

External Evaluator's Report
Program Review, Women's and Gender Studies Department
Sonoma State University

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Introduction

This report addresses observations and recommendations related to my one-day visit (April 23, 2015) to Sonoma State University for an external evaluation of the Department of Women's and Gender Studies (WGS). The evaluation is part of the department's 2014-15 Program Review.

Prior to visiting I reviewed the department's Self-Study documents, prepared by Dr. Don Romesburg, Chair of the Women's and Gender Studies Department. The one-day visit included meetings with Interim Dean of the School of Social Sciences, John Wingard, and Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, Melinda Barnard. I visited two WGS classes: Dr. Lena McQuade's "Women's Bodies: Health and Image," and Dr. Don Romesburg's "Queer Theory, Queer Lives." I enjoyed an extended lunch meeting with WGS faculty, including Dr. Charlene Tung and Drs. McQuade and Romesburg, followed by an hour-long meeting with about fifteen WGS students at the HUB.

I bring to this task the unique experience of having been part of the WGS core faculty at Sonoma State from 2003-2007, during which time I served as Interim Department Chair for one year. I have over twenty years of continuous experience in tenure line positions in Women's Studies departments, including at the University of Colorado, Boulder (1994-2003) where I received tenure and promotion; and at San Francisco State (2007-present), where I served as department chair from 2007-2010 and was promoted to full professor in 2010. I also served as a member of the Field Leadership Working Group for the National Women's Studies Association in 2013, which produced a snapshot of the field and guidelines for tenure and promotion in Women's and Gender Studies. I currently sit on the Academic Policies Committee of the Academic Senate at San Francisco State University, and I have participated in department-level program review at SFSU. All this prepares me to offer a candid and well-informed assessment of the WGS department at Sonoma State University.

I thank the WGS faculty and students for their time and thoughtful discussions during my visit, and I appreciate the interest and commitment that both Interim Dean Wingard and Vice Provost Barnard expressed during our meetings.

Strengths

The Women's and Gender Studies department at Sonoma State University is a small but impactful program with a long history of community-based feminist engagement and interdisciplinary curricular collaboration. The program was one of the earliest to establish itself in the CSU, and it attracts a larger number of majors than most other WGS departments in the CSU. The department is also currently peopled by three young and dynamic faculty-members who, given the opportunity, can steer the program in innovative directions.

In 2013, the Field Leadership Working Group of the National Women's Studies Association put together a statement on women's and gender studies research, teaching, and service to address epistemological questions about what 'counts' as scholarship in the field (<http://www.nwsa.org/files/2013-NWSA-Tenure%20StatementFINAL.pdf>). The statement outlines four key concepts as central to women's and gender studies: the politics of knowledge production, social justice, intersectionality, and transnational analysis. The WGS department at Sonoma State is noteworthy for its expertise and ongoing commitments in these areas. Here are some of the department's strengths:

- **Student engagement.** The most impressive aspect of my visit to SSU was the meeting with WGS students (majors and minors). Students talked excitedly and favorably about the department and, especially, its faculty. I posed several questions and students took turns responding. My questions included: "What makes WGS classes unique at SSU compared to classes in other departments?" "How would you describe the curricular mission of the WGS department?" "How do you think the program should develop in the future?" and "What are your individual academic goals or ambitions?"

To a person, students described faculty advising and mentoring as the most important feature of the WGS department at SSU. They described the culture and community of WGS as welcoming and supportive, and they praised the faculty for their availability in extended office hours and their willingness to get to know students as individuals.

Students also impressed me with their clarity about the department's mission. They described the curriculum as organized around the principles of intersectionality, interdisciplinarity, critical thinking, feminist pedagogy, and public/community engagement.

Students also identified ambitious individual goals (law school, graduate school, leadership roles in community organizations) and many were well on their way to achieving these goals. Students perceive the individual attention and pedagogy in WGS as instrumental to their ambitions and goals. It is not surprising then that the Women's and Gender Studies department attracts a large number of student majors and minors. The department offers students at SSU something unique and challenging that stimulates their ambition and provides direction for the future.

- **Interdisciplinary and co-curricular contributions to campus community.** The WGS department at SSU models best practices in interdisciplinary thinking and teaching. The WGS faculty is trained in interdisciplinary methods, and they

deliver a variety of courses that cross and combine disciplines in different ways. Core courses take an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge production, and GE courses (which net students from various fields) require students to think across disciplines in fulfillment of course requirements. The department's strong contribution to SSU's GE curriculum compliments stand-alone disciplines (like history or sociology) that require students to approach GE courses from a disciplinary perspective.

- **Intersectional approaches.** This aspect of WGS curricula maintains that systems of inequality and injustice are interdependent and cannot be adequately analyzed in isolation. Gender norms are, therefore, analyzed alongside and in equal weight to other socio-cultural systems such as race, nation, class, ability – to name a few. Intersectional analysis is a pivotal and original contribution of the field of Women and Gender Studies, and the WGS department at SSU puts intersectional approaches at the center of its course offerings. Students, in their capstone projects, and faculty, on their syllabus and in the organization of the major's core curricula, prioritize intersectional approaches to knowledge production. Students (especially double-majors) bring their WGS training in interdisciplinary methods and intersectional analysis to courses in other departments, enriching the classroom experience of students and faculty across the campus.
- **Pedagogical approaches.** As noted in the self study and reflected in course syllabi, WGS faculty are committed to feminist pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy emphasizes student-centered learning, classroom dialogue (rather than lecture-based learning), reading and writing skills (rather than multiple-choice testing), critical thinking, oral presentations and student facilitations. This is the teaching style of all upper-division core courses and most GE courses in the WGS department. In my observation, WGS students take an active role in the classroom; in the classes I visited students talked easily amongst themselves and with instructors; dialogue or debate was the central mode of classroom engagement. Feminist pedagogy requires that faculty hand over some of the responsibility of teaching to students, and student responsibility transforms the classroom and often translates into enhanced writing and public speaking skills. Students' classroom performance makes it clear that a dialogic approach – a practice of student engagement and classroom critique – is the norm in WGS classes at SSU.
- **Community engagement.** In keeping with best practices in the field, the WGS department at SSU prioritizes praxis in the form of student engagement and community service learning. From its inception, the WGS major and Women's Health minor have required students to complete a 4-unit internship as part of their course of study. Internship placements are pedagogical (students learn about learning through their experience as interns and written reflections), but internships also provide "real world" experience in the non-profit sector. This aspect of the curricula prepares students for life after college and helps them translate their WGS training into on-the-job training and potential job placements.

Challenges and Targets for Improvement

Despite its strengths, the WGS department at SSU faces a number of distinct challenges, the most important of which is a chronic lack of resources and administrative support. It is not possible for a department to sustain a fleshed out major (with stand-alone rather than cross-listed courses) and three minor programs on the labor of three FTEF. That the department has continued to function so effectively – building programs, growing the major, and providing service to the campus and community – speaks volumes to the energy and ingenuity of its young faculty. However, the faculty will certainly face burnout if it continues on this path. Something needs to change.

The department also struggles to communicate the relevance and importance of the department's curricular value to the wider campus community.

Recommendations

The WGS department's self-study makes it clear that the department is at a crossroads. Important decisions need to be made about the immediate future of the department. Here are some suggestions on how to move the WGS department and its various programs into the future. These suggestions are mindful of the program's historic mission, the abundance of campus and community stakeholders, the faculty's youth and energy, and the important role the department's programs play in student life.

1) The administration should provide course-reductions for all three faculty to revise the department's mission statement and SLOs. The department's mission statement and SLOs are out-of-date, and this exercise will enable the faculty to clearly communicate what the Women's and Gender Studies department at SSU is and does. The mission statement and SLOs should be able to communicate to a wider audience the utility of the department's major and minors. It is important that all three faculty-members participate in this exercise. Faculty can use this exercise to articulate recent developments in the field, speak to the applications that WGS programs have on a global stage, and explain the reasons SSU students are attracted to WGS programs and campus collaborations.

2) WGS faculty should rethink the organization and function of the WGS major. The curriculum outlined in the major has not been revised for some time, and it is reflective of a phase in the department's development that has long passed. Perhaps in the process of clarifying the department's mission and SLOs, a reinvigorated sense of the major will emerge. For instance, the self-study identifies a number of problems with the disciplinary concentration, and I agree that this aspect of the major is antiquated. My suggestion is to eliminate the disciplinary concentration and develop non-GE upper-division courses for majors. These courses should be reflective of the specific research interests of each of the core faculty. On graduation surveys, many students note a desire for more research opportunities, so non-GE electives should also have a research component.

3) Develop a track, minor, or concentration in gender and globalization and/or transnational studies. This development will bring the department in line with national trends in field formation. There are a few stand-alone courses that do this work (eg., Gender and Globalization), but WGS as a field has moved beyond a US context, and transnational perspectives should be more fully integrated into the department's GE and non-GE course offerings.

4) Once the department's mission, SLOs and curriculum have been clarified and revised, grow the faculty to at least five FTEF. As I discussed with Vice Provost Barnard, this is the smallest number of faculty necessary to run a sustainable program.