

May-2001

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Recommended Citation

Dever, Maryanne and Day, Liz (2001). Beyond the Campus: Some Initial Findings on Women's Studies, Careers and Employers. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 2(2), 53-66.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol2/iss2/4>

Beyond the Campus:

Some Initial Findings on Women's Studies, Careers and Employers

Maryanne Dever and Liz Dayⁱ

Introduction

The question of “what do you ‘do’ with Women’s Studies?” may be an all too familiar one to practitioners working in the field, but that is not to say that it has always received the serious attention it deserves. While as early as 1979 the National Institute of Education in Washington was inquiring into the specific vocational and career dimensions of Women’s Studies programs in the United States (see Bose and Priest-Jones 1980; Reuben and Strauss 1980), it was only with the appearance of Luebke and Reilly’s *Women’s Studies Graduates: The First Generation* (1995) that the issue of students’ specific post-graduation career and employment experiences gained particular prominence within the field.ⁱⁱ Now the vigorous scrutiny that Women’s Studies is currently undergoing throughout the western academy, together with the dramatic changes taking place in many systems of higher education, lend a new urgency to the task of finding convincing and concrete answers to the constellation of social, political and educational issues bound up in this common query. As we know, questions are being raised about Women’s Studies’ continued vitality and relevance, with commentators both inside and outside the field pondering whether it retains any compelling political, intellectual or pedagogic mandate in a world where its central objects of concern – “women” and “feminism” – have become so radically destabilised (see, for example, Allen 1997; Brown 1997; Crowley 1999). At the same time, institutions of higher learning are being transformed by the discourses of economic rationalism and the marketplace so that many practitioners are discovering first-hand how readily Women’s Studies programs become vulnerable to arguments made against maintaining allegedly “useless” and “non-vocational” areas of study (see Griffin 1998, Kessler-Harris and Swerdlow 1996). The reconfiguration of higher education within a broadly consumerist logic and growing rates of unemployment and underemployment among university graduates in many western societies also mean that not just administrators, but students (and their families) are now inquiring into the vocational relevance and the long-term “rewards” of specific teaching programs (see Skeggs 1995). Indeed, given these shifts in educational, fiscal, and political priorities, we suggest it may become increasingly difficult for teachers and researchers, especially those in public institutions, to continue fostering Women’s Studies programs and their students in the absence of clear understandings of students’ vocational aspirations, their post-graduation experiences, and the changing environment in which important educational and vocational decisions are being negotiated. Beyond the immediate career and vocational context, such considerations also offer significant opportunities for reflecting on the connections between our professed teaching and learning objectives and our students’ needs, desires and aspirations, as well as opportunities for learning more about what brings students into our classrooms and the visions they have for their lives beyond graduation. In what follows, we discuss some interim findings of on-going research conducted among enrolled Women’s Studies students and among prospective employers.ⁱⁱⁱ

Setting an alternative research agenda

Research by Luebke and Reilly and by Stearns (1994) into the post-graduation career paths of Women’s Studies students in the United States confirmed what practitioners have

long hoped or assumed to be true; namely that Women's Studies is an enabling qualification that opens up rather than closes off opportunities for its graduates. Indeed, in marked contrast to the dominant image of Women's Studies in the popular media as a dubious or "non-vocational" program of study that leaves its graduates facing uncertain employment prospects^{iv}, these studies together demonstrate that Women's Studies graduates are able to articulate a range of direct and indirect benefits of such programs for their careers. More importantly perhaps, Luebke and Reilly's work offers insights into the ways in which different students derive different vocational benefits from their studies, choosing to engage with the ideas and concepts encountered in Women's Studies in ways that are strategically useful to them. The insights graduates gained from their studies, write the authors, "made them better at what they have done since graduation" (199).

And yet, while these findings are timely, significant and heartening, like all studies based on graduate tracking, they ultimately provide us with only part of the picture. That is to say, graduate tracking generally provides insights into where graduates go, but says little, if anything, about graduates' initial experiences seeking employment, and less about where they wanted to go or imagined they could go. For this reason, when seeking to learn more about Women's Studies' specific relationship to the domain of the vocational, we adopted a series of alternative research strategies. Our research program was two-fold. In the first instance, we wanted to discover the extent to which vocational and career issues featured in students' decisions to enroll in and to continue on to major in Women's Studies. This led us in 1998 to begin a pilot survey of approx. 150 newly enrolled Women's Studies students from two universities in Australia (Monash University and Deakin University) and one in New Zealand (University of Otago). Results from this pilot project^v prompted us to embark in 2000-2001 on a rolling program of surveying that now encompasses four Australian campuses (Monash University, Flinders University, University of Sydney and Victoria University), and three in the United Kingdom (University of Surrey Roehampton, Lancaster University and University of Hull), together with five campuses in the United States (Duke University, University of Southern Maine, Ohio State University, Washington State University and the University of California, Irvine). In this second phase of surveying we added a further cohort of students, so that we are now eliciting responses not just from those enrolled in their initial Women's Studies subject, but also from majoring students approaching graduation. In the survey, students are asked to respond to a wide range of questions concerning their future career plans and what relationship, if any, they perceive between these plans and their enrolment in Women's Studies. In essence, rather than asking "what do you 'do' with Women's Studies?", we were asking these students "what do you *want* to do with Women's Studies?" or "what do you *think* you can do with Women's Studies?". When complete, the survey will cover more than 800 students at the entry level and 250 at the concluding stage of their studies.^{vi} These results are compared with control groups of humanities and social science students who were asked a similar series of questions in relation to their majors in politics, history, communications and tourism studies. This selection of subjects combined both traditional humanities disciplines and newer, applied fields.

In order to gain further insights into the study-to-work transition for Women's Studies students, we felt we also needed to probe the attitudes of prospective employers to graduates with majors in the field. As so little was known of this area beyond the level of anecdote, this seemed particularly important to us as our research with students was beginning to uncover a degree of anxiety around this issue. Many of the students surveyed

indicated that they believed Women's Studies was not well known or understood outside the academy and some 40% overall felt this could cause prospective employers to misunderstand the major or to view it with hostility or ridicule. The urgency of testing these types of assumptions was further reinforced by two specific incidents. The first of these involved one of our very talented graduates presenting herself at a well-known employment placement agency run by women. She had excellent results in Women's Studies and had completed a very fine dissertation on the topic of women entrepreneurs for which she had in fact interviewed the director of that particular firm. To her surprise, the same director advised her that she would enhance her chances of securing employment if she "played down the women's thing".^{vii} The second incident was the publication around the same time of an article in a major metropolitan newspaper in which another employment consultant used Women's Studies as her example of an "esoteric" major that failed to appeal to potential employers.^{viii} "Don't get me wrong", the consultant argued in our follow-up telephone conversation, "I'm really interested in Women's Studies ... but when I'm trying to market that, it's difficult".

Given these responses, it seemed only reasonable for us to inquire what potential employers make of our students' academic transcripts. After all, while it might be reasonable to expect that employers in women-centered organizations and perhaps the community and educational sectors could be expected to respond positively and with some understanding of the field, what of other areas? It has been suggested that 40 to 50% of new graduate opportunities are open to graduates of any discipline (Perkins 1992, 27), and so it is likely that many of our graduates are presenting themselves before mainstream employers and graduate recruiters — an impression confirmed by the wide range of anticipated career paths nominated by the students we surveyed. What image or understanding, if any, do these potential employers have of the field of Women's Studies? What knowledge and skills, if any, do they associate with its graduates? Do they view knowledge of women, gender and equity issues as an asset or a liability in a potential employee? Would they hire a Women's Studies graduate? These were the questions we wanted to ask.

And so, to complement the student surveys, we programmed a series of in-depth interviews with a small selection of local employers and university and college careers counselor's based in Melbourne. These interviews were designed to explore their knowledge of and attitudes towards Women's Studies as an area of specialization, together with their perceptions of applicants presenting with Women's Studies on their transcripts. At the same time, because we were concerned that new graduates and those recruiting them may hold differing assumptions about the recruitment process and about the relative importance of skills (particularly transferable personal and professional skills) and knowledge in early career development, we also wanted to learn more about their general practices in evaluating prospective employees. This research we felt would offer Women's Studies practitioners and students a twofold benefit. Not only would we gather insights into how the field is viewed in the wider employment sector and thus how graduates from our different programs might fare, but in talking to and interviewing recruiters, human resource managers, etc. we might also begin to play a positive role in raising awareness of the field of Women's Studies and in debunking any existing myths or stereotypes that may be present. Such contact has the further potential to pave the way for the development of new industry placements and internships, practices that have been shown to have a very

positive impact on graduates' future employment prospects (Australian Association of Graduate Employers 1997, 26).

What the students say

The following discussion is based on surveys completed across 2000 with Women's Studies students from the above-named campuses in Australia and the United Kingdom.^{ix} Among the general trends to emerge from the survey were a uniformly high degree of satisfaction among students and an overall positive attitude to the field and what it offered them intellectually and personally. These approval levels were common both to newly enrolled and completing student cohorts and were generally higher than those recorded in the control groups of students undertaking other humanities and social science majors. In contrast to popular accounts of Women's Studies as a "soft option", when asked to assess the subject's rigor by rating it as "harder", "easier", or equivalent to others they had encountered, students overwhelmingly placed it on a par with other subjects. While a minority indicated that they had been "nervous" or "uncertain" about the subject at the outset, they reported that their fears were rapidly allayed, and many students went on to distinguish their Women's Studies courses in positive ways from others in which they were enrolled. Typical of these types of responses was the comment, "I actually look forward to these lectures and I don't in my other subjects".

As our earlier pilot study indicated, career and vocational issues do not appear to feature prominently in students' initial reasons for selecting the major. In this round of surveying, Women's Studies students indicated overwhelmingly (between 70% and 90%) that their primary reason for enrolling in the field was "interest in the subject", a trend largely replicated in the control groups from other humanities and social science majors. Fewer than 5% of students in the various Women's Studies programs surveyed listed "career prospects" as the principal motivating factor in their enrolment decision. This figure is interesting given that, depending on the campus, anywhere between 20% and 60% of the same students indicated that they were "somewhat anxious" or "highly anxious" about their prospects of "securing satisfactory employment and establishing a career following graduation", figures that were more than double those found among the control groups. However, while Women's Studies students both at the entry and completing stages of their studies indicated overwhelmingly that they viewed their second subject concentration as having the potential to provide greater vocational benefits, the most frequently selected reason for enrolment in this other subject was still that of "interest in the subject". This suggests that despite a relatively high level of general sensitivity to employment issues and palpable pressures from family, partners, the media, and in some instances from the very institutions in which they were enrolled^x concerning the desirability of selecting "vocational" pathways, these students were nevertheless establishing their own priorities when it came to their degree studies. Indeed, one indicative response from students was that their enrolment in Women's Studies was "something I am doing for myself".

As part of the survey, students were asked to comment on their families' attitudes to their enrolment in Women's Studies. Here upwards of 90% of students at both entry and completing stages indicated that their families were positive or neutral in their responses to the subject. However, in a minority of cases, this question elicited illuminating comments directly related to perceptions of the subject's "usefulness" or "credibility". "They see 'Sociology' as more acceptable", one student noted of her family, while others

reported that “Women’s Studies is regarded by them as not a ‘proper’ subject” and “Psychology...is regarded more highly academically”. These types of attitudes were frequently linked to perceptions that as a subject Women’s Studies was “narrow” or “separatist”, something that one might dabble in, but not take seriously. This attitude was summed up succinctly by a student who wrote that “my grandmother said, ‘It’s ok as one module, but you don’t want to get silly about it’”. These concerns appeared to arise from the assumption that the field was not “real” (or as “real” as other possible majors) and was therefore unable to “provide a good background and basis for [a] career”. The fact that Women’s Studies did not qualify as a teaching subject for students interested in pursuing careers in school education – once a common destination or “fallback career” for generalist graduates – may also have been an issue in these negative assessments.

While students themselves appeared keen to resist these particular constructions of their chosen major, they nevertheless harbored their own related concerns. In particular, a small number of students indicated frustration that the subject in which they themselves were passionately interested was generally not “highly regarded” and, in their experience, did not appear to share the same status – either inside or outside the academy – as other humanities and social science subjects. A few expressed the wish that the field could have another, more “impressive” title, while others worried about the fact that it did not appear regularly in the recruitment information and job advertisements they saw (“all the workplaces I have looked at don’t include Women’s Studies as a subject area requested”).

Despite these anxieties, the majority of students appeared to hold quite firm opinions about the broader vocational application of a Women’s Studies major. While they understood that it did not have the same direct connection to specific professions that studies in law, physiotherapy or psychology might – i.e. Women’s Studies would not necessarily “qualify” them or alone provide for their entry into particular professions – in response to our question they could nevertheless readily identify a wide range of employment destinations for which they believed “a Women’s Studies education would be an advantage”. These included but were not limited to: social work, welfare, policing/correction services, and law; education, academe and research; government, policy and politics; media, advertising, marketing and journalism; human resources; and the healthcare professions. It is possible to speculate that in some instances these choices arose from a conviction (perhaps fostered by their studies) that certain professional domains would benefit from a timely injection of gender awareness. But at the same time they also seemed to accord with the students’ perception that Women’s Studies provided them with more of the “how” than the “what” when it came to career and workplace issues. That is to say, beyond knowledge of feminism and gender issues, it offered them important ways to read and negotiate systems, ideologies, and power structures or, as one student so aptly phrased it, Women’s Studies gave her the “ability to see through bullshit”.

In terms of their own anticipated career destinations, the students nominated a similarly broad, mainstream selection of employment fields. Of completing students, nearly 30% selected the option of “a women’s organization” from the list offered them, with similar or greater numbers nominating education, community work, social work/social welfare or the arts and entertainment areas, and significant numbers also selecting the options of “media” and “further study”. Of this same student cohort, just under than 80% self-identified as feminist. Some 48.5% responded that the knowledge and skills they developed in Women’s Studies were “central” to their later career plans, with a further 44% reporting

that they were “of some importance” to those same plans. The appended comments of those who selected “of some importance” suggest this answer was often chosen where students saw themselves deriving indirect rather than direct benefits from the study or where, as one student phrased it, they felt Women’s Studies would “enhance” their careers but would not be “pivotal” to them. Others appeared to select this response when they were undecided about their future career directions but believed a “knowledge of gender relations is always useful to have”.

Table 1: Career aspirations of completing Women’s Studies students

Employment Field	Percentage*
Law or law-related sector	10.3%
Education	29.4%
Social work or social welfare	41.2%
Public service or administration	10.3%
Business or commercial sector	8.8%
Trade union/advocacy field	2.9%
Peace/environment field	5.9%
Leisure/sporting/hospitality/tourism industries	1.5%
Arts, culture and entertainment industries	25%
Health and caring professions	11.8%
IT and communications	1.5%
Media	20.6%
A women’s organization	29.4%
Other community organization	13.2%
Further study	23.5%
Other	2.9%

*as students could nominate more than one field, percentages total more than 100%.

These figures make interesting comparison with the entry level students where only 15% of students indicated an interest in working in “a women’s organization”, from a cohort in which only 44% self-identified as feminist. Of this group, 22% viewed the knowledge and skills developed in Women’s Studies as “central” to their career plans, with a further 65% nominating them as “of some importance”.

Table 1: Career aspirations of beginning Women’s Studies students

Employment Field	Percentage*
Law or law-related sector	10.4
Education	19.1%
Social work or social welfare	47%
Public service or administration	13%
Business or commercial sector	9.6%
Trade union/advocacy field	2.6%
Peace/environment field	7%
Leisure/sporting/hospitality/tourism industries	4.3%
Arts, culture and entertainment industries	19.1%
Health and caring professions	23.5%
IT and communications	2.6%
Media	19.1%

A women's organization	15.7%
Other community organization	12.2%
Further study	17.4%
Other	4.3%

*as students could nominate more than one field, percentages total more than 100%.

Obviously in making comparisons between the two groups, it is necessary to remember that the entry level students in any program of study are likely to exhibit a good deal less certainty in relation to its cumulative benefits, applications and outcomes than those at more advanced stages. However, taken together, the above figures would seem to suggest that those students who continued on to major in Women's Studies not surprisingly demonstrated a much greater interest in and identification with feminist politics and practice, results which echo earlier findings by Bargad and Hyde (1991) and Stake and Rose (1994) among others. They also accorded the major a much more significant role in their future career plans. It is not possible to confirm from our data whether this greater commitment to feminist ideas and practices determined their decision to continue on to major in the subject or vice versa. But certainly among the entry level students we found a strong correlation between those students who self-identified as feminist and/or listed Women's Studies as 'central' to their later career plans and those who indicated their intention to major in the field.

It is also interesting to examine the specific benefits or qualities students at each level understood they were deriving from the subject, many of which had direct or indirect vocational applications. The most frequently listed were general knowledge and specific knowledge of feminism and women's issues, together with a range of important applied and process skills such as critical analysis, research and writing. One further commonly reported quality was that of increased "confidence" or "determination", sometimes expressed in abstract terms as "the confidence to do anything" or "confidence in myself as a woman" and sometimes quite specifically as "confidence as a woman in the workplace". By contrast, while students in the control groups responded with discipline-based knowledge and a similar selection of skills, confidence did not appear in their lists. This particular finding complements trends identified in other research which indicates that Women's Studies programs and students place a high emphasis on personal transformation as an outcome of both curriculum and pedagogy (Griffin 1994, 13-45; Lovejoy 1998). But it also suggests that one benefit of the type of research we are undertaking here might be the fostering — among teachers, students and potential employers — of a more detailed understanding of the ways in which the personal is also vocational. After all, as Helen Perkins argues "one of the key determinants of early success in a graduate career and indeed, for that matter, throughout a career, is confidence" (1992, 29).

One element that we had not considered was the extent to which careers and employment might actually function as a pathway into Women's Studies. This emerged as a trend among older or mature age students and was expressed in two distinct ways. Some responded that their experiences undertaking paid or voluntary work in a women's or feminist organization (the refuge movement, women health centers etc) or a recommendation from a workplace colleague had led them to enroll in Women's Studies, often as a way of learning how to "participate more fully" in those same workplaces. For others, however, enrolling in Women's Studies represented a direct attempt to break away from their previous working lives and to forge more personally fulfilling futures. Here

Women's Studies represented a space in which to take stock, a site of (self-)discovery and a place from which to re-launch themselves. In the words of one such student, "I wish to change career, do something for myself. [Women's Studies has] helped me formulate my thinking around this".

The overall picture which emerges from our surveys is of a cohort of students whose decisions to enroll in Women's Studies are rarely informed in the first instance by career and vocational considerations, even though they experience perceptible levels of anxiety concerning their future study-to-work transitions. Indeed, they appear to enroll in Women's Studies despite their awareness of the prevailing rhetoric about "thinking vocationally" and their sensitivity to concurrent perceptions of the major's apparently limited vocational appeal. Once enrolled, however, the same students, if prompted to reflect on career and employment issues, are capable of identifying a range of broadly vocational qualities and attributes that they feel they are deriving from their Women's Studies courses. But at the same time they continue to exhibit concerns about their abilities to "sell" the major in the face of what they believe may be ignorant or hostile responses from those outside the program itself. In the light of these findings, it is instructive to look at what some of those "outsiders" – employers and careers advisers – had to say about the major.

What the employers and careers advisers say

We began with a preliminary contact list of 112 local employers, graduate recruiters and employment professionals across the following sectors which covered most of the career destinations nominated by the students themselves: non-government or community sectors; arts, culture, and media; government, business and corporate sectors; health and welfare. After initial telephone and mail contact we were able to secure approx. 10% of these for in-depth interviewing, including the careers advisers from each of the Melbourne universities boasting substantial Women's Studies programs.

Our interviews produced findings that are reflected elsewhere in the literature on graduate outcomes, but which are perhaps not widely recognized among Women's Studies teachers and students. Indeed, as one university-based careers adviser pointedly noted in discussion, faculty across the humanities and social sciences are often not particularly well-placed to address these issues with students: "Some of them aren't interested. Some of them say, 'I don't see that as my place', and I think a lot of others have never worked outside of the university sector, so it doesn't naturally occur to them". One significant finding was that the majority of employers recruiting graduates with generalist degrees are far more interested in graduates' transferable personal and professional skills (i.e. confidence, communication skills, team working, creativity, verbal reasoning) than in the specific knowledge gained from their studies. Indeed, as has been observed elsewhere, "the better the personal skills the less the discipline seems to matter" (Perkins 1992, 28). In the words of one of our interviewees, students undertaking any humanities or social science major needed to be strongly encouraged to think about their studies from two quite different perspectives: "one of them is the content of the subject they have studied and the other is the skills they have developed as a result of studying that subject". Based on our findings, many of the Women's Studies students we surveyed were actually moving towards interpreting their studies in just this way.

Throughout our interviews, employers and careers advisers alike argued that graduate applicants with generalist degrees were rarely assessed solely in terms of what appeared on their transcripts and that detailed distinctions were seldom made among the different

humanities and social science disciplines unless there was a compelling need to do so (eg. specific requirements for languages or statistical skills). While grades were generally taken to be a reasonable indication of ability, they nevertheless took second place to the skills base in a world where, we were told, employers “would much prefer a well-grounded graduate with Bs than a nerd with As”. This suggests that the field of Women’s Studies could perhaps benefit from encouraging its students to recognize and name the genuine vocational strengths of the empowerment and personal transformations they experience, together with those feminist process skills which they develop through their studies (see Schniedewind 1993). Again, the message seemed to be that “the personal is also vocational”.

While we encountered no explicitly negative responses to Women’s Studies as an area of academic endeavor from amongst our interviewees, problems associated with the general lack of awareness or understanding of the field were raised by a number of them. These concerns tended to be associated less with the public sector where it was considered greater progress had been made in the recognition of gender issues than with the private sector where it was felt the lack of specific knowledge of Women’s Studies could prompt potential employers to make recourse to a range of familiar, if somewhat inaccurate, gender stereotypes. In particular, several interviewees reported their suspicion that workplaces which remained heavily segregated along gender lines and exhibited workplace cultures and career achievement structures strongly marked by entrenched traditions of corporate masculinity were probably likely to consider a Women’s Studies major as someone who was “bolshy” or “politically correct”, who possessed no sense of humor, and who was unlikely to fit easily into the prevailing workplace culture! In these environments, they suggested, the field of study itself was also likely to be interpreted as “softer” or “lesser” and that such candidates, if selected at all, would likely be channeled into the small number of “soft” positions in human resources dealing with equal opportunity compliance etc. Interestingly, we interviewed one employer from the travel and tourism industry who admitted sharing some of the same opinions herself before she returned to university and enrolled in a graduate Women’s Studies program:

before [doing the course] I would have thought [Women’s Studies graduates] were going to be ... lefty, “pinko” and giving me a hard time over all these business things that we’ve got to do, and have ethical problems with everything we do. They might be a bit difficult to manage. I now realize that that isn’t the case. I think there is a need for repositioning in the minds of employers in terms of Women’s Studies graduates.

She suggested some potential employers could be similarly “intimidated” by the field, while others might simply make well-meaning but erroneous assumptions about its apparently limited application in their particular workplace. One of the university careers advisers outlined this latter scenario in the following manner:

If [the employers] are graduates themselves, then it was twenty years ago, and things have changed. And particularly with an Arts course where the directions, the emphases can be so wide and varied, I think employers have a very vague knowledge of what the student has come out with... So what they are saying is, “Oh, so you’ve done Women’s Studies as a major, that means you must know about women and women’s issues and women’s politics. Well, we’re not an organization that deals with women’s issues, you need to go

and work at a women's health center. You won't be suitable for me." Whereas that's not the case at all.

A further issue to emerge from this discussion was the suggestion that Women's Studies' particular location within a broad humanities or social science degree might prompt some potentially negative responses that had little to do with any aspect of the major itself. In this scenario, the positive vocational attributes Women's Studies programs may foster in the way of transferable personal and professional skills would be in danger of being overlooked in the race to generalize about the famously "non-vocational" attributes of such degrees and their graduates.

In contrast to these reported attitudes, however, a different range of responses was elicited from interviewees in the community sector and NGO area. Here Women's Studies was characterized as a potentially important qualification and a positive attribute in a graduate. The manager of the local office of a major aid organization who had previously worked in the finance industry summed up her current experience of Women's Studies graduates as follows:

The way I see Women's Studies working in employment is usually [as an] adjunct to another degree or another major, usually people [in this office with Women's Studies qualifications] have double majors...it is not an uncommon discipline for female employees [here]. It would have been much more uncommon in other organizations [where I've worked] for me to hire Women's Studies graduates ...Gender is one of our areas of work and a major thematic too. We have gender specialists, it's a big part of our program...we are an organization where political activism is an advantage, not a disadvantage.

The message we received here was that the Women's Studies major was considerably enhanced and took on new, demonstrably "vocational" qualities when judiciously coupled with either relevant work experience or a second major or postgraduate qualification in fields like politics, sociology, anthropology, or journalism. Employers in the community and NGO sectors were readily able to "make sense of" and "apply" the major in this context. The strong emphasis on work experience that we elicited also reinforced how important the common practice of incorporating internships into Women's Studies programs can be in giving Women's Studies students an "edge" when seeking post-graduation employment opportunities.

It was consistently stressed throughout our interviews that since the majority of employers could not be expected to have a detailed and current working knowledge of all humanities and social science subjects, the responsibility ultimately rested with Women's Studies graduates to explain their major in ways that employers can grasp. Indeed, we were repeatedly informed by interviewees that "the onus is on the student or the graduate to demonstrate the relevance of the study they have done" or that "it really is up to the student to paint that picture for the employer". This was felt to be especially important for a field like Women's Studies where, in common with many other humanities and social science fields, there is not necessarily a "direct connection" to a specific professional or vocational pathway that graduates and prospective employers can take for granted. While it was felt that there were ultimately plenty of potential openings for Women's Studies graduates, it was noted that few recruitment advertisements would actually specify Women's Studies. As one careers adviser observed:

Occasionally you might see “Women’s Studies graduate needed for...” but as a rule you tend not to see that. But in a paper every week there are at least half a dozen vacancies that would be suitable...

In this sense, it is up to Women’s Studies graduates to imagine, identify and forge their own pathways and, in order to do so, these graduates need to be able to understand and talk about their studies and what they have gained from them in ways that “translate” effectively beyond the campus gates. But while Women’s Studies graduates were not specifically singled out by our interviewees, we were nevertheless consistently reminded that as a group new humanities and social science graduates generally fail dismally in this particular “translation” exercise.^{xi} The primary reasons for this failure were said to be the fact that many graduates are “not actually conscious of the kinds of transferable skills they’re picking up along the way” and the fact that often those teaching them “may not themselves be aware of that sort of language and [of] the workplace conditions”. Here the spotlight is turned back on Women’s Studies practitioners and their role in assisting students to develop an appropriately flexible lexicon for thinking about and describing the field in which they are majoring.

Conclusion

In presenting these findings, we are not suggesting that career and vocational matters should dictate how we organize and represent our activities in Women’s Studies, whatever the shifts taking place in both the higher education and employment spheres. We also recognize that the relationships between subject (or degree) choice, anticipatory career expectations and labor market outcomes are necessarily complex ones (see Lyon 1996) that we cannot hope to resolve fully through this project. However, we believe that the preliminary results from this research project point to important avenues for engaging directly with some of our students’ pressing needs and anxieties, for understanding more about the ways in which our programs relate to the wider community beyond our campuses, and for opening dialogues with those both inside and outside our institutions who currently find difficulty understanding and valuing our work in terms other than these.

Among the principal insights our research has yielded is the need for Women’s Studies practitioners to intervene proactively in debates about the field’s “vocational applications”. Two specific pathways for change suggest themselves. The first concerns prevailing perceptions of what is “vocational”. Our research has revealed a keen sensitivity among Women’s Studies students to general perceptions of how the field rates, particularly with respect to its broader vocational appeal. It would therefore seem to be important for us to challenge more explicitly the prevailing definitions of the “vocational” now circulating within our systems of higher education, many of which are narrowly technocratic and exclude broader understandings of the relationships between career success and generic skills gained through study. Such interventions would inevitably necessitate pushing the boundaries of current definitions of the “vocational”, at the same time as learning more about the processes by which students themselves come to understand different fields as “vocational”, “useful” or “applied”. Further, it is not possible to eliminate from our speculations here the prospect that uncertainty about the field’s immediate and longer-term vocational rewards figures in some students’ decisions to continue or discontinue their concentration in Women’s Studies. We should therefore consider the benefits of mapping in detail the different ways in which individual students

and graduates perceive Women's Studies to be meeting (or defeating) their specific vocational needs — whether directly or indirectly.

A second, related pathway concerns how we as practitioners engage with career and vocational inquiries. Popularly, when career issues arise, practitioners have been content to proffer a list of occupations or employment sectors that they believe could or should accommodate graduates with a demonstrated competence in feminist and gender issues. The web-pages of countless Women's Studies programs worldwide currently perpetuate this practice. Whether, or to what extent, these employment areas are open to our graduates – or how they would approach them – is usually left unaddressed. Our research suggests that we need to begin to open out this discussion and to stress the genuinely transferable nature of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired as part of the major. This may well entail becoming conversant with a whole new language and imagery for talking about our field and engaging systematically with some of the more extreme stereotypes that trouble Women's Studies. In this way we will hopefully begin to shift people's thinking away from the narrower perceptions of the field as pertaining solely to women and women's issues towards an understanding of its broader engagements and applications.

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Endnotes

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ⁱⁱ For an account of relevant research conducted over the past two decades and analysis of why career and vocational issues have not featured more prominently in published discussions of the field and its students, see Dever, Cuthbert and Dacre (1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution of all members of the research team, particularly Denise Cuthbert and research assistants Kim Whiting, Lisa Star, Sara Williams and Xiaomei Ma. The particular assistance of Dr Sue Jackson of the University of Surrey Roehampton in assessing survey documents for use with UK students is also noted. This project is indebted to the cooperation of staff and students at each of the participating institutions.

^{iv} See, for example, C. Armitage, "Relevance pays off in job search", *The Australian*, 23 November 1998: 2; T. McCamish, "BA Honors (Dishwashing)", *The Age* (Melbourne), 20 November 1999, 7; and R. Wilson, "PhD programs in women's studies proliferate on the campuses", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 November 1998, A10-12. A wider discussion of media images of Women's Studies can be found in McDermott (1995).

^v For a full discussion of the results from the pilot survey see Dever, Cuthbert and Pollak (forthcoming).

^{vi} It should be noted that the difference in the size of the survey pools at the respective levels is not related to response rates, but is indicative of the enrolment 'pyramid' that is common to Women's Studies programs. Despite large numbers of students 'sampling' Women's Studies at the entry level, the numbers of students continuing on to majors is often comparatively small, approximately 10% - 20% of the original pool. As the survey was administered during regular class time, response rates were generally very high for both groups.

^{vii} We can report that the same graduate was later hired by a prominent US magazine aimed specifically at working women. In that job interview, the interviewer commented that she wished she had more such Women's Studies graduates to employ!

^{viii} Catherine Armitage, "Relevance pays off in job search", *The Australian*, 23 November 1998: 2.

^{ix} In the final analysis, these results will be compared with those emerging from United States cohorts surveyed in 2000-1.

^x One campus promoted itself in advertisements as a place where students could freely enroll in any combination of subject majors they preferred ("we won't raise any eyebrows") and yet students there reported course counselors working to dissuade them from selecting Women's Studies as one of their majors.

^{xi} Identical assessments of humanities and social science graduates were reported in Australian Association of Graduate Employers (1997).