

## For Members Only: Feminism on Campus Today

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During the summer of 2004, I joined the herd of interns that descends upon Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., each summer. My assignment? To work in the Office of Senator Richard Lugar. It did not take long for me to realize that I thrived in this environment—a city packed with ambitious, politically-minded women, many of whom are conservative. Rather than throwing out Republican and Democratic one-liners, my female colleagues were eager to talk about nuanced arguments behind legislative proposals and how the issues of the day affect women. It was exhilarating to hear speakers and staffers explain a five hundred-page bill, and it was also refreshing to see how these women were able to balance their extraordinary achievements with a full family life.

I returned to the University of Virginia (UVA) for my third year of college that fall and set about to find some semblance of the environment from which I had just come. With more than five hundred student clubs at UVA, I thought it would be easy. There was a club for just about every group activity, but what I discovered after searching the UVA club database was disappointing to say the least. There were women's organizations, but they were not for me. These organizations catered exclusively to liberal women. At first, I thought perhaps it was just my university that lacked what I wanted. Maybe another college had a club that I could start on my campus. I searched club databases at colleges throughout the country. Yet again, my search was futile.

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A week after my database searches, I saw a sign on campus for the “Women’s Center.” “Wow,” I thought, “this could be what I am looking for!” That name sounded fairly neutral. I figured it would be open to *all* women. I called, earnestly expressed interest in learning more, and scheduled an appointment. I soon discovered just how wrong I was.

I arrived at the UVA Women’s Center with a smile to find a middle-aged feminist faculty member ready to show me around. As we chatted, she enthusiastically told me about their work and tried to get me to sign up. She was friendly, confident, and talked a mile a minute as she described all of the programs housed at the center. Her passion and pride in her work were apparent. As the tour went on, though, I began to get the impression that the center’s programs were not exactly neutral and actually had a liberal slant. My guide gushed about the various programs geared toward different segments of the female population, however, so I decided to inquire a bit further. At the end of the tour, I asked her, “Would the Women’s Center consider cosponsoring a group for conservative women?” She looked at me as if I were crazy, chuckled, and said, “Not here.” I thanked her and decided to start a club for conservative women on my own. On September 29, 2004, I founded the “Network of enlightened Women,” NeW, a book club for conservative university women at UVA.

Unfortunately, my experience at the UVA Women’s Center was not an aberration. Conservative women on campuses across the nation are searching for some type of women’s organization. Since 2004, NeW has developed into a national movement, with chapters on more than twenty campuses. Chapters generally start by seeking to educate themselves through the book club, and then often expand their mission to educate the larger campus community by holding debates, hosting panels on how to balance work and family, and participating in philanthropic activities.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Institutionalization of Feminism on Campus**

Almost half a century after the beginning of the women’s liberation movement, feminism has become part of the university establishment. Feminists have secured academic departments, centers, and professorial and administrative positions that are now part of the regular budget. But too often

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<sup>1</sup>To learn more about the Network of enlightened Women (NeW), visit [www.enlightenedwomen.org](http://www.enlightenedwomen.org).

they ignore or reject women who hold traditional views about femininity, sex differences, and motherhood. Through the creation and expansion of women's centers and women's studies departments in particular, campus feminists have virtually defined feminism as an entirely liberal phenomenon, one that is deeply affecting student life today.

### *Women's Centers*

There are hundreds of campus-based women's centers at colleges and universities throughout the United States. Most of these centers emerged as an outgrowth of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and have had an activist bent from the beginning.<sup>2</sup> One former women's center director describes the sentiment of that time: "Women were angry at the rigidities of their institutions, eager to see some immediate changes, and at the same time aware that an important first step in effecting change was to raise the consciousness of women."<sup>3</sup> According to this view, to become motivated to act, women first had to become aware of their second-class status.<sup>4</sup>

Women's instinctive willingness to share their personal experiences quickly became a political instrument, "consciousness-raising," which was used to build the movement by making women aware of the presumed oppression they faced.<sup>5</sup> College campuses were one of the most popular places for this activity, and women's centers were created in part for this purpose.

Some of the necessary characteristics of a women's center director were said to be "energy, leadership, commitment to feminist issues, and political sensitivity to what works at an institution."<sup>6</sup> In a 1988 survey, half of the founding directors interviewed had academic credentials, while the other half had a background in administration or activism.<sup>7</sup> Once established, many

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<sup>2</sup>Bonnie Mason Clevenger, "The Mission, Organization, Funding, Programming, and Clientele of Campus-Based, Administratively Organized Women's Centers" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, May, 1987), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Miriam K. Chamberlain, ed., *Women in Academe: Progress and Prospects* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), 87.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1979), 214.

<sup>6</sup>Chamberlain, *Women in Academe*, 98.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

centers followed feminist principles by functioning as nonhierarchical entities that made decisions collectively.<sup>8</sup>

Acquiring funding was one of the biggest challenges early women's centers faced. Founders raised funds from private sources, state governments, and the federal government, including under the Higher Education Act, the Women's Educational Equity Act of 1974, and the Comprehensive Education and Training Act of 1976.<sup>9</sup> Once established, these centers depended on student workers and volunteers to continue. The accountability of women's centers varied. Most center directors reported to an administrator in student or academic affairs, while some had an advisory or executive committee.<sup>10</sup> In the beginning, the centers received little support and were viewed by many as a fad.<sup>11</sup> They have survived, however, and decades after being founded there are hundreds of thriving women's centers across the nation spreading feminism, if no longer through old-fashioned consciousness-raising, through various programs of the kind that I was told about at the UVA center, such as sponsoring a campus production of *The Vagina Monologues*.

### *Women's Studies Departments*

The discipline of women's studies also grew out of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> The first women's studies department was created in 1970 at San Diego State College (now San Diego State University). On its website, the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) brags that today "there are more than 900 programs in the U.S., boasting well over 10,000 courses and an enrollment larger than that of any other interdisciplinary field."<sup>13</sup>

But what exactly is women's studies? On its website, the Appalachian State University women's studies department defines the discipline in a way that is fairly representative, as

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>9</sup>Clevenger, "The Mission," 9.

<sup>10</sup>Chamberlain, *Women in Academe*, 99.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>12</sup>San Diego State University Women's Studies (<http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/dept/wsweb/index.html>), "Timeline," <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/dept/wsweb/timeline.htm>.

<sup>13</sup>"National Women's Studies Association (<http://www.nwsa.org/index.php>), "NWSA/Ms. Magazine Guide to Women's & Gender Studies," <http://www.nwsa.org/research/theguide/>.

a field of inquiry that grew from a concern about the way other academic fields ignored or distorted the concerns, histories, theories, experiences, and perspectives of women. Women's studies scholars, with many different points of interest and with many different methods of conducting research, seek to understand the causes, workings, and effects of power inequalities in societies past and present. These power inequities have affected the kinds of claims a male-dominated academy has made about women as well as the lives and opportunities of women and men.<sup>14</sup>

Armed with this predisposition to view the relationship between the sexes as one of power inequity and male dominance, the proponents of women's studies aim to exert political influence in the larger world. The above description goes on to emphasize that "commitment to social change" is what "makes women's studies scholarship feminist and links it to social movements across the world to end forms of discrimination such as sexism, racism, and heterosexism."<sup>15</sup>

Actually, that commitment to social change makes women's studies quite suspect as an academic field. Scholarship is compromised when it serves a preconceived point of view and political agenda. While earning my undergraduate degree at UVA, I became curious about the Studies in Women and Gender (SWAG) major and looked into what SWAG students were learning. The description for the introductory course at the time, "Women's Lives in Myth and Reality," read: "This course will explore women's past and present circumstances and envision future possibilities and alternatives, analyze issues of gender in relation to class and race, and work toward a framework for understanding the world and our place in it."<sup>16</sup> Many women envision having a family as a future possibility, but this course did not offer any sections devoted to studying traditional family structures or ways for women to pursue both career and motherhood. Instead, the course readings were aimed at inculcating the next generation of women with feminist principles. For instance, one of the two main textbooks used in the course was *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, which includes

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<sup>14</sup>Appalachian State University Women's Studies Program (<http://www.womenstudies.appstate.edu/index.html>), "Women's Studies: A Brief History of the Field," <http://www.womenstudies.appstate.edu/history/history.html>.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Studies in Women & Gender at the University of Virginia (<http://www.virginia.edu/womenstudies/>), Courses, SWAG 2559-100, "Women's Lives in Myth and Reality," <http://www.virginia.edu/womenstudies/courses.html>.

articles such as “Lusting for Freedom,” “Taking It to the Streets,” and “Bringing Feminism a la Casa.”<sup>17</sup> Feminists have been wildly successful in infusing the curriculum with their agenda. Each year, countless women enter colleges around the country, sign up for classes such as “Gender and Sexuality in Pop Culture,” and are clueless that they will be fed radical feminist ideas. (Interestingly, although men have increasingly become a minority on campus, there is no growing national movement to create men’s studies departments or men’s centers.)<sup>18</sup>

Women’s centers and women’s studies departments work together to increase the power of feminism on campus. Each year, the NWSA hosts an annual conference for women’s centers and women’s studies professors. The 2006 conference included a roundtable discussion titled, “How Women’s Centers Respond to Conservative Young Women: Dialogue and Action.” The title of this session conveys an “us versus them” attitude, suggesting that conservative women are the enemy and unwelcome outsiders in women’s centers. The abstract for this roundtable speaks for itself:

Has your Women’s Center encountered encouragement, resistance, or support requests from self-identified conservative young women?...How has this group challenged your work, or how have you challenged them? We anticipate this panel to be part of a larger discussion about the visibility of conservative young women’s groups on campus (one high-profile example at the University of Virginia is the Network of Enlightened Women, or N.E.W., formed in direct response to NOW), and political climate and Women’s Centers in general.<sup>19</sup>

That the topic of how to deal with conservative women on campus was discussed at this national conference for women’s centers and women’s studies leaders shows that conservative women are considered outsiders by these institutions. Furthermore, these institutions are connected and working together. Women’s centers and women’s studies departments were founded

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<sup>17</sup>Barbara Findlen, ed., *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995; Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup>A few such programs do exist, for example, the Men’s Studies and Fatherhood Program at Akamai University (<http://www.akamaiuniversity.us/MensStudies.html>), and the Men’s Studies Program at Hobart and William Smith Colleges (<http://academic.hws.edu/mensstud/>).

<sup>19</sup>Conference information and program materials, “Locating Women’s Studies: Formations of Power and Resistance,” National Women’s Studies Association Twenty-Seventh Annual Conference, Oakland, California, June 15–18, 2006, 39, <http://www.nwsaconference.org/2006/downloads/intro06.pdf>.

with a political mission, and they have maintained that political agenda while becoming part of the university establishment.

### **The Influence of Feminism on Campus**

Contemporary feminism teaches women that fulfillment comes from working and having a full-time career, and conveys the idea that women devoting most of their time to their children for a period is antiquated. Moreover, feminism specifically affects campus life through its stigmatization of traditional masculinity and rejection of the biological differences between men and women. As a result, feminism has played a large part in the continued rise of the hookup culture and decline of traditional dating on campus. Hooking up—engaging in a physical relationship with no intention of forming an emotional relationship—can be especially dangerous for women. Aside from the risk of pregnancy, women are more likely than men to contract sexually transmitted diseases, which can potentially cause infertility, cancer, and even death. Hooking up has emotional consequences for both women and men, if more so for women, which can make establishing future relationships more difficult. By discarding basic cultural rules on dating, the hookup culture affects the power dynamics between men and women and blurs appropriate boundaries in relationships.

Despite these negative consequences, feminist groups have yet to speak out against the hookup culture and, in some quarters, expressly support it. Why? To argue that hooking up is more dangerous for women would require acknowledging that biological differences between the sexes exist, something feminists are generally unwilling to do. The feminist movement on campus settles instead for a “girls gone wild” hookup culture and rejects dating as an oppressive patriarchal institution. When students can hookup, there is little incentive to enter into a committed relationship.

I had a conversation with a recent graduate of the University of Florida (UF) and when I asked her about dating and the hookup culture on her campus, she replied:

At UF, dating was almost non-existent. I remember so many lunches at the sorority house when girls with sheepish “grins” would confess to “shacking” with some fraternity boy the night before. The girls all

laughed, but you could see the pain. And when girls asked about my boyfriend, it was almost as if they couldn't believe that a guy could treat a girl so nicely without sexual motives. It was always, "You're so lucky!" But really, it was just that I had high standards and didn't enable the young men on our campus to behave in such a way. I wanted to be a treated like a lady. If more women demanded more respect, I think guys might start getting the picture. It's a cycle that feminist ideas and sexual liberation have fed into.

Hooking up has become such a widespread problem on campus and traditional masculinity so reduced in value that conservative women are pushing back publicly. Last spring, the Arizona State University (ASU) chapter of NeW hosted its First Annual Gentlemen's Showcase to show appreciation for those men who treat women with dignity and respect. Students were given the opportunity to nominate a male ASU student for performing a gentlemanly act. The top ten most-nominated gentlemen at ASU were honored at an awards banquet.

The ASU NeW chapter sought to praise chivalry publicly with the hope of encouraging more gentlemanly behavior on campus. To promote the showcase, chapter members created a short video asking students four questions: What is a gentleman? What are the characteristics of a gentleman? Are there gentlemen at ASU? Are gentlemen an endangered species? Student answers ranged from serious to comical. For example, responses to "What is a gentleman?" include,

Just a man that has manners I guess.

Well, we don't know. We haven't ever seen one before.

Someone who opens doors, is chivalrous, and a nice guy.

A gentleman is a person who likes to do nice things and doesn't really ask for anything in return.

Someone who is nice and courteous and is always looking out for other people before themselves [*sic*].

The ASU showcase was so successful that other chapters of NeW are hosting similar events this spring, and the national organization of NeW is hosting an online Gentlemen's Showcase. That events like this even need to be held speaks volumes about the influence of feminism on campus.



## Feminism on Campus Today

Each year, over seventeen million students enroll in our nation's colleges and universities.<sup>20</sup> Since 1979, a majority of these students has been female.<sup>21</sup> When students enter college, what will they likely find? They will find women's centers that don't welcome all women. They will find women's studies, sociology, and anthropology departments staffed by professors who teach that gender is socially constructed and that women are regularly oppressed by a patriarchal society. They will find chapters of the National Organization for Women, the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance, or some other feminist campus-based organization waiting to recruit them to feminist causes.

Considering the reach of campus-based women's centers, women's studies departments, and programs organized by women's clubs on campus, students are bound to be exposed to and influenced by contemporary feminism—whether in the classroom or in the changed campus culture. Recognizing this influence is the first step to challenging it. And the next step is creating more organizations like NeW.

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<sup>20</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, "College Enrollment up 17 Percent Since 2000," press release, September 17, 2008, <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/education/012637.html>.

<sup>21</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Children of 'Baby Boomers' and Immigrants Boost School Enrollment to Equal All-Time High, Census Bureau Reports," press release, March 23, 2001, <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/education/000322.html>.