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"We Make Do and We Are Creative:" A Report on the Status on Women and Gender Equity Centers

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NATIONAL WOMEN'S STUDIES ASSOCIATION

"We Make Do and We Are Creative": A Report on the Status of Women and Gender Equity Centers

Welcome from the NWSA President and Interim Executive Director

First and foremost, we extend our deepest gratitude to the amalgamation of directors, advocates, donors, campus disruptors, staff, strategists, and creatives who have co-authored the rich and ongoing legacy of campus Women's Centers. There is no Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies without Women's Centers.

Yet, our Women's Centers colleagues routinely contend with being relegated to the margins, if not erased altogether, of our field and the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) as a whole. They are far too often excluded from research initiatives, meeting minutes, archives, and our memories. To that point, most seem to know San Diego State College (now San Diego State University) inaugurated the first Women's Studies Program in 1970. But what a number of people don't seem to be aware of is the first campus based Women's Center in the U.S. was founded at the University of Minnesota a decade prior - and seventeen years before the founding of the National Women's Studies Association. The time for us to collectively honor that, not just in the abstract but in praxis, is long overdue, and it is needed now more than ever.

According to the most recent "Data Legislation Tracker" information published by The Chronicle of Higher Education, there have been 85 bills introduced across nearly 30 states since 2023 that would "prohibit colleges from having diversity, equity, and inclusion offices or staff," "ban mandatory diversity training," "forbid institutions to use diversity statements in hiring and promotion," or "bar colleges from considering race, sex, ethnicity, or national origin in admissions or employment." Of those 85 bills, 53 have been tabled, vetoed, or they otherwise failed; 14 have final legislative approval; and another 14 have become law.

Our Women's Centers colleagues are especially vulnerable to these pronounced attacks. The University of North Florida eliminated its Office of Diversity and Inclusion and all of its centers, including the LGBTQ and Women's Centers. The University of Texas at Austin eliminated its Gender and Sexuality Center, created the Women's Community Center, then closed it in April. The University of Oklahoma at Norman eliminated its Gender and Equality Center and National Education for Women's Leadership program, in addition to phasing out councils, events, and programs that "appeared to give preference based on race, ethnicity, sex, gender, identity or sexual orientation." The University of Utah closed its Women's and LGBT Resource Centers. Of course, this list is not exhaustive, and we are certain additional attacks are forthcoming.

Welcome from the NWSA President and Interim Executive Director

This report is a critically important step in our collective efforts to resist the subjugation and erasure of Women's Centers. Sincere thanks to Dr. Angela Clark-Taylor, Dr. Hannah Regan, and all other contributors for your steadfast commitment to appropriately and abundantly uplifting and honoring the work of our Women's Centers colleagues through this preliminary Association study. Special thanks are also due to the NWSA Women's Centers Committee, chaired by Dana Bisignani and Letitia Price, for remaining committed to this work throughout every single year - and the Women's Centers Committee co/chairs of the past who champion(ed) the support and advocacy for our colleagues. While we have a lot of work to do in our efforts to "reconnect, repair, and restore" along these lines, the National Office and Governing Council look forward to building on this critical work in collaboration with you and our Women's Centers colleagues within the U.S. and beyond.[1] It is through these networks - of both kinship and feminist organizing - that make restorative and transformative work possible.

In solidarity and action,

Heidi R. Lewis, Ph.D.
President, 2023-25

Kristian Contreras, Ph.D.
Interim Executive Director

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1 This is a reference to President Heidi R. Lewis' strategic plan, "Reconnect, Repair, Restore: A More Thoughtful, Transparent, and Trustworthy NWSA" (2024).

About NWSA

Established in 1977, the National Women's Studies Association has as one of its primary objectives promoting and supporting the production and dissemination of knowledge about women and gender through teaching, learning, research and service in academic and other settings.

Our commitments are to: illuminate the ways in which women's studies are vital to education; to demonstrate the contributions of feminist scholarship that is comparative, global, intersectional and interdisciplinary to understandings of the arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences; and to promote synergistic relationships between scholarship, teaching and civic engagement in understandings of culture and society.

NWSA recognizes that women's studies is broader than what happens in the classroom and acknowledges women's centers staff as feminist educators. Campus-based women's centers have a long history of working together with women's studies to transform the curriculum, the campus environment, and society at large.

Through their scholarship and pedagogy our members actively pursue knowledge to promote a just world in which all persons can develop to their fullest potential— one free from ideologies, systems of privilege or structures that oppress or exploit some for the advantage of others. The Association has more than 3,000 individual and 350 institutional members working in varied specialties across the United States and around the world.

Contributors

Angela Clark-Taylor, Ph.D. (she/her) is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Doctorate of Education at St. John Fisher University. Angela previously served as the Executive Director of the Flora Stone Mather Center for Women at Case Western Reserve University as well as the Director of the Center for Women and Gender Equity and Founding Director of the Violence Prevention Center at Bowling Green State University. She has held multiple leadership positions in NWSA throughout her 16 years of membership.

Hannah Regan, Ph.D. (she/her) is the Associate Director for Research and Evaluation in the Flora Stone Mather Center for Women and a Lecturer in the Sociology and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies departments at Case Western Reserve University.

To see the list of all Women's and Gender Centers we were able to identify in the United Stats, please use this QR code.

Introduction: About This Report

In 2022, the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) embarked on an effort to respond to direct threats to women, gender, and sexuality studies (WGSS). A working group of NWSA leadership and faculty of WGSS departments who had come under attack met over the 2022-2023 academic year to set an agenda for a series of responses to support WGSS departments. The 2023 NWSA Vice President suggested the development of a WGSS survey and subsequent report. Simultaneously, Angela Clark-Taylor and Emily Creamer requested to launch a survey for women and gender equity centers to both create a baseline of information on these centers and to better understand any effects of the Anti-DEI legislation on their work. The authors volunteered to lead this effort and developed the survey which was used for this project. Both surveys were approved by the President and voted on by the Governing Council.

This survey was circulated in fall 2023 by NWSA and through the women and gender equity center listserv (WRAC-L). In addition, 384 centers were identified by a state-by-state internet search of 4-year colleges. 335 of the 384 centers had email contact information and were sent the survey at least 3 times. This resulted in 63 completed surveys.

The questions within this survey covered topics including center reporting structure, budget, space, staffing, and perceptions of support by key institutional leaders. It also included questions on the scope of women and gender equity center work including communities served, issues focused on, and participation in diversity, equity, and inclusion work. In addition, The Chronicle of Higher Education was used to track anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) was used to explore institutional data including characteristics, revenue/expenditures, and Carnegie classification.

For more research, we invite you to explore the *Journal for Women and Gender Centers in Higher Education*

Before we present the data, it is important to frame these findings in light of the limited existing research on women and gender centers in higher education. We then summarize the key findings in the report on the importance of centers' reporting lines and leadership support, resource allocation, and the impact of institutional and national climate. The resulting data shared within this report seeks to add to the growing body of information on women's and gender center practice in higher education.

Overview: Women and Gender Equity Centers in Higher Education

The purpose of women and gender equity centers is to remove barriers to intellectual growth by supporting educational equity, violence prevention, and leadership development (Kasper, 2004). Women and gender equity centers are non-conventional spaces: spaces created outside of the traditional classroom environment (Iannello, 2010). Although ground-breaking work by Chamberlain (1989) and Davie (2002) on women's centers noted the lack of research on campus-based women's center decades ago, these centers have remained under-researched in the study of higher education. The literature which does exist is centered around five themes:

- Descriptive accounts of women's centers that look at similarities across centers in their purpose and role on campus including sharing a prroposed structure (Byrne, 2000; Chamberlain, 1998; Clevenger, 1987; Gould, 1997, Kasper, 2004, Lonnquist & Reesor, 1987; TenElshof & Searle, 1974; Wetzel, 1988; Clark-Taylor, et al., 2021);
- The role of feminism in women's center work (Allan, 2011; Bengiveno, 2000, Martell & Avitabile, 1998; Miller, 1988; Nicolazzo & Harris, 2014; Nickels & Trier-Bieniek, 2017; Parker & Freedman, 1999);
- Race, queerness, and centering intersectionality (Buckley & Hetherington, 1988;Buford, 1988; Jennrich & Kowalski-Braun, 2014, Blair-Medeiros & Nelson-Alford, 2021);
- Gender-based violence prevention and response (Wright-Mair and Marine 2018; Linder, Grimes, Williams, Lacy, and Parker 2020; Hills and Adams 2023); and
- Student learning and engagement (Murray & Vlasnik, 2015; Nickels & Trier-Bieniek, 2017; Wies, 2011).

Attempts to broaden scholarship on campus-based women and gender equity centers within higher education research have examined centers with regard to staff and administrations, such as explorations of center staff (Marine, 2011), supporting women administrators (Mellow, 1988), leadership development (Bonebright, Cottledge, & Lonnquist, 2012), career development (Hirsch & Tobin, 1988), and women and gender equity centers as replacing deans of women (Brooks, 1988). Others have looked at particular topics, such as virtual centers (Benner, 2009), women's empowerment (Curry, 2009; Gould, 1997), and collaboration between women and gender equity centers and women's studies (Parker & Freedman, 1999). Finally, other scholars have examined specific contexts, such as community colleges (Nichols, 1975), HBCUs (Suggs & Mitchell, 2011), and women's colleges (Gould, 1997).

Overall the research on women and gender centers at this time is relatively limited, and there has not yet been a comprehensive meta-analysis or literature review which lays out where the conversation is at this time. We therefore choose to begin this report with a brief review of the existing literature that summarizes this conversation, so that our work is established as building on that of the scholars who preceded us. We need not only more research, but assessment data on women's and gender centers to help us to advance their work in higher education. This report seeks to add to the latter, by providing data from a nation-wide sample of centers and their current reporting line, institutional support and resources, and national climate.

Summary of Data

The data summarized in the table below looks at women and gender centers that participated in the study alongside all identified women and gender center departments. The proportions for most characteristics for all centers are fairly close to their representation in our data, with the exception of religion; there are far fewer religiously-affiliated schools represented in the data than there are nationwide who have women and gender equity centers.

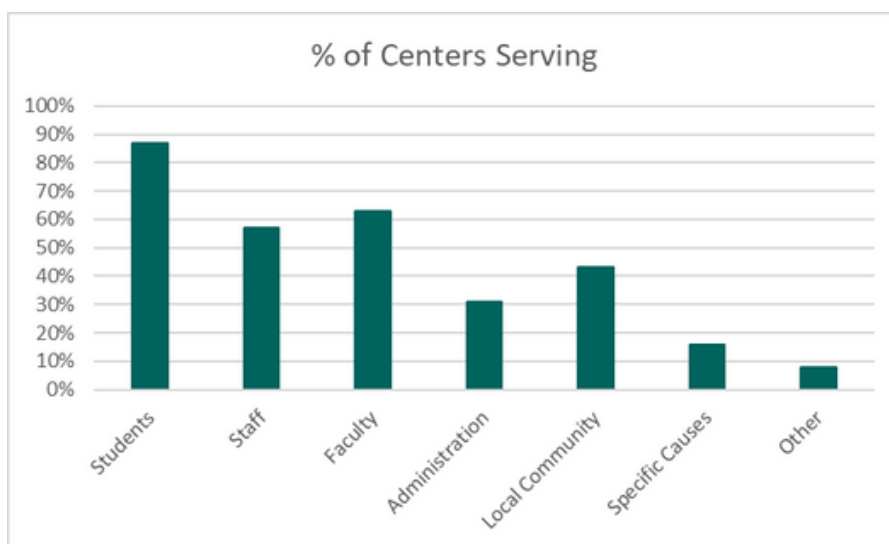|	Survey Participants	All Women and Gender Centers
Center Type	17% Academic Institutes 82% Women/Gender Centers 2% Other	N/A
Center Classification (Davie 2002)	5% Community Activist/Action Centers 66% Student Services/Resource Centers 23% Synthesis Centers 6% Research Centers	N/A
Public/Private	68% Public 32% Private	57% Public 43% Private
Religiously Affiliated	9% Religious 91% Non-religious	19% Religious 81% Non-Religious
Carnegie Classification	34% Very High Research 22% High Research 6% Doctoral/Professional Degree Granting 23% Master's Granting 15% Bachelor's Granting	24% Very High Research 16% High Research 8% Doctoral/Professional Degree Granting 32% Master's Granting 19% Bachelor's Degree* *Including Special-Focus, such as law or health professions
DEI Bills	32% of respondents are in states with one or more anti-DEI bills introduced 14% of respondents in states with one or more active anti-DEI bills 54% of respondents have no anti-DEI legislation present at this time	24% of all programs are in states with one or more anti-DEI bills introduced 13% of all programs are in states with one or more active anti-DEI bills 62% of programs have no anti-DEI legislation present at this time

Note: The DEI bill metrics are accurate as of March 2024. This is intended to reflect the climate in which respondents participated in the survey, but the legislative situation continues to evolve rapidly.

Types of Centers and Populations Served

Although all centers are based on college campuses, they do not all have the same primary purposes or populations. We use the Davie (2002) definition to classify types of centers in four categories: community activist/action, student services, research, and synthesis centers. Community activist/action centers are often staffed by volunteers, including students, or by part-time staff; these centers provide places to meet, find support, organize, and take action for social change. Student services are predominantly led by a master's-level professional director, though increasingly led by doctoral-level directors, and these student-focused centers are typically located in student affairs divisions. They are generally strong on programs and services, and less focused on influencing or setting institutional policy. Research centers are staffed primarily by faculty; these centers focus on research and publication of scholarly reports on gender issues. Synthesis centers are frequently led by professional directors with doctorates or by faculty; these centers are more likely to be housed in academic affairs divisions and to serve a broad constituency. They also play a role in curriculum and policy transformation as well as offer programs and services.

Primary Population Served

10%
2% 5%
1%
82%

■ Students ■ Faculty ■ Staff ■ Local Community ■ Causes
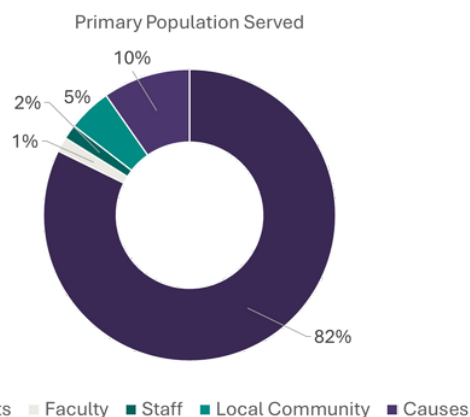
In addition to the different goals/missions that centers prioritize, they may serve different groups connected to campus as well. The vast majority of centers reported that students were the primary population they served. Faculty and staff were each the primary population for one center, and the remaining centers cited a specific cause or the local community as the primary population they served.

% of Centers Serving

100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%

Students | Staff | Faculty | Administration | Local Community | Specific Causes | Other

Although most centers reported students as the primary population, more than half of centers also reported serving faculty and staff. Slightly less than half serve the local community and around 30% serve the administration. A small percentage of centers serve specific causes - generally harm or violence prevention or reproductive justice/menstrual supplies - or other populations, examples of which included other universities or other academic institutes working in the field of gender equity.

Reporting Structure and Leadership Support

Centers report relatively high levels of support, with 63% saying they feel their president is supportive, 58% saying their provost is supportive, and 79% saying their dean or other division leader is supportive. However, the number of supportive leaders is often as important, if not more important, than which leader is supportive. Almost half of centers reported that all three levels of leadership were supportive. 16% reported support at two levels and 22% reported only one supporter. 14% of centers reported that they had no support at any of the three levels of leadership.

63%
report president support

58%
report provost support

79%
report dean/division leader support

Although reports of support are high, many centers reported little contact with their president or provost due to their reporting structures, as described further on the next page. Because of this, "relationships with the President and the Provost are negligible," says one respondent. Having advocates for centers provided participants a level of confidence others did not have in the potential for support, but they did not always provide concrete ways that affected resources.

14%

22%

16%

48%

Reporting Structure and Leadership Support

The single largest category of reporting areas for women's and gender centers was the division of student affairs, closely followed by DEI and academic affairs divisions. A small portion of centers reported elsewhere in the institution. About 1/4 of centers reported to a Vice President/Provost and another 1/4 reported to an Associate/Assistant Vice President/Provost. The remaining centers reported to, from most frequently reported to least frequently reported, a dean, a [executive] director or chair, the provost, an associate/assistant dean, or another area. Examples of the other reporting areas or reporting lines cannot be given as they are university-specific and potentially identifiable.
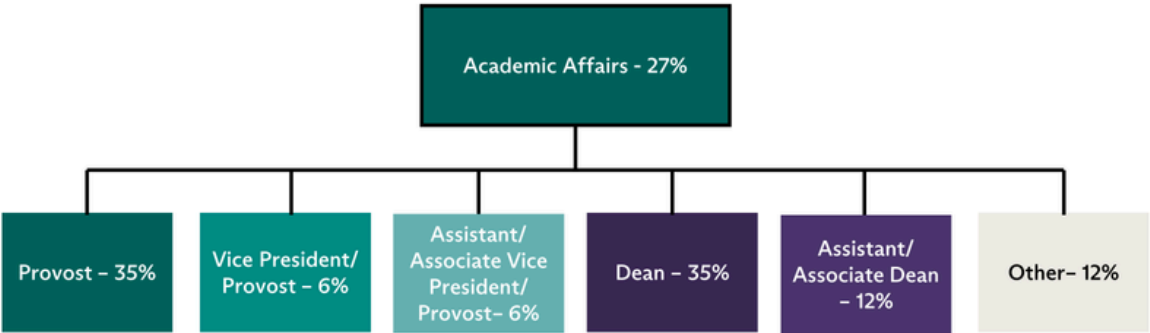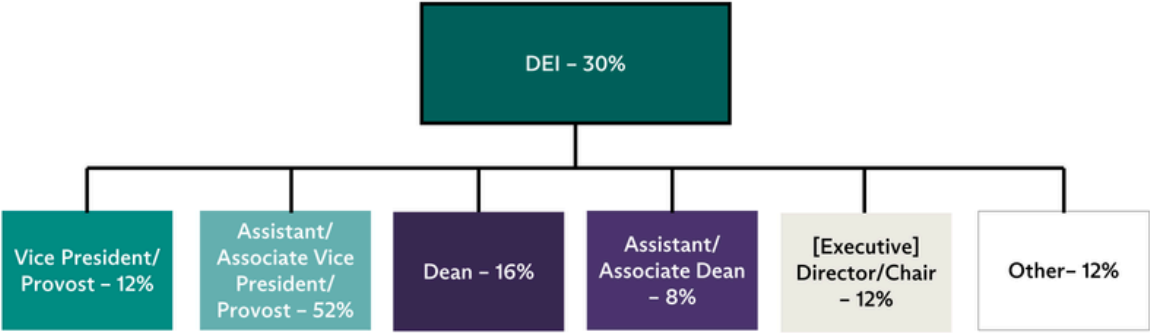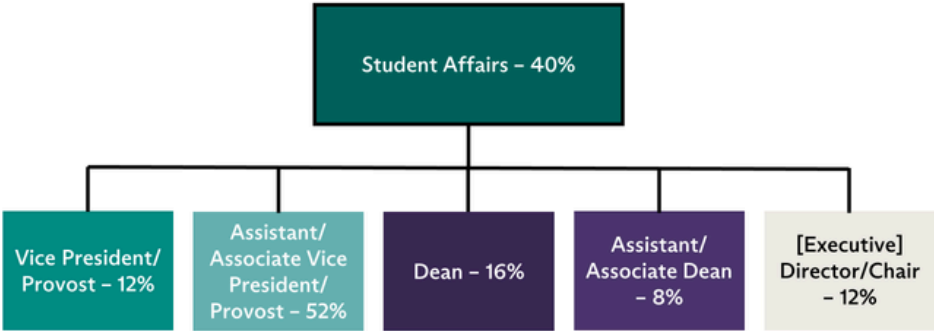
Some centers report feeling a great deal of support when a member of leadership has a previous connection to their center. The prevailing sentiment, though, was one of verbal support with no material follow-through, usually in the form of funding. One participant noted, "While senior administration acknowledges our existence and doesn't actively try to remove our funding or shut us down, they have done absolutely nothing (either visibly or privately) to support our center." However, many others report that they have experienced multiple changes to restructuring, which caused difficulty and seemed reflective of the overall university attitude toward them. "[In the past five years we] have reported to the Deputy Provost, VPSA [Vice President of Student Affairs], then AVP [Associate/Assistant Vice President]...decreasing prestige each time."

Although many respondents felt that lack of support from leadership contributed to their small and shrinking budgets or strict boundaries on their work, some preferred when their leadership took little notice of them. "They leave me alone, which is what I prefer. On the other hand, if I want a budget, I have to raise it myself." The two disparate perspectives described in this section emphasize the conflict between attention and by extension support from executive leadership, to increase resources and visibility on campus, and the potential that drawing attention to oneself will only increase restrictions and limitations, even if those limitations are put in place in the name of support. Center leadership must decide whether, within their context, being noticed or flying under the radar is more beneficial to their goals.

In the graphics on the next page, we visually represent the reporting structures for respondents' centers. The dark turquoise boxes at the top show what percent of centers report to each of three major areas where women and gender centers are housed. The boxes below each major reporting area indicate the title of the person within that area to whom respondents said their center reports and the percentage of centers within each area reporting to someone with that title.

In this section and the following sections, we also present an "In Their Own Words" section, which presents the many views that center leadership shared on the major aspects under consideration here. The quotes from these respondents were so emotive and dynamic, we felt it was better to let them speak for themselves than to blend into our own narrative.

Reporting Structure and Leadership Support

Student Affairs – 40%
- Vice President/Provost – 12%
- Assistant/Associate Vice President/Provost – 52%
- Dean – 16%
- Assistant/Associate Dean – 8%
- [Executive] Director/Chair – 12%

DEI – 30%
- Vice President/Provost – 12%
- Assistant/Associate Vice President/Provost – 52%
- Dean – 16%
- Assistant/Associate Dean – 8%
- [Executive] Director/Chair – 12%
- Other– 12%

Academic Affairs - 27%
- Provost – 35%
- Vice President/Provost – 6%
- Assistant/Associate Vice President/Provost– 6%
- Dean – 35%
- Assistant/Associate Dean – 12%
- Other– 12%

0% of Centers surveyed reported directly to the President

In Their Own Words:
Women's Center Leaders on Reporting Structure

"Our current provost was one of the principle architects of the women's center as a university faculty member."

"I don't think they see us a major enough player to offer tangible means of support directly to us."

"We recently moved out of student affairs and into a division of DEI. Feel more supported with the move."

"I keep an open line of communication with my administrators--especially when I am working on LGBT+ issues in the very conservative state. They know my view is that I am only interested in working in the best interest of our students and to create community. I am not trying to draw attention from our conservative state legislature or other entities that could interfere with my work. We have a relationship of trust."

"The President recently introduced us to a large donor who started and funded a scholarship program for Single Parents at our University."

"My new dean is a former faculty director of our Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality. She therefore is a strong supporter of the Center. My provost and president are both relatively new, so I do not have a sense yet of what level of financial support we will receive. Nominally, in any case, they are both supportive of the Center and its work."

"We have been trying to change the name of our center to better reflect the scope of the work we do. Without ever having a meeting with us or looking at the research we did, the President's office has told us to cease and desist with our request for a name change."

"new president, supports some DEI offices over others."

"The director of [the women's center] is an ex-officio member of an advisory group...[which] meets with senior leaders quarterly to recommend policies and practices that will enhance the work experience of women and minoritized employees at the university. Senior leadership is receptive during meetings, but could better integrate the insights from [the women's center and advisory board] into other decision-making bodies throughout the year."

"We have a very strong relationship with administration and staff/faculty among our institution. It seems as though the majority of our institution understands how important our work is."

"Before our restructuring (the Office of Diversity & Inclusion moved from being under Academic Affairs with a Vice Provost in leadership to being part of a newly created Division of Inclusion, Civil Rights & Title IX) I felt that I had the ability to speak open & freely about issues on campus, in the community, statewide, etc. However, since the restructuring and new leadership, I do not have the same level of autonomy or support to speak freely."

Institutional Resources

As noted in the previous section, statements of support from university leadership rarely produces additional resources. In addition, other key findings noted that the women and gender equity centers were understaffed and underfunded compared to other centers on campus including staff salaries. While some centers had an endowment, most were small and salaries were supported by the institutions. Only two centers had sizeable endowments or gifts and felt well-funded. In our responses, space was referred to very little, with staffing noted the most followed by budget for programming.

Many respondents reported considering grants with few seeking them. Respondents that had grants most frequently reported the Office on Violence against Women (OVW) grant as a source of growing staff, yet one institution noted "I don't have the capacity to keep writing the OVW grant. I don't seem to be able to keep the grant director position filled, so the work of the grant always ends up falling to me with no additional compensation or relief of other duties, and I just can't anymore." Only one institution mentioned leadership was helping them locate grants.

The importance of engaging with senior leadership becomes clearer when examining center budgets. "We do not have a budget line in the office budget. I have to ask the Dean for money or asks departments to partner," says one respondent. In some cases, staff salaries are covered by the institution, but without any additional budget, and a staff with no budget has very little capacity to do any meaningful work. "We previously had a full-time Campus Advocate from the local crisis center who saw students all the time. Since she left, the crisis center has been unable to consistently staff the position…The inconsistency…has left our under-served students continuously underserved."

Beyond institutional support for salaries, endowments, and grants, few respondents mentioned other forms of fundraising to support their work. These various deficits mean that for many centers, annual operating budgets were as low as $10,000-$17,000. Despite their limited resources, increasing enrollment at the university drove increased involvement in the center, yet this rarely resulted in increased staffing or budget to meet the need.

Some respondents also compared themselves to other centers at their institution. For example, one noted that "The director supervises far more people than any other identity-based center, but earns the same or less." They also noted there had only been a small increase in their pay in the last 5 years and their salary is only slightly higher than their office's support staff member. Another respondent said "The only way in which our Center can stay afloat is to have some of the lowest paid professional staff in our division of student affairs."

The combination of all of these factors meant that, with little staff and budget to drive the work centers do, students did a great deal of work within these centers. While we are all grateful for the work of our very dedicated students - many of us were those students once, after all - it is evidence of the desire and need for the work of women and gender equity centers that is not being met through university support. The programming budgets of some centers were even allocated by student government rather than being a university budget line, even if staff salaries were covered by the university. So how does work get done, with minimal university support and limited capacity? As one respondent said, "we make do and we are creative."
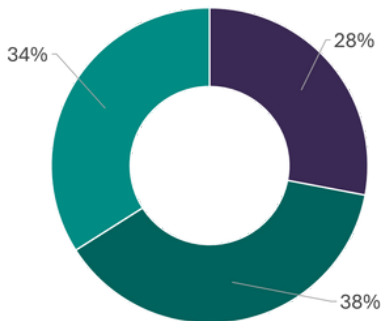
"We make do and we are creative."

Institutional Resources

Space Change

28%
12%
60%
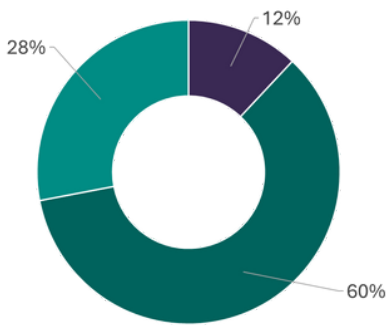
■ Decreased ■ Increased ■ Stayed the Same

Budget Change

34%
28%
38%

■ Decreased ■ Increased ■ Stayed the Sam

Staff Change

33%
25%
42%
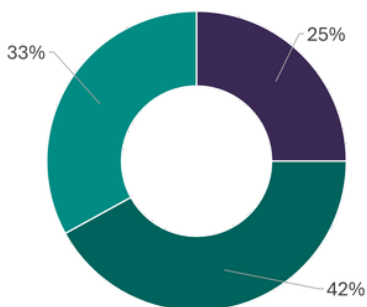
■ Decreased ■ Stayed the Same ■ Increased

3

average number of staff members, ranging from 0-15

To better grasp the impact of policy changes over the last five years, we asked respondents to tell us how their physical space, budgets, and staffing has changed in that time period. These graphs show what percent of participants said they had experienced an increase, decrease, or no change in the last five years.

The majority of programs reported no change to their space in the last five years; those who did report a change were more likely to report an increase than a decrease.

Around 1/3 of programs reported an increase in budget, while slightly over 1/3 reported their budget stayed the same and slightly less than 1/3 reported a budget decrease. Notably, qualitative responses indicate that many of those budgets stayed the same at $0, or other very small amounts.

The biggest single category of responses reported that there was no change in staffing, while 33% reported an increase, including part-time staff members moved to full-time and 25% reported a decrease, including full-time staff members moved to part-time.

The number of staff reported ranged from none to fifteen, with an average number of staff between two and three and three being the most commonly reported number of staff.

Centers report unequal budget distribution across areas of DEI and other home divisions, as well as that changes in reporting structures can impact their resources. "Since moving Divisions in 2020 our staff has slowly declined and we continue to lose positions but absorb work from across campus."

Institutional and National Climate

The topics of concern and realities of women and gender equity centers described in the sections on reporting structure, leadership support, and institutional resources not only reveal a lack of responsiveness to the needs of the centers, but also the national and institutional climate for women and gender-diverse populations. Centers described token supportive relationship when their mission, programs, and public messaging, in particular, remain palatable by remaining apolitical.

For example, the Dobbs decision and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* have put a spotlight on reproductive health and justice issues, leading to increased advocacy work within these centers. Centers that chose to continue to speak out on gender-related issues in the nation and world feared backlash such as loss of funding and threats to job security. The possibility of retaliation centers reported often, in the end, stifled advocacy efforts.

Additionally, the demographic changes in the populations served by these centers have sparked discussions about potential name changes to better reflect the communities they support. Just under half of centers initiated a name change in the past 20 years, with the majority changing to something more inclusive (such as adding gender to the name or changing to "Gender Equity Center"). The intersections of gender, race, and LGBTQ+ identity of community members supported by women and gender equity centers on campus was not often acknowledged by administration, leaving centers unable to make the needed name, mission, and programming shifts necessary to thrive. "Without ever having a meeting with us or looking at the research we did, the President's office has told us to cease and desist with our request for a name change," one respondent told us. However, we found no relationship between public/private universities, reporting structure, or the presence of anti-DEI bills in whether or not a center changed their name. This suggests that regardless of their institutional or national climate, centers are attempting to become more equitable and inclusive in their missions, beginning with the name.

In the following page in this section, we also present a final "In Their Own Words" section, which demonstrates the many views that center leadership shared on the major aspects under consideration here. Again, the quotes from these respondents were so nuanced, we felt it was better to let them speak for themselves than to blend into this narrative.

These quotes highlight the importance of advocacy work done by cultural and identity centers in universities, while also shedding light on the struggles and limitations faced in addressing contentious issues in a politically charged environment by women and gender equity centers. The need for continued support and resources for these centers to effectively serve their communities and navigate complex sociopolitical landscapes is evident in the challenges described.

Photo from "Faith, Feminism, and Being Unfinished: The Question of Women's Ordination" at Georgetown University. Photo credit: Leslie Kossoff, Copyright: © 2022 Georgetown Univ.

In Their Own Words:
Women's Center Leaders on Institutional & National Climate

"Legislation has wreaked havoc with our Center and Division...There is a lack of communication about what we can and can't (or "shouldn't") do, which has led to people being afraid...It feels like we can do our work, but we shouldn't draw too much attention...and that this is not the time to make a splash with our programming. Although no one really fears for their job, we are all fearful generally about whether we are going to do something "wrong" right now"

"The Center has been an advocate for women of color at a PWI. However it is hard for many women of color to work at a PWI especially dealing with micro and macro racist aggression. It's exhausting."

"We are in the process of exploring a name change once again...to reflect changes in the demographics we work with. In addition to cis and trans women, we increasingly have more gender non-conforming, non-binary, two-spirit, femme folks and men and masculine folks connecting with our Center. We would like our name to reflect that."

"The Dobbs decision has created space for the center to be more visible as we help to shape campus conversation and policy...The center plays a key role in educating the campus, and this work has enabled me to build relationships with people across...campus, including health scientists and practitioners. State laws regarding how campus collects data...created more work for me in terms of advocacy as well as being directly involved in designing surveys, etc."

"Because we are a private institution, we have been insulated from local, state, and federal concerns related to these topics. However, the overturn of Roe emboldened...students protesting events."

"Given the current national landscape and the upcoming election of a new Governor...I do not think that we will exist in 6-12 months. We may be assumed under another unit at the University, but I think the scope of work we are able to do will be very limited.""

"I think we can speak out about women's and gender equity issues, but we are aware of the current sociopolitical environment and...attacks on DEIJ work. That informs how we choose which issues to speak out about, and the manner/form that the speaking out might take."

"It's changed how we market, what we talk about, what we offer, etc. we've received death threats and are regularly discussed in disgust by legislators on the statehouse floor and have hit pieces about us produced by a local lobbying group."

"We work very closely with the State legislature on issues such as violence against women, human trafficking, gender equity, and economic policies."

"The culture and identity centers...tried to host a lunch and learn about [a state senate bill], and the event was shut down the day before. We were given explicit instructions...not to discuss or promote anything about state legislation that would affect university funding. I have also been asked to...work behind closed doors to avoid "offending" people...our [community] want us to address legislation and current events, I am not allowed to do so without considerable restrictions."

Conclusion: Increasing Higher Education's Understanding of Women and Gender Equity Centers

Overall, the survey responses and narrative accounts of the experiences of working in a women and gender equity center in higher education show the continued need for more understanding and support for how these centers serve women and gender-diverse communities on campus. Moving forward, institutions of higher education should establish clearer reporting lines, provide equitable institutional support for staff and programming, and support centers in considering potential name and program changes to better reflect their mission and services as centers that support the advancement of knowledge about women and gender-diverse communities on campus of all races, ethnicities, abilities, and other axes of social identities. Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) and the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) could also enhance the impact and reach of women and gender equity centers by playing an advocacy role for the need and missions of these centers on individual campuses and across the higher education and feminist communities. By taking these steps and garnering more support and for women and gender equity centers, these spaces can continue to be valuable resources for promoting gender equity and inclusion in academic and campus environments.
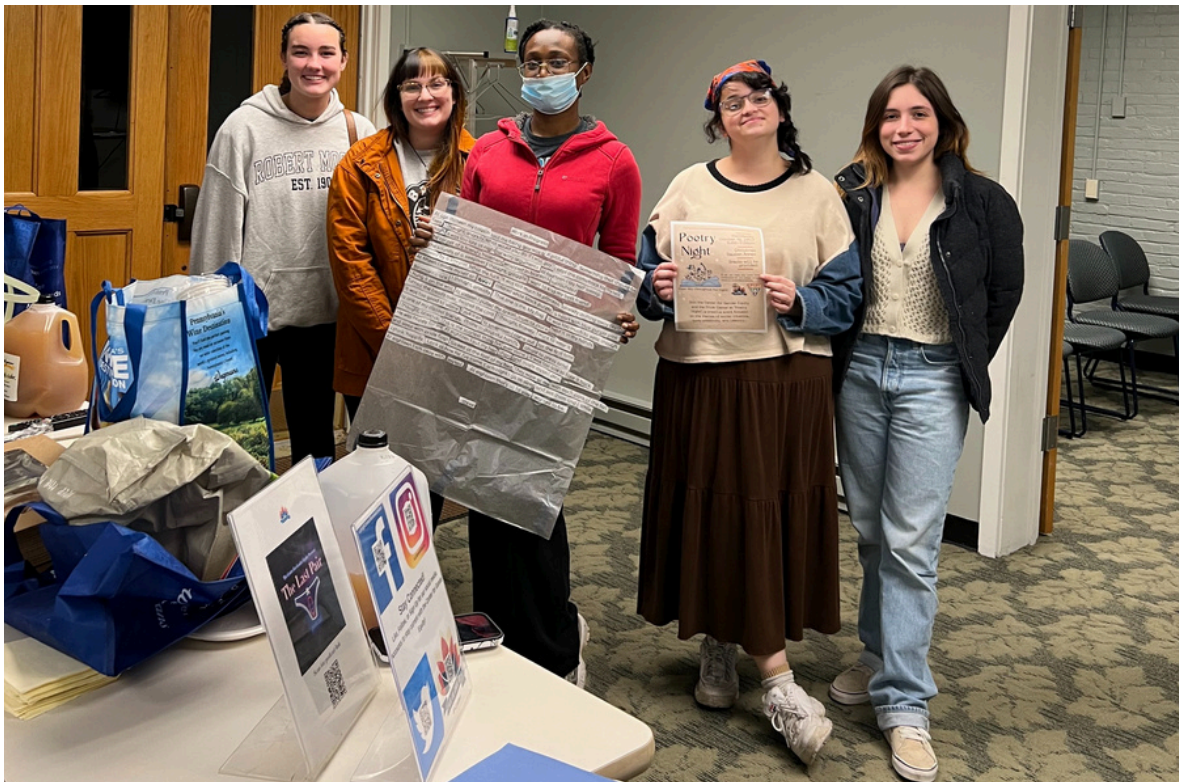
Poetry Night Event, Lehigh University

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Appendix: Survey Instrument

Q1. What is your institution (we will pull the IPED data to gather information such as type of institution and size. We will deidentify the institution from your individual answers, but we will lump them together by Carnage classification, location, etc.)

Note: Participants were asked to select whether they were responding as a Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program/Departments or a Women/Gender Equity Center and subsequently funneled to the appropriate questionnaire based on their response

Q2 Please select your affiliation (can only select one):
Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies, Program/Departments (1)
Women/Gender Equity Center (2)

Q3 The following questions are focused on Women & Gender Centers and Institutes.
Please select what best describes the structure of your area (can select more than one):
Academic Institute (1)
Women/Gender Center (2)
Other (please specify) (3)

Q4 What is your title? (Select all that apply)
Coordinator (1)
Assistant Director (2)
Associate Director (3)
Director (4)
Assistant Dean (5)
Associate Dean (6)
Dean (7)
Administrative Assistant (8)
Graduate Assistant (9)
Volunteer (10)
Other (please specify) (11)

Q5 Do you feel the university president is supportive of the Women/Gender Center on your campus?
Yes (1)
No (2)

Q6 Do you feel your university provost is supportive of the Women/Gender Center on your campus?
Yes (1)
No (2)

Q7 Do you feel your dean/division leader is supportive of the Women/Gender Center on your campus?
Yes (1)
No (2)

Q8 Is there anything you wish to share about your department or program's relationship with the institution, president, provost, or dean? Please use this space to share.

Q9 Over the past five years, what has happened to the Women/Gender Center's space?
The space has increased (1)
The space has stayed the same (2)
The space has decreased (3)

Q10 Over the past five years, what has happened to the Women/Gender Center's budget?
The budget has decreased (1)
The budget has stayed the same (2)
The budget has increased (3)

Q11 Over the past five years, what has happened to the Women/Gender Center's staff (non-teaching individuals)?
The number of staff have decreased (1)
Staff have been moved from full-time to part-time (2)
The number of staff have stayed the same (3)
Staff have been moved from part-time to full-time (4)
The staff have increased (5)

Q12 How many staff members work in the Women/Gender Center? (type in response)

Q13 Can your office/center/institute function fully based on your staffing status?
Yes (1)
No (2)

Q14 Is there anything you wish to share about the Women/Gender Center's budget or staff? Please use this space to share.

Q15 Are you engaged in diversity, equity, inclusion, and/or belonging work within your university?
Yes (1)
No (2)

Q16 Are you engaged in diversity, equity, inclusion, and/or belonging work outside of your university (e.g., conferences, professional organizations)?
Yes (1)
No (2)

Q17 What best describes your type of Women/Gender Center? (Davie, 2002)
Community activist/action centers. Often staffed by volunteers, including students, or by part-time staff, such centers provide places to meet, find support, organize, and take action for social change (1)
Student services/resource centers. Often led by a master's level professional director, though increasingly led by doctoral-level directors, these student-focused centers are typically located in student affairs divisions. They are generally strong on programs and services, and less focused on influencing or setting institutional policy (2)
Synthesis centers. Often led by professional directors with doctorates or by faculty, these centers are more likely to be housed in academic affairs divisions and to serve a broad constituency. They also play a role in curriculum and policy transformation as well as offer programs and services (3)
Research centers. Staffed primarily by faculty, these centers focus on research and publication of scholarly reports on gender issues (4)

Q18 Has your Women/Gender Center been renamed in the last 20 years?
    Yes (please share the old name and new name) (1)
    No (2)

Q19 In your opinion, what population does your Women/Gender Center primarily serve?
Students (1)
University staff (2)
University faculty (3)
University administration (4)
The local community (5)
Specific causes (please specify) (6)
Other (please specify) (7)

Q20 In your opinion, what groups does your Women/Gender Center serve (including the primary group from above)?
Students (1)
University staff (2)
University faculty (3)
University administration (4)
The local community (5)
Specific causes (please specify) (6)
Other (please specify) (7)

Q21 Who does your Women/Gender Center report to?
President (1)
Provost (2)
Associate Provost (please specify such as diversity, equity, inclusion) (3)
Assistant Provost (please specify such as diversity, equity, inclusion) (4)
Dean (please specify, such as dean of students) (5)
Director (please specify such as director of student affairs) (6)
Other (specify) (7)

Q22 In the past five years, has your Women/Gender Center reporting structure/line changed?
Yes (1)
No (2)

Q23 Is your institution religiously affiliated?
Yes (1)
No (2)

Note: The following was shown only if the respondent indicated that their institution was religiously affiliated

Q24 If your institution is religiously affiliated, how has that impacted your practice as a women/gender studies faculty member and/or your department?

Q25 Can you speak out directly about women's issues at the institution, at the state-level, nationally, and/or within professional organizations?
Yes (feel free to elaborate) (1)
No (feel free to elaborate (2)

Q26 To what extent has national, state, and local legislation impacted your practice, teaching, scholarship, enrollment, budget, etc. (including the overturning of Roe v. Wade)?

Q27 Is there anything you wish to share about the Women/Gender Center's name or who it serves? Please use this space to share.

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