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Feminist Scholarship Review: Gender and Sexuality Studies and the Liberal Arts Education

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Feminist Scholarship Review

Gender and Sexuality Studies
and the Liberal Arts Education

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Beth Miller

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Introduction

The first question posed about every human, even with ultrasound, is, "Is it a girl or a boy?" It is the first and most important category people put us in as human beings. This is why I often wonder why there is still debate over whether or not to look at gender in relation to liberal arts curriculums. Gender is where we start, live and finish life—we should understand its (imposed) implications and limitations.

Sexuality is the human impulse that governs much of our adult lives regardless of our gender, race, ethnicity or class. It is a unifying category regardless of whether we are sexual or not and regardless of whom we are sexual with. The persistence of Darwin and Freud's theories on sexuality in many classes testifies to our prolonged investigation of human sexuality. Applying feminist consciousness to contemporary sexuality studies, however, may help us evolve beyond Darwin and Freud's limited perspectives on this important aspect of human life.

Liberal arts Colleges are not trade schools. Humanities majors in particular are not training for a particular profession as much as we are training our minds to take in the world as completely as possible and break it down as essentially as possible. We are becoming thinkers who are able to integrate intellect, creativity and compassion into a world view that makes us more complete human beings.

When I solicited professors for essays in this issue, I asked them to answer the question: What is the importance of gender and sexuality studies to a Liberal arts curriculum? Elisabeth Armstrong, PhD in the Women's Studies Department and Stephen Valocchi, PhD and director of the Sociology Department were kind enough to take time out of their busy schedules to submit their opinions on this topic.

Armstrong points out current challenges to the validity of continuing to separately study gender. The argument is that these problems have been addressed and are no longer valuable as separate intellectual pursuits. She disagrees questioning the commitment of liberal arts educators to integrate gender into their courses. Gender and sexuality studies are integral to understanding our current place in history. Specifically, gender and sexuality studies facilitate our ability to question proscribed reality which is central to becoming independent, creative and critical thinkers.

She also observes that many Liberal arts colleges are becoming corporations. Because of this, they rely on money and the people who give it, whether they are individuals or other corporations. This relationship can compromise an institution's honest pursuit of education by introducing the interests of non-intellectuals into the liberal arts structure. Sexuality and gender studies, at its core, challenges such compromising intrusions and can keep a Liberal arts college honest. Deconstruction is central to gender and sexuality studies, equipping students with the tools to notice and challenge threats to intellectual purity.

Valocchi observes that women's studies programs have deconstructed persistent and structural gender assumptions that have erased and subjugated more than half the population throughout history. He also addresses the conflation of biological sex with societal gender rules specifically structured to govern behavior.

According to Valocchi, the job of a Liberal arts education is to explore "physical, social, cultural and historical worlds." The acknowledged omission of women, gays, lesbians and bisexual persons within these worlds requires a reinvestigation of them. Intellectual excellence demands the completion of our human portrait.

The absence of sexuality studies as recently as 1985 at Trinity shows the disregard our college community has had for intellectual investigation on this essential topic. The continued lack of a separate Lesbian and Gay Studies Department shows how far behind other intellectual communities Trinity is in its pursuit of "critical inquiry, social justice and a commitment to a common humanity (Valocchi)," within the appropriate auspices of intellectual investigation.

At the last Presidential Fellows meeting, we discussed the validity and application of our extensive community involvement, via the Learning Corridor, and Liberal arts excellence. Opinions varied, but one theme emerged: we have more to learn and the real world can be a valuable teacher. By stretching our perceptions of scholarship and pushing intellectual investigation into new areas we become better, more completely educated students.

Women's Studies programs have helped students and professors revive the atrophied parts of our intellectual body by challenging us to disengage from incomplete histories and dangerous assumptions. Our intellectual body will continue to limp, however, until we can integrate sexuality studies in an honest, vigilant way. As humans in female or male bodies, affected by feminine or masculine gender rules and heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or celibate identities, we must attend to our reality. As a Liberal arts college committed to rigor and intellectual excellence, we must acknowledge the status of gender and sexuality studies at Trinity College.

- Beth Miller

Women's Studies and Sexuality Studies: Essential to Completing and Policing Liberal arts Curriculums

By Elisabeth Armstrong

The argument was nascent in the U.S. academy even during the early seventies as feminists sought to create women's studies programs and departments: we've heard the women's movement, we know about sexism, we know about homophobia and we've made the requisite changes in courses, hiring and tenure decisions. The gist of this position flourishes today when scholars and administrators argue that liberal arts institutions, with their commitment to humanities and the humane, no longer need separate gender studies or sexuality studies programs because their departments have already solved those nagging problems. I disagree, but not because I mistrust their commitment of departmental faculty to offer courses on African American history or hire women. Instead, I suspect the institutional place of these disciplines as objective and inherently rational.

Established departments' reputation as disinterested holds even though English as a discipline has a highly political history - its introduction into Oxford and Cambridge was fought bitterly by the classicists - since they saw the study of English-language literature as a discipline suited only for the working classes and subjects of colonial rule. The politics of biology are all too visible today with the ruling against teaching Darwin or evolution in Kansas public high schools. Even with their contentious histories, the status quo position of English and Biology in colleges today dulls the political commitments that humanities and liberal arts demand. Gender studies, like other fields of study fought for and won in the sixties and seventies, is overtly political. Its roots are in the women's movement and in a wide range of struggles for justice and equality. We need, institutionally, academically and personally, to champion those biased, informed commitments to the world around us. These newer areas of study sharpen the character and content of a liberal arts education at the he turn of the millennium.

The president of the Modern Languages Association (MLA), Edward Said, defines the purview of humanities and liberal arts as more than a commitment to the humane, but to a committed *kind* of scholarship that connects separate areas of knowledge, ways of reasoning and seeing the world that are presented as separate.¹ Gender studies questions the boundaries of disciplines. To address questions of gender, we must rethink within disciplines such as history, to ask whose history we write, how we document our findings, even, what counts as documentation. Gender studies also reveals the overlapping connections between disciplines. It shows how we cannot understand, for example, women's traditional unpaid labor without at-

tending questions of history, psychology, sociology, law and economics. Above all, Said stresses the worldly connections of a humanities education, in its purview and its methods. Those who live in the ivory tower or are just passing through are never exempt from larger conversations about social customs, values, ethics, or demands.

Given the centrality of the humanities to a liberal arts education, the role of independent, financially secure programs/departments for ethnic, religious, international, gender and sexuality studies have never been more imperative. In this period of greater rationalization of universities, where colleges are being restructured to become profit-seeking companies rather than vital sites for developing human potential and the creative and critical faculties of the mind, we need programs that keep our institutions of higher learning honest. Gender studies programs in liberal arts institutions can no longer depend on active, diverse and organized women's movement to guide its decisions (even though its ideas live in on in the hearts and actions of many). Gender studies programs can no longer wait to be included in larger community political initiatives, but must actually forge those connections between local/national groups and on issues. Unmoored from the energy and struggles of a feminist movement, gender studies in our colleges and universities must now make its own way, create its own alliances on and off campus and fight its own battles.

The self-defined commitment of colleges like Trinity College is to a liberal arts education, and one part of this education is the humanities. When a college tries to function like a corporation, it jeopardizes its own identity. The bottom line should not be dollars made. Universities, private and public, should support the production of creative, secular and critical thinking by its students over the production of young people into to a pliant (yet knowledge-endowed) workforce. As openly political, openly interested in the outcome of its scholarship, women's' studies and gender studies, by their very definition, take a stand for a liberal arts education that engages with rather than passively accepts the world.

¹Edward Said, "Humanism?" *MLA Newsletter*, 31:3(Fall 1999):2-4.

Completing our Intellectual World

By Stephen Valocchi

In an important 1975 essay, anthropologist Gayle Rubin introduced the concept of the sex/gender system - a set of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity. One cannot understand much about our social world without the insights provided by the sex/gender system. The field of women's studies has done much to bring us these insights: how patriarchy operates in different societies and in different historical eras; how women's lives and women's contributions have been written out of history; how gender norms and gender-based assumptions about men's and women's capacities have shaped everything from the constitution of science to the division of labor at work and at home.

Of course, it is the responsibility of a liberal arts curriculum to teach the complexities of the sex/gender system. After all, the liberal arts are supposed to provide us with a series of lenses through which we make sense of our physical, social, cultural and historical worlds. Without knowledge of the sex/gender system, we cannot recognize the ways in which many aspects of social life are gendered and, thus cannot assess the role we play in the gendering of that social life. This last part of a liberal arts education is crucial - the assessment and change part. A liberal arts education is supposed to be a critical enterprise as well as a purely analytical enterprise. It fosters the values of critical inquiry, social justice, and a commitment to a common humanity. Women's Studies programs, especially those animated by the feminism of the 1970s, embraces both visions of the liberal arts.

More recently, there has been increased attention to the 'sex' part of the sex/gender system in Women's Studies and elsewhere in the academy - the recognition that society not only organizes sex into gender but eros into sexuality. And just as there are regulatory and punitive systems in place that arrange gender hierarchically, there are similar systems for sexuality. A quick example: When I came to Trinity in 1985 there was not a single course in our curriculum that dealt with lesbian, gay, bisexual sexualities and identities. Implicit in this absence is the assumption that these sexualities - the historical construction and present constitution of homosexuality and lesbian, gay or bisexual identities - were not worthy of intellectual attention. Also, implicit in this absence is the assumption that the category of heterosexual was so dominant it didn't even have to be named and investigated. The situation today here is a little different, although we still do not have a fully-developed gay studies program.

Just as the feminist movement provided the political impetus for the creation of women's studies programs throughout the country, the gay liberation movement has had a significant influence on the liberal arts

curriculum. There has always been a close relationship between activism and scholarship. Some may think this inappropriate - that the academy should remain somehow immune from the social world. I think this way of thinking about the academy is nonsense especially for a liberal arts curriculum.

As a matter of fact, this model is the perfect model: the social world gives us our intellectual material; we have the rare opportunity in our classrooms and in our scholarship to sit back and make sense out of that material; we react to that material both analytically and critically; then we act in the social world on the basis of our study. Action, reflection, action, social change. This is the model of feminism and gay liberation; this should be the model for the liberal arts.

Further Reading :

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All of the above titles are available at the Trinity College Library.