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Sisterhood & Feminism: Engaging Gender and Women's Studies Students in the Community

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SISTERHOOD & FEMINISM: ENGAGING GENDER AND WOMEN'S STUDIES STUDENTS IN THE COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

In this article we attempt to share the theoretical framework and experiences of students and administrators in creating and maintaining a community engagement program, “Sisterhood & Feminism”. Through a review of the literature we offer our philosophy for including this program in our work, with particular focus on the role of Gender and Women’s Studies programs in engaging students in the community. We will discuss Gender and Women’s Studies’ inherent mission as a site of feminist activism as well as look at the value of using feminist pedagogy in engaging students in activist work (Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman). Finally, we will provide a description of the “Sisterhood & Feminism” curriculum, share student experiences, and discuss best practices for implementing similar programs. It is important to note that the authors of this article include both the student developers of this course and department staff. Each author brings a different lens to the analysis of mutually shared experience. It is also important to note that this article does not include the voices of our community partners. In sharing our experiences from collaborating on “Sisterhood & Feminism” we hope to provide a tool for administrators and students to create similar programming on their campus.

ENGAGING GENDER AND WOMEN’S STUDIES STUDENTS IN THE COMMUNITY

In 1970, Robin Morgan published the seminal feminist text *Sisterhood is Powerful*. This collection of essays and documents on the second wave of the feminist movement was named by The New York Public Library as one of the 100 most influential books of the century (Diefendorf). Morgan's subsequent collection of essays, *Sisterhood is Forever*, illustrates not only the ongoing work of feminist scholars and teachers, but also the continued meaning and connection of women to sisterhood. Simultaneously, Gender and Women's Studies programs began to appear in colleges and universities across the country (Ginsberg 10). Alice Ginsberg notes, "From its very inception, women's studies had a very clear purpose and that was to transform the university so that knowledge about women was no longer invisible, marginalized, or made 'other'" (10). Yet, bell hooks notes that oppressive practices are still often perpetuated by university systems. hooks states "that if we examine critically the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom" (29). Feminist theoretical perspectives that are based on the idea of transforming the academy and the world are therefore integral for Gender and Women's Studies programs engaging students in the community. Contemporary feminist epistemologies demand we challenge not only sexism, but also the inequities of racism, colonialism, class, and all other forms of oppression (Naples and Bojar 13).

Through community work, Gender and Women's Studies students "can begin to understand and use feminist theories as tools for improving women's conditions rather than abstract sets of ideas" (Trigg and Balliet 60). Community work can not only benefit the community, but may also offer students the opportunity to learn about how to engage community members and develop an understanding of different meanings of community (Washington). Yet, community service can easily become oriented toward benefitting the institution. It is important to remember that effective community service holds many of the same goals as feminist teaching methods, and should be "collaborative,

nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, respectful, and transformative” (Trigg and Balliet 56). These principles inspired students to take the initiative in developing “Sisterhood & Feminism.” Their choice of sisterhood as a lens to teach feminism serves to demonstrate their commitment to collaborating with our community partners in ways that can allow for transformative learning for students, staff, and community members.

Educators and students use the knowledge they create in the classroom to inform their activism outside of it. Using the theoretical knowledge learned in a classroom to do work to transform the world is explained by Sonia Kruks as praxis—theory-informed action (Stanley; Agha-Jaffar). The effectiveness of including and validating relevant personal experiences in classroom discussions and sharing stories among all classroom participants is necessary in the formation of a “liberatory” feminist theory that has a great effect upon students’ experiential knowledge (hooks 15). Since feminist praxis is bound to activism, hooks explains that students must learn to offer the teachings of feminism in Gender and Women’s Studies programs in ways and spaces other than the traditional classroom in order to be accessible to all community members.

Anne Bubriski and Ingrid Semaan, in accordance with the ideas of hooks, discuss how activism is critical to feminist pedagogy. Bubriski and Semaan also make sure to warn teachers that we do not just create service-oriented students, but social justice oriented students. They offer five pedagogical guidelines to help teachers facilitate this process with their students. This includes: (1) having direct contact with the agencies the students will be working at before they begin, (2) teaching students the difference between service and social justice, (3) working with students to help them come out of their comfort zone, (4) meeting with students individually to guide them in the understanding of service versus social justice, and (5) using writing assignments to help students continue to reflect (Bubriski and Semaan 92). This framework is important to the work of “Sisterhood & Feminism”. It encourages students to be involved in certain administrative aspects of arranging

the course and also suggests that both the students and community members will act as teachers.

Melissa Peet and Beth Reed discuss praxis as an example of connected learning and its connection to feminist multicultural teaching. Their goal is to “illuminate why the action component of praxis can be ‘taught’” (Peet and Reed 107). We hope through gathering information about student and staff experiences building and implementing “Sisterhood & Feminism”, we will be able to teach and encourage other Gender and Women’s Studies Programs to implement similar initiatives. In the next section we will briefly describe the “Sisterhood & Feminism” course and share student experiences participating in the program. Finally, we will conclude by providing resources so that “Sisterhood & Feminism” can serve as a model that can be used to develop more opportunities for Gender and Women’s Studies students to engage with their communities, achieve praxis, and work to develop feminist identities.

ABOUT “SISTERHOOD & FEMINISM”

“Sisterhood & Feminism” is a course developed in 2007 by Gender and Women’s Studies students at The University of Rochester’s Susan B. Anthony Institute for Gender and Women’s Studies (SBAD). “Sisterhood & Feminism” was constructed to serve as a way to bring Gender and Women’s Studies topics into the community. It is offered as a community-based course to the women of Sojourner House, an organization that provides transitional housing for women, many with children, who are committed to overcoming the challenges of homelessness, addiction, and abuse and rebuilding their lives. The course is offered through the Henrietta Hammond Institute for Life Skills (HHILS). The HHILS principles of Sojourner House include: making it relevant to members, focusing on the positive, encouraging mutual aid, presenting class materials in multiple formats, offering appropriate choices without being overwhelming, bringing in and validating life experiences, and making connections with recovery principles. Based on these principles as well as Bubriski and Semaan’s

framework for creating social justice oriented students, “Sisterhood & Feminism” uses the powerful history of feminist sisterhood to teach feminism to the women of Sojourner House. Through the experience of teaching community members about feminism, the University students are able to experience feminist work firsthand. By evaluating their own lives and perceptions of the women of Sojourner House, both the students and the women in the community learn about sexism in modern American society, the ways sexism often goes unrecognized, as well as how sexism interacts with other forms of oppression.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES

The women who participate in the course can offer valuable perspectives to the students that they may not have been aware of before teaching the course. The students found the consciousness-raising model (Bubriski and Seeman; Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman; Naples and Bojar) to be successful because of the diversity of backgrounds in women participating in the course. The two experiences of the founding students of “Sisterhood & Feminism”, shared below, resonate in very different ways based on the reflections they offer to us. We start with Julianne’s reflection, which centers on the positive impact of the course on her understanding of community service and engagement, identity, and development of a professional career path dedicated to supporting individuals and making change.

JULIANNE’S EXPERIENCE

My experience majoring in Gender and Women’s Studies at the University of Rochester was one of enlightenment, excitement, and inspiration. For the first time in my life, I felt connected to my coursework and actively engaged in my learning process. My academic training clearly translated to real life, and I began to see the world through a new lens.

On a personal level, Gender and Women’s Studies gave voice to my life experiences as a woman, as well as my queer identity. On a larger scale, the discipline introduced me to the concepts of

institutionalized violence, state violence, and privilege. I grew to feel fortunate and grateful for the opportunity to find empowerment through Gender and Women's Studies, while also feeling enraged that this information is a privilege, accessible to very few. Unsure of what to do with that anger and incapable of shrugging it off, I found myself feeling increasingly frustrated.

Luckily for me, my colleague Susan Storey began fostering relationships with community organizations in Rochester and creating volunteer opportunities for the Gender and Women's Studies Undergraduate Council. Her relationship and trust with the staff of Sojourner House led to the creation of Sisterhood & Feminism. Sisterhood & Feminism became a 4-session course at Sojourner House, a transitional housing facility for women. The goals were to learn collaboratively, recognizing that the women in the facility had their own unique experiences with gender and sexual violence, and that we, as college students, could learn a lot from the women in the program [at the Sojourner House].

Sisterhood & Feminism allowed me to engage with the Rochester community. Teaching the course felt different from volunteer work, it was a commitment and a relationship. We showed up every week to dialogue with the women and presented our course topics, as best we could. We then sat and listened, leaving room for discussion, opinions, feelings, healing, and growth. During college, I saw myself heading down a career path of activism and political engagement. However, upon graduating, I found myself applying for jobs in the social services and speaking about "Sisterhood & Feminism at all of my job interviews. This experience landed me my first job out of college, working as a counselor for female parolees in a residential rehabilitation center.

My experience with Sisterhood & Feminism inspired me to start a focus group around LGBT issues at the facility. In the group, I relied on the same consciousness-raising skills that I had fostered in Sisterhood & Feminism, and again, went into the group knowing that my students could also be my teachers. Today,

I am studying psychology, in the hopes of going to graduate school in the field of counseling psychology. I also volunteer at the GLBT National Hotline, responding to crisis calls. Inspiration for these decisions came from my work as a counselor, which came from my work at Sojourner House.

While Sisterhood & Feminism began solely as a desire to take feminism outside of the classroom, it led me to my current career path and continues to serve me as a source of inspiration today. For that, I will be forever grateful for the opportunity to help design and teach Sisterhood & Feminism, as well as the support of the Susan B. Anthony Institute for Gender and Women's Studies, my co-teachers, the Sojourner House staff, and the brave clients of Sojourner House.

Julianne felt equipped to begin taking action on her own to organize to make change, and volunteering her time to work to support individuals in need. Susan, another founding student facilitator of "Sisterhood & Feminism", offers a different reflection. Susan outlines how she came to understand feminism in a new light, as something all-encompassing rather than something to discuss solely in a classroom, and that consciousness-raising model (Bubriski and Seeman; Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman; Naples and Bojar) again worked to develop a sense of connection, perhaps even community, among the students and instructors.

SUSAN'S EXPERIENCE

During my undergraduate years studying Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Rochester, I learned the history of feminism, the waves, and both the accomplishments and critiques of the movements. I learned how to pick apart arguments within a framework of feminism and make connections between feminism, race, and class. However, I often became discouraged by the constant theoretical conversations I had with my fellow Gender and Women's Studies students regarding feminism because I felt as if after a while, it was little more than "preaching to the choir."

What were we really accomplishing unless we left the boundaries of academia and made connections with women in the larger Rochester community?

While my academic studies taught me the foundations of feminism and philosophical frameworks, it was developing and teaching the Sisterhood & Feminism class that truly brought feminism out of a theoretical realm and into a reality. It was meeting with a group of women of different ages, diverse backgrounds, and bringing a variety of different stories to the table that completely changed the way I understood feminism, felt about my studies in the classroom, and incorporated feminism into my life. In the beginning, we tried to teach the class similarly to our own Gender and Women's Studies classes; it was very structured and discussed key figures and movements in feminism. It was not long before we realized that the women were learning little more than facts and that a consciousness-raising model was significantly more influential. Not only did a model of consciousness-raising allow each woman in the Sisterhood & Feminism class to come forward and talk openly about her own experiences, but it also allowed the rest of us to not only be there as supporters, but to realize that there are many common and shared experiences.

I hope that the Sisterhood & Feminism class will continue to raise feminist consciousness for women in the Rochester community, as well as continue to also raise the consciousness of the university students who lead the class, as it did for me. Without my time working with the many women who signed up for our Sisterhood & Feminism class, I do not believe I would feel as fully immersed in feminism as I do today. I would know the theories, I would be able to pick apart the arguments, and I would still protest for Women's Rights any day of the week, but I would be stuck within a bubble of feminist academia. Rather, today I am working towards a career centered in women's health care because I feel, like with teaching the Sisterhood & Feminism class, that

rather than studying feminism, I will be able to essentially live feminism by affording a safe and holistic place for a variety of women to share not only their health concerns, but also their stories and experiences.

These reflections demonstrate the unique and affirmative ways that a community engagement opportunity like “Sisterhood & Feminism” can affect students, and based on these accounts, the community-based women in the course. These students’ responses, along with an understanding of how consciousness-raising teaching methods work, allow us to infer that the course was successful in helping both students and communities’ members explore feminist identities, see how feminist theories can be applied in practice, and learn useful communication skills to discuss difficult topics with individuals from varying backgrounds.

TEACHING THE COURSE

Here we offer what are in essence guidelines for students and administrators who are interested in creating a similar program and partnership between their Gender and Women’s Studies program, students, and the community. This information can help programs identify undergraduate student participants, build relationships with community organizations, and design an appropriate community-based curriculum. We offer examples of the content in the “Sisterhood & Feminism” “lessons” to give readers an understanding of the nature of discussions in the course. Following this, we will offer best practices in teaching the course for students, and discuss some best practices for community engagement in Gender and Women’s Studies learned through our experience with “Sisterhood & Feminism”.

COURSE MODEL

“Sisterhood & Feminism” is taught using the consciousness-raising model, which operates under the assumption that students and community members can learn together from each other’s experiences and opinions. By focusing on the lives of the women in the course and

their understanding of gender relations, both students and the women at Sojourner House were able to develop a deeper understanding of feminism. Susan Faludi notes it is important “that women not be forced to 'choose' between public justice and private happiness” and emphasizes that women must be “free to define themselves--instead of having their identity defined for them” (xxiii).

FINDING STUDENT INSTRUCTORS

Ideally, three or four students should teach the “Sisterhood & Feminism” course but the course has run with as few as two students as instructors. The students are able to split up the topics for that week so that no one person is responsible for facilitating the whole hour. If one student is unsure how to respond to a question or situation in the community, the other students often provide additional insight and assistance. Since Sojourner House quickly fills the time slots for its elective HHILS courses, as many community-based agencies do, it is a good practice to start the process of finding students and a time slot with a local agency as early as possible. A great place to begin looking for students is through talking to members of university clubs involved in feminism or activism. At the University of Rochester we were in touch with the Undergraduate Women’s Caucus (now called College Feminists), the Gender and Women’s Studies Department’s club, as well as other aligned academic programs.

When talking or emailing with potential student volunteers, we have found it most effective to emphasize that potential students need not be experts, but rather that they care about the issues and have some coursework in Gender and Women’s Studies. Once students commit, they contact the community organization to find out the available time slots for elective courses that semester and decide the time slot that works best with the schedules of students and the community organization. Two weeks before the first class, students begin to prepare to facilitate the four, one-hour meetings that make up the course.

WEEKLY MEETINGS

Students should try to meet a few times before the first class and at least once a week during the class. During the first meeting, students decide on the topics for that week and devise a basic agenda. These topics can often be tricky to present effectively, and meeting again in a few days gives the student instructors time to brainstorm different techniques. Additional meetings are important as they allow the students to finalize the agenda, decide who will take which topics, and come up with a basic time schedule for how long each of the topics should take. Two meetings are effective because the students address and iron out any problems before teaching the class. For example, if the students decide during the first meeting to incorporate a movie clip but the co-instructor is unable to find the movie, the second meeting allows them to revise the plan. The students should have a conversation about the following issues as they update their agenda: How can this course be the most beneficial to the students? How do we incorporate consciousness-raising into the course? What are our goals for the semester? We also suggest including a list of local resources that instructors can refer to for help and assistance, as well as to refer their students to in answering questions about local places of interest.

SUGGESTED TOPICS TO COVER IN THE COURSE

Instructors are encouraged to make changes to best suit their situation, but we offer the following suggestions of topics to cover in the course, and suggestions about ways to include these topics in a class agenda. Based on these principles, topics in the class could include: introductions to feminism, reproductive rights, women in the workplace, and voting rights. Students may want to specifically discuss stereotypes of feminism, why they identify as feminists, what feminism advocates for, and explanations of feminism connection to combating all forms of oppression. In many ways the building of community through sharing personal experiences is the most important part of this course. Student instructors can begin by explaining their personal experiences with feminism and sisterhood. Make sure to include that it's okay not to identify as a feminist and why or why not the instructors do. Recognize

that “feminism” is a political ideology. One can support feminist goals without identifying as a feminist. You may want to show pictures of famous feminists. Ask the women about their personal thoughts, experiences, and understandings of feminism. Do not tell them that they are wrong. Instead, encourage further conversation and open-minds.

BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED FOR STUDENT INSTRUCTORS

What follows are notes that have been developed for students before they begin the course. These guidelines were created after starting the first “Sisterhood & Feminism” course and have continued to be built upon as a way to help students prepare for the challenging discussions that will happen. It is important to remind students that difficult conversations, if handled appropriately, can result in the most meaningful sharing of knowledge and learning experience for the students and the women at their community partner organization. We believe that providing these materials to the students make them feel more comfortable assuming the role as a facilitator, as most Gender and Women’s Studies students are versed in these topics and can feel capable of discussing them with these types of examples.

Diversity

Before beginning the course, it is important to recognize that the women you will teach are coming from very different backgrounds. Issues of race, class, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity come up often in class discussions. As a facilitator, it is important not to ignore these experiences, but instead acknowledge them and use them to begin meaningful and respectful conversations. This includes recognizing one’s own biases. Evaluate language choices and make sure you are using correct and inclusive terminology. Try to become informed about the histories and cultures of the social groups you may be working with. If you don’t know something, ask someone who does. Recognize that someone’s upbringing affects the way that they understand concepts like sisterhood and community. Most importantly, do not assume that everyone shares the same experiences.

Things Will Not Always Go As Planned

You are dealing with sensitive material that may bring up unexpected emotions or memories for your students. Once again, it is important to recognize these experiences if they arise. Your response often provides an important example of sisterhood for the women. Remain confident and in control, but listen and learn from the women's experiences. Even if the experience is something that you are unfamiliar with, you can listen and respond, but sometimes it is important for someone who understands the situation to respond. Luckily, the room is filled with women who may have had similar experiences. Without assuming or expecting anything, you can encourage class members to jump in. Either way, you should listen and acknowledge the experience of each woman if they struggle with the discussions. Do not ignore situations as they present themselves. You may also wish to speak with a woman after class to make sure she felt heard and that any questions or concerns were answered. Checking in with them before the next class is another option as well.

Not Everyone Will Be Receptive and Some May Know More Than You Do

Some topics that arise in this course can cause controversy and debate in the classroom. Embrace these conversations as a learning experience. Refer to ground rules when conversations begin to get out of control. Many students have told us that they learn a lot from the course. Even when topics become difficult, it is important to stick with the class.

It is important to also remember that some of your students may be highly educated in this topic. Acknowledge the students' knowledge and encourage them to share it as well as to continue learning. Almost all students come with experiences of gender oppression. These experiences may not be exactly what you learned in your Gender and Women's Studies course, but in many cases they are as or more important. Try to incorporate space for these experiences into your lesson plan.

CONCLUSION

“Sisterhood & Feminism” is an opportunity for academic theory around feminism to move toward praxis. If Gender and Women’s Studies is inherently about community engagement, then engaging students in community is integral to an undergraduate education in Gender and Women’s Studies. Student reflections demonstrate that putting theories into practice outside of the classroom does work toward the mission of Gender and Women’s Studies in engaging students in activism and community building so they can begin to understand how to be agents of social change. We suggest that community-based programs should be commonplace for all Gender and Women’s Studies programs that are working to teach feminist praxis. “Sisterhood & Feminism” is offered here as one example to serve that mission. We have included additional course materials with suggested discussion topics and sample weekly agenda for that purpose. We encourage you to use this model and information in any way that could help to expand your Gender and Women’s Studies program on a path towards community engagement and feminist praxis.

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APPENDIX A

Suggested Topics to Cover in the Course

1) Explanation of Feminism and Sisterhood

- a) Feminism: A movement to end sexism and oppression (Sexism is discrimination based on a person's sex)
- b) Sisterhood: Encourages women to support each other in order to end sexism. Sisterhood recognizes that women (not just men) can perpetuate sexist practices. Sisterhood encourages women to reach out to each other and end their own sexist behaviors

2) Explanation of Sex, Gender, Sexuality, and Transgender

- a) Sex: Whether someone is male, female, intersex. This is biological and often determined at birth.
- b) Gender: "The range of social and relational characteristics that mark our bodies as belonging to one of several social categories. The most common categories are boy/man and girl/woman, but they are not the only possible ones. There are also individuals who identify as transgender, two-spirit, and genderqueer... Gender is a complex set of situated relationships that describe how we identify ourselves and how others choose to interact with us in the world. It is informed by the sex that we are assigned at birth, and although many females develop a gender identity as a girl or woman, and many males identify as boys and men, many individuals also develop gender identities that vary from this familiar pattern"¹.
- c) Sexuality: "A term that is used to refer to an individual's tendencies, preferences, and desires with respect to romantic partners and intimate relationships. Sometimes sexual orientation is used interchangeably with the term sexuality; however, sexuality can be used more broadly to refer to a wide

¹ Elizabeth J. Meyer, *Gender and Sexual Diversity in Schools* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010) 33.

variety of identities and behaviors as well”².

- d) Sexual Orientation: “Describes who we are sexually attracted to and is generally determined at a very young age.” The four main categories of sexual orientation include asexuals, bi-/omni-/pansexuals, heterosexuals, homosexuals”³.
- e) Transgender: This term “describes individuals who are not cisgender, or whose gender identity is different from the sex that they were assigned at birth. There is as much variety of gender expression within the transgender community as there is within groups of men and women. Some transgender people choose to challenge and disrupt the categories of masculinity and femininity and embrace varying degrees of each”⁴.

3) Waves of Feminism

- a) First wave: Primarily dealt with suffrage, this perhaps can be linked to voter rights today.
- b) Second wave: Focused on inclusion of women into male dominated fields; white, middle-class woman was “universal” woman; sought equality with men. (Womanism or Chicana Feminism may broaden this perspective.)
- c) Third wave: Addresses issues of intersectionality, more inclusive towards all individuals across race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, nationality, and other axes of difference.

4) Personal Experiences

- a) Feminism in our personal lives: Relate to feminism on a personal scale by explaining how you are a feminist and its importance in your life.
- b) Feminism in their lives: Ask the women to share their experiences/impressions of feminism, the work of feminists.

² Elizabeth J. Meyer, *Gender and Sexual Diversity in Schools* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010) 48.

³ ---. 48.

⁴ ---. 37.

APPENDIX B

Sisterhood and Feminism Agendas

Week 1 Agenda Example

- 1) **Introductions** (15 minutes)
 - a) Group Introduction – Students will give a brief welcome and introduce the group
 - i) Thanks for signing up for Sisterhood and Feminism
 - ii) We're undergraduate students studying gender and women's studies
 - b) Student Introductions
 - i) Who we are (names, pronouns, etc.)
 - ii) Why we wanted to teach this course
 - iii) Whether we've ever taught the course before
 - iv) Why we identify as feminists / why we think it's important / what it means to us
 - c) Introductions of community members at Sojourner House
 - i) Names
 - ii) Why they signed up for the course
 - iii) What they'd like to learn from it
- 2) **Ground Rules** (15 minutes)
 - a) Ask the women to help create a list of ground rules that we will use throughout the course. We will add to the discussion if the women are stuck or we think there's an important one that has not been said. (Think about using a white pad so you can bring these each week)
 - b) We came up with the following rules (backups):
 - i) Always use "I" statements and speak for yourself, not the group
 - ii) Respect others
 - iii) What's said in the room stays in the room (confidential)
 - iv) One person talks at a time

- v) You can disagree something that is said, but make sure to disagree with what is being said, not who is saying it
- vi) This is a safe space - Verbal attacks and bullying are not allowed

3) Sex, Gender, and Sexual Orientation (15 minutes)

- a) Definitions (Consider using an activity as opposed to just reading a list)
- b) Discussion about differences between sex, gender, and sexual orientation
 - i) Create list of gendered activities
 - ii) Discuss how gender is socially constructed
 - iii) Discuss how sexual orientation is determined by sex or gender

4) What is Planned for the Course (5 minutes)

- a) In the next couple of weeks we will.... (Some examples include)
 - i) Look at the representation of sisterhood in the media by watching a clip from a movie
 - ii) Share personal experiences/opinions about sisterhood through positive and supportive discussion
 - iii) Discuss how the themes of the course affect society today
 - iv) Learn to understand and identify gendered issues
- b) Community Member Goals for the Course (5 minutes)
 - i) If there is anything the students would like to learn about that wasn't mentioned

5) Highlights of Everyone's Day (5 minutes)

- a) We will go in a circle and talk about the best part of our day
- b) Thank everyone for there time

Week 2 Agenda Example

1) Introductions (10 minutes)

- a) Group Leader Brief Reintroductions – Names
 - i) Remind everybody of ground rules

- b) Names of community participants again (Possible pair with the highlight of their day so far)
- 2) Introduction to Today's Topic (10 minutes)**
- a) Begin discussing concept of "sisterhood" and its representation in the media
 - b) Ice-breaker: name a famous woman that you admire (living or dead)
- 3) Personal Experiences w/ Sisterhood @ Sojourner (10 minutes)**
- a) Introduce how Sojourner can be an opportunity to connect with other women
 - b) Ask women to write down one goal for a way they can better support the women in their lives
 - c) Ask if they would share if comfortable
- 4) Small Groups (15 minutes)**
- a) Introduction to scenario activity
 - i) Hand out scenarios and ask the women to decide as a group why each of the women in the scenarios acted the way that they did and how you would have felt as each one of the characters
 - ii) Assign scenarios (1 per group)
 - iii) Everyone will briefly join a group (read scenario, leave, come back and check in with them)
- 5) Movie Clip (15 minute)**
- a) Intro to Activity
 - i) We'll watch a brief clip from a movie and then in the small groups discuss the medias role in creating stereotypes of women, sisterhood, and feminism
- 6) Wrap-up**
- a) Thank everyone for their time

Week 3 Agenda Example

- 1) Introductions (5 minutes)**
- a) Welcome

- i) Highlights of everyone's day so far
 - ii) Connect this week to last week
- 2) Icebreaker:** (5 minutes)
- a) What do you think of when you hear the word feminist or feminists?
- 3) "This is what a Feminist Looks Like:"** (10 minutes)
- a) Pass around diverse pictures of women/men wearing the "This is what a Feminist Looks Like" shirts and/or show this is what a feminist looks like media clip
 - b) Talk about how feminists can be anyone/very diverse (include gender, race, sexual orientation, class, ability, nationality, and other axes of difference)
- 4) Definitions:** (10 minutes)
- a) Go over definitions of feminism, sisterhood, sexism
 - i) What it means to be a "feminist"
 - ii) What it means to have "sisterhood" in your life
 - iii) Connection between "feminism" and "sisterhood"
- 5) Group Activity:** (20 minutes)
- a) Have women split into groups
 - b) Ask them to think of at least three problems that women (in general) face that men usually don't worry about
 - c) Make the distinction that these should be gendered problems, not biological
 - d) Ask if anyone remembers what "gender" is? Does anyone know what a "gendered problem" means? Gendered roles?
 - i) One student can help with each group
 - e) Discussion
 - i) Go over the problems they came up with
 - ii) Take one "problem" from each group
 - iii) Discuss the roots of that problem
 - iv) Relate it to feminism (a feminist lens allows you to see why it's a problem)
 - v) Relate it to sisterhood

- 6) **Movie Clips:** (15 minutes)
 - a) Cinderella, clip without sisterhood
 - b) Sister Act, clip with sisterhood
 - c) Discuss the clips and their reactions
- 7) **Wrap-up**
 - a) Thank everyone for their time

Week 4 Agenda Example

- 1) **Introductions** (5 minutes)
 - a) Welcome
 - i) Highlights of everyone's day so far
 - ii) Connect this week to last week
- 2) **Sisterhood Discussion** (10 minutes)
 - a) Focus on concepts instead of definition
 - i) Use examples of engaging in sisterhood in classroom like clapping during highlights, helping sign everyone in, trying to remember names, taking care of each other's babies, not judging each other, etc.
 - ii) Tie in common goals of being better people/better mothers
 - iii) Reminder how you do not have to give up on self, do not have to be best friends, and no one is perfect in sisterhood
 - iv) By being the best you can be, you are in a better position to help others
- 3) **Definitions of sexism, feminism, and feminist** (10 minutes)
 - a) How these definitions relate and importance of both sisterhood and feminism
 - i) Flip sheet to reveal pre-written definitions
 - ii) Difference between feminism/feminist (feminism as movement against sexism)
- 4) **Expression of their own stories** (20 minutes)
 - a) Where do they want to be after leaving the house? How can they use sisterhood and feminism to help them get there?

i) 10 minutes to write/10 minutes to share with group

5) Final Wrap-Up (15 minutes)

- a) Class Evaluations
- b) Give out resource sheets for them to learn more
- c) Thank everyone again for their time

APPENDIX C

**Example of Resources Provided to Community Partners at
Sojourner House**

Websites of Interest

Ask Amy – <http://www.feminist.com/askamy/>

“Ask Amy,” part of the www.feminist.com website, serves as a resource for people to ask questions about anything from “How do you define feminism?” to “What’s a good feminist movie?”

Feminist Majority Foundation- <http://www.feminist.org/>

Another very active non-profit women’s rights organization, “www.feminist.org” also allows you to get involved with feminist campaigns by sending pre-written emails.

Feministing, The Feminist Crunk Collective, or Austraddle–
<http://www.feministing.com> or <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/>
or <http://www.autostraddle.com/>

Feministing is a website that blogs about current and recent events relating to feminism.

Autostraddle specifically deals with the intersection of queer identities and The Feminist Crunk Collective with race and ethnicity.

National Organization for Women- <http://now.org/>

One of the largest non-profit women’s rights organizations in the world, <http://www.now.org> allows you to get involved with feminist campaigns by sending pre-written emails.

Planned Parenthood- <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>

Offers detailed information about birth control and other aspects of sexual and reproductive health.

Suggested Reading

Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism –

Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman (2002)

Feminism is for Everyone – bell hooks (2000)

ManifestA: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future – Jennifer

Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000)

The Vagina Monologues – Eve Ensler (2001)

“Unpacking the Invisible Backpack” – Peggy McIntosh (1988)

Sisterhood is Forever: The Women's Anthology for a New

Millenium – Robin Morgan (2003)

APPENDIX D

Examples of Ways to Break Down an Agenda

This agenda is based on the Suggested Topics (Appendix A) and a course with four instructors.

Instructor 1: Explanation of Feminism and Sisterhood

- 1) Introduce the terms: Before jumping right into defining feminism, sisterhood, sexism, give a bit of a context first. For example, you could say something like, “Feminism is a term that is often misunderstood and defined incorrectly. Although there is no universal definition, the one we like best and find is the most reflective of a universal definition (if there could be) is.... ‘a movement to end sexism and oppression.’”
- 2) Then, since you just mentioned “sexism,” it would be easy to then explain that term (just so all the women are on the same page).
- 3) Lastly, “sisterhood” is a term that the community members at Sojourner House will probably have an easier time relating to. Not all the women may be ready to declare themselves feminists (perhaps because they are unfamiliar with it, they may have had a bad experience with it, maybe because the often negative connotations that follow the word, or other reasons), but “sisterhood” has a friendly connotation and is a good step toward embracing feminism. Taking the time to really explain sisterhood and giving examples of sexism (including how women can be sexist toward one another) and how sisterhood works against these negativities is a crucial part to introducing this course.

Instructor 2: Explanation of Sex, Gender, Sexuality, and Transgender

- 1) Expect questions, concerns, frustrations, misunderstandings, etc. with this section. Just make sure to slowly and clearly go over each term. These terms are important to understand for this class and future classes.

- a) Some classes have no trouble accepting these terms, while other classes may have initial hesitations. However, in most classes there are many questions, so make sure to clearly explain the terms and listen to questions carefully.
 - b) It may be beneficial to include these terms in the handout, but leave room for women to write in definitions.
 - c) One co-instructor could write the terms on the flip-chart as another co-instructor explains them.
 - d) Make sure the person writing has finished before moving on to the next term (this also ensures that the women had enough time to write down the term in their notes).
 - e) Ask for any questions after each term, and again – pay close attention to them so your answer is helpful.
- 2) “Transgender” can be a difficult term to explain. Some may think you either mean drag queens or transsexuals. The easiest way to make sure everyone understands is to explain early on that it is not the same thing as changing your sex or wanting to change your sex (transsexual). Refer to the root word “gender” vs. “sex.”

Instructor 3: Waves of Feminism

- 1) Discuss the time period (political goals, political climate, etc.)
- 2) Make sure that the women understand that knowing the dates and the names of the laws/policies that changed are not as important as realizing that feminism is a fight that began a long time ago and is still going on today.
- 3) Lead a conversation on the ways that things have and have not changed.

Instructor 4: Personal Experiences

- 1) Begin with the instructors explaining their personal experiences with feminism/sisterhood. Make sure to include that it’s okay not to identify as a feminist and why/why not the instructors do. Recognize

that “feminism” is a political ideology. One can support feminist goals without identifying as a feminist.

- 2) Show pictures of famous feminists. Make sure to include diversity in this lesson. In the past, these pictures have included Barack Obama, Ashley Judd, Whoopi Goldberg, Geena Davis, and Margaret Cho in their “This is What a Feminist Looks Like” t-shirts.
- 3) Ask the women about their personal thoughts, experiences, and understandings of feminism. Do not tell them that they are wrong. Instead, encourage further conversation and open minds.