

**NCRW Annual Conference 2005: Power Matters –
Leading in Academe: The Women’s Studies PhD Program**

Location: CUNY Graduate Center

Event Date: June 7th, 2005

Speakers: Pamela Hall, Deborah Rosenfelt, Allison Kimmich

Moderator: Beverly Guy-Sheftall

Quotes:

“Women’s Studies is about living the issues you are studying – whether they pertain to class, race, or sexuality. Women’s Studies is a collaboration of disciplines and issues of diversity.” – Deborah Rosenfelt

“Women’s Studies is essentially about building bridges and connections and bringing awareness to immediate issues.” – Pamela Hall

“With a database that would provide information regarding Women’s Studies programs nationally, NWSA hopes to make the case for the existence of the discipline of Women’s Studies even stronger.” – Allison Kimmich

Overview:

This panel examined the implications and effects of Women’s Studies PhD programs for Women’s Studies, academia, and society at large, as well as for research on women, gender, race, class, sexuality, and difference. Among questions explored: What impact does the existence of the Women’s Studies PhD have on the way Women’s Studies and research on women and gender are perceived, funded, and recognized on campus? What epistemologies are being privileged, and what challenges does this present for other disciplines? What role are such programs playing in linking gender issues to broader concerns about diversity on campus, outreach to local communities, and student and faculty activism? How might NCRW encourage and facilitate research needed for the continued development of the discipline?

Summary:

Pamela Hall, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Women’s Studies and Chair of the Department of Women’s Studies at Emory University, began the discussion surrounding the future of a Women’s Studies PhD and its place in academia by defining what a Women’s Studies curriculum aims to accomplish and instill in its students. “My job at Emory is made up of several parts: educating the administration about what we do [in Women’s Studies], educating ourselves

and our students about the nature of the discipline, deciding where we want to go and what we want to do with it,” she said.

Emory began offering courses related to women’s issues and women’s studies in the 1980’s, although at that time there was no recognized major or program implemented by the school. By 1986, not only had Emory established a Women’s Studies major, but an official PhD program had also come into place. The major is structured around jointly appointed core faculty. Two years ago, the department received departmental status within the university. Now they can offer professors possibilities of tenure as well as full-time positions.

At present, there are 12 full-time staff members and 70 associate and interdisciplinary faculty members. Thirty of those professors are deeply involved with the Women’s Studies major or PhD program, either teaching classes or acting as advisors to the students. “Women’s Studies is essentially about building bridges and connections and bringing awareness to immediate issues,” said Hall. Therefore, the department has always made hiring qualified academics and bringing in influential speakers a top priority.

The Women’s Studies program has succeeded in asserting itself within the school as well as within the wider community. Since the inception of the PhD program, there have been 30 successful graduates, including co-panelist Allison Kimmich. Because they attract and accept such diverse group of PhD candidates with varying interests, Hall said, “The department’s admission criteria are simple – students who apply to the program have to know where their interests lie and what they really want to study. The challenge for the admissions committee is to decide whether or not the institution can adequately provide guidance for these students interests.”

Deborah Rosenfelt, Professor of Women's Studies and Director of the Curriculum

Transformation Project at the University of Maryland, continued the discussion by describing the

PhD program there. Every year, roughly 100 applicants apply to the program, however, only five to seven are typically accepted. Topics of study range from how employment issues relate directly to race and gender to how issues of physical disabilities are related to feminist studies. Like Hall, Rosenfelt emphasized the interdisciplinarity of Women's Studies. For Rosenfelt, "Women's Studies is about living the issues you are studying –whether they pertain to class, race, or sexuality. You can't talk about women's issues and exclude all those other issues. Gender is not a topic within itself. Women's Studies is a collaboration of disciplines and issues of diversity." Most of Maryland's PhD students have affiliate advisors from other disciplines as well. There are eight full-time faculty members for the program, five of them who identify as women of color. In addition, there are 70 associate faculty members either assisting as professors or advisors to their PhD students.

One of the central aims of the PhD program is to integrate theory and activism. Most of their graduate students teach undergraduate courses and are very enthusiastic and open about sharing their work with their students. Rosenfelt noted that not all their students end up working in academia, although a large percentage do. Many also work for NGO's, pursue work in the policy making side, or choose to enter law-related professions.

Allison Kimmich, a graduate of the PhD program at Emory University expanded on the kinds of work graduates pursue upon graduation by discussing her own post-graduate work experience. Kimmich is currently the Executive Director of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), where she develops and executes comprehensive fundraising plans to expand the organization's revenue. She previously served as the director of pre-college programs at Barnard College, where she developed a Young Women's Leadership Institute and taught feminist theory in the undergraduate Women's Studies program.

As Executive Director of NWSA, one of her projects involves establishing a database that could provide information regarding Women's Studies programs nationally. This would include statistics

and reports on faculty members, departments, the number of students in Women's Studies programs nationally both at the graduate and undergraduate levels, and a systematic description of such programs. The first of its kind in this field, the database would become a comprehensive resource for both individuals and academic institutions in further advancing the study and work of Women's Studies. "With the database, we hope to make the case for the existence of the discipline of Women's Studies even stronger," Kimmich said.

In summary, moderator **Beverly Guy-Sheftall**, Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women's Studies at Spelman College and adjunct professor at Emory University's Institute for Women's Studies, highlighted many of the crucial points discussed by the panelists. Guy-Sheftall believes that "The biggest frontier and challenge for Women's Studies is that at present there is no data that can go toward program assessment," expressing hope that NWSA's proposed database will help. "The database would provide a history and basis for Women's Studies," she said. Guy-Sheftall agreed with Hall and Rosenfelt's view of Women's Studies as a big tent, an overarching and encompassing major: "it includes nationality, sexuality, religion – all aspects of identity, power and social meaning...all of that is conveyed in the discipline of Women's Studies. Gender is not the primary tool of analysis, gender does not exist in isolation, our identities are based on gender in addition to other identities," she concurred.

According to Guy-Sheftall, the most troubling question for Women's Studies in the immediate future is "how its study in the United States can become global." She commented that often in her own teachings she finds that students in Women's Studies programs across the nation know very little about women's lives outside the United States. "What can be done? A more global perspective must be taken, broadening the range of reading materials, texts and topics," she said. She ended with a call for further conversation: "What are we doing with Women's Studies at the undergraduate levels? That is equally as important. Students in Women's Studies, especially at the undergraduate level, are not linking theory and practice, they are not activists, and activism is getting lost."