ ; (e) more positive effects of these changes ( $M = 2.04$  vs.  $1.28$ ),  $F(2, 308) = 5.20, p < .01$ ; and (f) greater likelihood of future feminist activism ( $M = 51.7\%$  vs.  $27.8\%$ ),  $F(2, 308) = 9.95, p < .0001$ . Class type was not significantly related to ratings of negative class impact. For all variables for which an effect was found, Tukey post hoc comparisons indicated that women's studies students gave significantly higher ratings than either comparison group ( $p < .0001$ ). They also indicated that the comparison groups were not significantly different from one another.

The MANOVA revealed a significant overall gender effect,  $F(7, 302) = 2.42, p < .02$ , but no interaction effect of gender and class type. Women reported (a) more important changes in their willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors ( $M = 1.72$  vs.  $1.32$ ),  $F(1, 308) = 4.62, p < .05$ ; (b) more positive effects of these changes ( $M = 1.80$  vs.  $1.27$ ),  $F(1, 308) = 8.04, p < .01$ ; and (c) greater likelihood of future feminist activism ( $M = 43.3\%$  vs.  $25.0\%$ ),  $F(1, 308) = 10.03, p < .01$ .

Responses of women's studies students to the open-ended questions were explored through procedures of content analysis suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984). To develop a classification of response categories, all responses to the questions were examined. Recurring themes were identified, and each response was then coded by the theme expressed. Responses

that reflected more than one theme received multiple codes. Agreement between independent raters was approximately 96%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion between raters. Percentages reported here for each category of response are based on the subsample of 98 women's studies students (55%) who responded to the open-ended questions.

The following themes of change in interactions with others were identified:

1. *Increased awareness of discrimination*: 57.1% indicated they had become more sensitive to discriminatory practices toward women. An example is, "I have learned the overt and subtle ways in which people, including women, discriminate against women. My senses are much more acute now—I watch people's behavior much more."
2. *Enhanced self-confidence*: 28.6% reported increased self-confidence in relating to others and in discussing women's issues with others. Examples are, "I am much more aware of the many aspects of a patriarchal society, and I speak of these imbalances with more feeling and assuredness," and "My arguments are more logical and statistical, giving me more confidence [to discuss] these issues."
3. *Greater tolerance of others*: 28.6% reported greater tolerance of others whom they saw as different from themselves. One woman wrote, "I am more understanding and accepting of individual choices of women who are different from myself."
4. *Ability to educate others*: 33.7% indicated they applied knowledge gained from the course to educate others about women's issues. An example is, "I am much more likely to inform other people of what I have learned—women's rights, gay rights, general information—because I am so much more informed."

Categories of new roles and behaviors included the following:

1. *Adoption of new/nontraditional behaviors*: 22.4% described changes toward less gender-stereotyped life styles. One woman stated, "It has made me tell my fiance to do more cooking and cleaning. It has also made me think about pursuing more of my own interests instead of being his sidekick all the time." One man wrote, "I have done several 'feminine activities' at home (sewing, etc.) which helped me spend more time with and enjoy my wife and our time together."
2. *Enhanced assertiveness*: 23.5% indicated increased outspokenness with others. One student said, "I have become much more assertive in stating my opinion and more assertive in following up and behaving in a manner that supports my opinions." Another wrote, "I find myself 'arguing' with men about sexism and feminism and supporting myself with stats."
3. *Wanting to learn more*: 8.2% indicated an increased desire to learn more about feminist issues. Examples are, "I am now very curious of differential treatment of women and plan to take more courses to explore this," and "I find myself reading up more on these topics."

Responses of women's studies students to the open-ended questions concerning class factors associated with change were analyzed by the same procedure described for other open-ended questions. Of the 98 responders, 67.3% attributed changes to course content, 34.7% to class dynamics (e.g., open-class format, supportive atmosphere), and 10.2% to the influence of the course instructor.

## DISCUSSION

Our results provide promising support for the positive impact of women's studies courses on students' feminist activism. The three class groups, which were equivalent in age, racial composition, and college year level, reported similar amounts of feminist activism at pretesting. At posttesting, more women's studies students reported keeping informed of women's rights issues, talking with others to influence their attitudes toward women's rights, signing petitions, and other unspecified activities in the cause of women's rights. The proportion of comparison students who reported these activities was about the same across time periods, whereas the proportion of women's studies students endorsing the activities increased substantially from pretesting to posttesting.

Students in comparison classes did not report increases in feminist activism even if the class was taught by a women's studies teacher. This finding suggests that whatever women's studies teachers provide their students in nonwomen's studies classes is not sufficient to promote changes in feminist activism and that the content of women's studies classes is an important aspect of the impetus for change. Students' responses to the open-ended questions further support the importance of the women's studies knowledge base in bringing about change. When asked what aspects of their women's studies classes led to the changes they reported, students were most likely to identify the content of their courses.

There are four limitations of the study that should be noted. First, receptiveness to change was not equated at pretesting, and women's studies students may have been more open to making the changes studied here than the comparison students. Second, the higher proportion of women students in the women's studies classes could have influenced class outcomes. Third, all measures of activism were self-reported and were not confirmed by other sources. We therefore do not know whether reports of activism were inflated by a felt pressure to appear feminist in attitude and behavior. However, the procedures were designed to reduce social desirability response sets. Students' responses were anonymous, and members of the research team, rather than course instructors, administered the questionnaires.

The fourth methodological shortcoming is that women's studies students were not instructed to exclude class-related activities from their reports

of feminist activism. Hence, some reported activities, particularly "kept informed of women's rights issues," may have reflected classroom experiences or course assignments. The open-ended comments indicated, however, that some of the reported changes in interactions with others and new roles and behaviors took place outside the classroom and were self-initiated. Participants described being more watchful of discrimination and sexism around them, more assertive and self-assured in speaking up for their rights and the rights of other women, more tolerant of others' perspectives and life styles, and more willing to try new, nontraditional roles and activities. Moreover, women's studies students rated the changes they experienced as more important and more positive than did comparison students. Therefore, our findings provide encouraging evidence that women's studies courses are effective in promoting feminist activism. It is important that future research explore whether such gains brought about by the women's studies experience are sustained over time.

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