

Our Hang-Out: The Minnesota Women's Center and Women's Higher Education
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Abstract

As the Minnesota Women's Center celebrates its 40th anniversary, this paper highlights our past and present work at the University of Minnesota, especially our programs for returning women students and Outstanding Women Learning (OWL). We propose including on the national agenda three exemplary practices of the Minnesota Women's Center: building partnerships with men in coeducational institutions, co-curricular programs such as Minnesota's OWL, and an organization—indeed, an academic office—devoted to returning women students.

Introduction

In this paper we discuss the past and present of the Minnesota Women's Center as a case study, to suggest the place for women's centers in higher education nationally. First, we highlight the history of the Minnesota Women's Center, focusing on our strong heritage in supporting returning women students and advocating for system change on campus. Second, we showcase two current projects of the center: our programs for returning women students and Outstanding Women Leaders (OWL). These projects are works in progress that we believe have an important role in system change on our campus and in higher education nationally. Last, based on our experiences at the Minnesota Women's Center, we argue for the centrality of campus-based women's centers in a national agenda for women in higher education.

Granted that each institution is unique, and that our history differs from the histories of other women's centers, we nevertheless believe that the challenges we have encountered and the questions facing us now are far from unique. We believe that—as our own past and present

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show—campus women's centers offer a unique voice in responding to the challenges and questions facing women in higher education. We hope to stimulate further discussion because, to restate a conclusion reached over a decade ago, "there is work to be done" (Wetzel 1988: 15).

Three Traditions in the History of the Minnesota Women's Center

There are three traditions in the history of the Minnesota Women's Center that provide strong foundations for our current programs: (1) a focus on returning women students; (2) inclusion of men; and (3) advocating for system change to create a climate more conducive to the success of diverse women students.

The Minnesota Women's Center originally opened within a broader program entitled "The Minnesota Plan for the Continuing Education of Women." This program was the brainchild of two ingenious women at the University of Minnesota set on making a difference. In the late 1950s, Virginia Senders, psychology lecturer, and Elizabeth Cless, assistant to the dean in the General Extension division (now University College), joined forces and designed a unified, far-reaching program that encompassed their shared concerns about enabling educated women to be productive members of society. After securing funding from the Carnegie Corporation, their comprehensive program opened in July 1960. The program had a two-fold mission. It promoted, first, "the full utilization of our resources of able and educated womanpower" and, second, "an increase in the personal happiness and satisfaction of many individual women, which will occur as they find ways of making full and productive use of their capacities and their time." To achieve this mission, the program acted as a liaison between women students and university resources (Schletzer, et al. 1967: 2).

While the Minnesota Plan attended to the needs of women students at all stages in their careers, the students who most often made use of the services were typically more mature, re-

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turning women students. Referred to as "Rusty Ladies," these women were typically 36 years in age, the mother of three children (one of which was still in pre-school), married, and college-educated to some degree (Schletzer, et al. 1967: 7-15). The returning-women-student focus earned the program wide accolades, including endorsement by Betty Friedan (Friedan 1963; Vick 1963) and a federal grant in 1966 that funded "Operation—Second Chance," a clearing-house of resources for Minnesota colleges and universities interested in piloting their continuing education programs (Szczepanski 1966).

The Minnesota Women's Center continued the work of the Minnesota Plan pioneers by maintaining resources specifically geared toward returning women students. "Students Older than Average" created support and advocacy groups during the 1970s, and by the late 1970s the center began administering the Carol E. Macpherson Memorial Scholarship, an opportunity directed to women students over 28 years of age and returning to school after a five-year or longer break in their post-secondary education (Truax, et al. 1981; Minnesota Women's Center 1999).

In addition to a focus on returning women students, another strong tradition of the Minnesota Women's Center since its founding is the inclusion of men. Both the original Minnesota Plan of the 1960s and the Minnesota Women's Center of the 1970s depended on the support and flexibility of male deans and supervisors. Moreover, various members of the staff—although in low proportions—have been male. In some cases important research on women students and in other cases awareness-raising programs owed their success to male contributions (Schletzer, et al. 1967: 7; Kimpbell 1999).

Although women's centers founded during the height of the women's movement in the 1970s often argued for all-women spaces and all-women non-hierarchical, we find that this model suffers from two difficulties. First, despite emulating a non-hierarchical spirit, in practice

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most academic women's centers have operated under hierarchies (Clevenger 1988: 6). Second, while an all-female model has proven to be successful at women's colleges, the results from co-educational institutions are less clear-cut (Tidball, et al. 1999: xix-xxi). Given that we operate—as many women's centers do—in coeducational institutions, at the Minnesota Women's Center we encourage dialog among women and men students in our own programs and, as a result, we believe we foster further dialog in other spheres—school, work, and home. We agree with the spirit of Hannah Goldberg's recent manifesto that, to carry out our mission in a coeducational university, we must build partnerships between men and women on campus (Goldberg 1999: 16).

A third tradition, advocacy for *system change*, also characterized the early work of the Minnesota Women's Center and gradually grew in importance. Once the Carnegie grant expired in 1965, Student Affairs assumed financial responsibility for the continuance of the Minnesota Plan's coordinating office (Schletzer, et al. 1967). By 1971 (and under a new director) the coordinating office was renamed the Minnesota Women's Center and took a central role in advocating for women on campus, much in the spirit of the growing national movement for women's liberation (Fryand 1970). By the early 1970s, director Anne Truax catalyzed discussions about implementing an affirmative action policy, only the beginning of a long and tumultuous history of gains for faculty women at Minnesota (Minnesota Planning and Counseling Center for Women 1970; Blom 1990; Spector 1990). In 1973, with other Minnesota Women's Center staff, Truax served on the founding committee of the Women's Studies program. A decade later she helped institute yet another academic department, the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies. These and other system changes represented significant gains for women students during the

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1970s and 1980s. As a result of these early successes, Minnesota became both a pioneer and model for other women's centers interested in promoting system changes in higher education.

While the center's programs addressed the needs of diverse students, a particular commitment to diversity was adopted during the center's involvement in the work of a university-wide effort to improve the campus climate for women in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Spector 1990). In 1992 the Minnesota Women's Center adopted new mission statement emphasizing a "special commitment to women of color, women with disabilities, lesbians, bisexual women, and reentry women" (Minnesota Women's Center 1993). The focus on diversity translated into practice by with the launching of students of color programs as regular features of the center's activities. As one example, in 1998-99 the center hosted programs and provided resources for women students of color interested in graduate school, including brown bag discussions on the application process, financial aid workshops, and presentations by admissions staff and graduate faculty of color. Multiculturalism and a deep spirit of system change continue to motivate what we do at the Minnesota Women's Center. Programs for returning women students and the OWL program strive to marshal together—and indeed supplement—resources at the university in order to promote the success of all women students.

Outstanding Women Learning (OWL)

Turning now to the present programs of the Minnesota Women's Center, we wish to highlight a new program called Outstanding Women Learning (OWL) to be launched at the University of Minnesota. OWL responds to findings that demonstrate a need among coeducational institutions for programs modeled after women's colleges.

Studies show that women are entering post-secondary institutions in record numbers. Fifty-five percent of undergraduates were women in 1993, and women were awarded more

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Bachelors and Masters degrees in 1996-97 than men (Tidball, et al. 1999: 21-22; Hammock 1999). Yet other statistics show a different story. In 1998 women on average earned \$150 less per week than men and were less likely to enter managerial and professional positions (U.S. Department of Labor 1999). In all-women colleges, students tend to achieve and accomplish more than women from coeducational institutions (Tidball, et al. 1999: xix). Our challenge as a coeducational institution is to provide educational opportunities in an environment where all students flourish and to "go on beyond equity to achieve true partnerships between women and men" (Goldberg 1999: 16). Until such partnerships are common-day practice on coeducational campuses, there remains the need for programs that take women seriously by providing spaces and locations where their voices and issues are at the center, offering peer support for enhancing student development, encouraging interactions with accomplished female role models, setting high academic standards, and offering tangible support services (Reiss 1999). The Minnesota Women's Center has designed the OWL program to address this need. Similar programs thrive with documented success at places like University of Richmond, Virginia (WILL 1998).

The proposed OWL program at Minnesota is a four-year program that provides women students with an opportunity to excel in their fields, gain valuable skills, build communities with other students and faculty, learn to apply their skills in larger society, and enhance their overall university experience. OWL has four components: (1) Academic, (2) Active Learning, (3) Critical Skills, and (4) Advising experiences to teach women self-advocacy and other critical skills. Women students will enter the OWL program during the second semester of their freshman year. During the next three and one-half years students will combine the four components to gain a holistic, empowering, and effective educational experience.

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In the Academic Component and during the second semester of their freshman year, OWL students will take an introductory experience class offered through the Student Excellence in Academics and Multiculturalism (SEAM) program that emphasizes women's roles in academia and valuable academic skills (A/PLRC 1999). By the third and fourth year of the OWL program, students will be expected to have declared their majors, and they will be organized into smaller cohorts sharing the same minors (especially in women's studies, leadership, and foreign studies). In their minors, students will learn about women's achievements in their chosen fields and develop further skills for becoming effective leaders. In the Active Learning Component and during the second or third year of OWL, participants will complete a supervised internship, a study abroad program, or a paid work experience. Students will be required to choose active learning experiences appropriate for their chosen fields that give them opportunities to apply their skills in real work settings. In the Critical Skills Component students will attend the annual Women Student Leaders Conference in Washington, D.C. in their sophomore year. During all four years of their programs, OWL students will participate in a Critical Thinking Debate Series designed to develop critical thinking capabilities, public speaking skills, and other forms of civic participation. In the Advising Component OWL will assign each participant an advisor during her second semester to draw up an individualized academic/career plan. Beginning in her second year, each OWL student will meet with a mentor from her chosen field. Last, OWL students in their third and fourth years will serve as peer advisors for OWL students in their first and second years. Together, these opportunities allow OWL students to gain experience in both giving and receiving advice and support.

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An Organization for Returning Women Students

In the spring of 1999, staff member Ellen Birmingham initiated work to identify the number of returning women undergraduates on the Twin Cities campuses of the University of Minnesota. Working with Academic and Distributed Computing Services, she developed a Web survey to collect information about and feedback from undergraduate women students who were over the age of 30, registered full or part-time, with and without a declared major, and enrolled at the Minneapolis and St. Paul University of Minnesota campuses. Admissions information indicated that there existed a pool of 3900 undergraduate women fitting these criteria. To request responses to the survey, she sent an informational message to pool members via their university email accounts. 434 students responded, representing an 11 percent return. The survey questions fell into two categories. The first group of questions requested demographic information about the respondents, while the second group of questions canvassed the students' perceptions of the need for on-campus resources tailored to returning women students. From the demographic results, the majority of respondents were between 30 and 40 years old and has at least 1 child. We found that 45.4% of respondents are carrying 12 or more credits as compared to 39% of a comparable population in 1984-85 (Truax 1984). The survey results overwhelmingly demonstrated a perceived need for additional campus resources specifically directed toward returning women students, especially service hours on evenings and weekends, an academic office/drop-in center, and a staff trained on reentry student academic issues.¹

To advocate for campus resources for returning women students, last fall Birmingham founded a new student organization, Returning Women Students. Currently the group is networking and recruiting members, gaining publicity, and strategizing for presenting their case to

¹ The questions and survey results are available upon request from the authors.

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university administrators (Simanduyeva 2000). In the meantime, the Minnesota Women's Center has supported the group by providing both space and resources for its activities. We plan to continue researching the status of returning women students and advocating for their academic success on campus.

One way we have gained insight into the situations of returning women students is simply by listening to their individual stories. The following vignette from a 54-year-old transfer student brings us full circle to the original concerns of the Minnesota Plan:

In 1997, I transferred to the University of Minnesota from Arizona State University. Eager to learn about campus resources, I decided to visit the Minnesota Women's Center first. After formally introducing myself to the staff, I proceeded to ask where the returning students' office was located. With hesitation, the program coordinator bluntly replied, "We don't have one." I stood there dumbfounded and filled with disappointment. Before I came to the U of M, people boasted how the university was an advanced institute and ahead of the times—whatever that meant. I stood there wondering if I had made a mistake in transferring. This was an opportune time to brag about the reentry office at Arizona State, and I did just that. I told stories about financial need-based scholarships, a competent mentor program, and weekend events for non-traditional students. My first two months at the U of M were troubling for me, and many times I contemplated on leaving. Through all my trials and tribulations, the Minnesota Women's Center has always been there to listen to my complaints, nurse my wounds, and encourage me to follow my dreams. The center has known that resources for older students have been limited. The university is geared toward working with a population of younger students who face different issues and challenges.

During my first visit to the Minnesota Women's Center, I learned about the Carol E. Macpherson Scholarship for older, returning women students. I immediately applied for the scholarship. When I later heard that my application was selected, it really boosted my morale! The award helped fund my education for a couple of quarters, during a time when I was still getting oriented to campus. More than that, when I received the award I felt a sudden sense of belonging absent during my first months on campus. It really motivated me to give the U of M a second chance.

This story (shared by staff member Janet al'Azar) parallels many of the stories of the center's foremothers and clientele (see for example Cunningham 1974). Programs for returning women students that she helped initiate and that have been supported by the Minnesota Women's

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Center in recent years include a brown bag lunch series, special lectures and events, and most recently the newly-established student group highlighted above.

Conclusion

The question before us is, "Based on current successes and challenges, how can women's centers contribute to higher education in the twenty-first century? What should the role of women's centers be in a national agenda for women in higher education?" We propose as partial solutions the inclusion of the work of women's centers on the national agenda. In our case, this includes three exemplary practices: building partnerships with men, creating a campus climate encouraging the success of diverse women students through programs such as OWL, and advocating for groups, resources, and services for returning women students.

As a last point, we believe that women's centers should continue to work to support each other, exchanging ideas, and encountering challenges to our legitimacy together rather than separately. Presented with the task of setting a national agenda for women in higher education, we can take a momentous step by carving out a prominent place for women's centers.

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