It’s Not Your Mother’s Women’s Studies Program

by Jacqueline Tasch

Gwen D’Arcangelis is studying biological threats—a combination of bioterrorism and emerging infectious diseases. Anna E. Ward is studying orgasm. They are in the same academic program, and it’s not biology. It’s Women’s Studies—a field that has experienced a remarkable widening in research topics since 1975, when the interdepartmental program was established at UCLA. Women’s Studies “is no longer just about particular groups of women but about issues that affect women,” says the program’s director, Professor of Law Christine Littleton. “There are other places to study bioterrorism, but those others do not include gender in their work. Whatever we’re looking at, gender is organizing our approach.”

Out near the discipline’s cutting edge is Gwen’s work, looking at the politics and media coverage related to biological threat. The “masculinist discourse” of national security is making a gendered distinction “between masculine wielders of intentional biological weapons and feminine embodiments of unintentional disease threats,” Gwen says, using gender in an almost abstract fashion as a cluster of characteristics. With an overlay of race, Arabs and Muslims—seen as potential bioterrorists—are masculinized, while the Chinese—associated with SARS and bird flu—have been presented as a feminized threat.

The field’s traditional repertoire is more identifiable in Anna’s work on women’s orgasm. Anna is looking at the “cultural understandings and representations of orgasm and how they’ve shifted historically.” Before modern times, orgasm was viewed as a mechanism “not that much different than sneezing,” she says, whereas modern descriptions of orgasm are “now tied to sexuality, pleasure and an ecstasy that is almost spiritual.” St. Teresa and Anaïs Nin may be talking about vastly different things, but they use quite similar descriptions, she says. Anna’s interest in the subject began with an undergraduate paper on the famous faked-orgasm scene in When Harry Met Sally. The scene is proof of a cultural script describing “what an orgasm should look like.” Indeed, director Rob Reiner took actress Meg Ryan aside and “told her she was doing it wrong,” then demonstrated the “correct” way, Anna says.

As Professor Littleton describes it, Women’s Studies is broad enough to include both women’s work—and an even wider variety of topics, from biology and politics, to religion, language and the law. It has transformed scholarship with two ideas, she says: (1) The experience of women is a necessary component of human experience, even when (perhaps especially when) it differs from men’s experience; and (2) Many things thought of as neutral are not neutral. In biology, for example, what is seen as “objective” may be the dominant group’s way of viewing a subject. “If you create knowledge from the experience of marginalized groups,” Professor Littleton says, “you’ll see something very interesting, something you missed.” As a result
of this broadening of its inquiry, Women’s Studies is experiencing a current resurgence, she says.

A marker of the UCLA program’s vitality is its recent application for departmental status. “A department can initiate its own hiring in areas it needs,” Professor Littleton notes, instead of negotiating with traditional disciplines to hire people who can contribute to the program. Being a department also offers a range of administrative efficiencies and advantages in recruiting both faculty and graduate students. Finally, it adds an official recognition that she believes is well-deserved. “Women’s Studies at UCLA has a reputation as one of the best and most respected programs in the world,” she says. “It’s surprising to people outside UCLA that we’re not a department already.” Indeed, Berkeley, Riverside and Santa Cruz have already given their programs department status, while the UCLA program is the only one in the UC system to grant a PhD.

Adding a doctoral program was a major milestone in the growth of Women’s Studies at UCLA, with the first students admitted in Fall 2000. Despite small classes—typically four to six new students each year and a total of 20 students in all—Women’s Studies has staked out turf in several areas, one of them being international and transnational women’s issues (see accompanying story). Related fields of interest are area and ethnic studies. “We’ve made consistent efforts to have strong ties with these programs, as more and more researchers are working in the area where race and gender intersect,” Professor Littleton says. Recently, Women’s Studies has made joint appointments with Asian American Studies and Chicana/o Studies.

Another area of research strength, suggested by Professor Littleton’s presence in the School of Law, is law and public policy. Among its small graduate cohort are a number of lawyers, including Laura Foster, who took a joint master’s/law degree from the University of Cincinnati.

Laura’s work on international patent law is built around a case study involving the hoodia plant of South Africa. The nomadic San people long ago discovered that hoodia could be used as an appetite suppressant, and colonial visitors from Europe took note of this usage in their diaries. In 1963, the South African Council for Science and Industrial Research decided to see if there might be military applications and got a patent. More recently, that patent was sold to Unilever and Phytopharm—ironically, Dutch and British companies, respectively—for development as a diet aid. The San were able to negotiate a 6% to 8% share of the royalties South Africa will collect.

Again, this topic may at first glance appear to be oddly placed in Women’s Studies, but Laura’s work is a woman-centered examination of relationships of power. One might call such a perspective “feminist,” and the women interviewed for this article agreed that the term—although variously defined, perhaps—characterizes themselves and their work.

Raised by a single mother, Gwen says, “I’ve been a feminist since I was two.” Anna was only 10 or 11 when she had an opportunity to meet Gloria Steinem, an activist in the U.S. women’s liberation movement. “She’s so charismatic and has such a presence,” Anna recalls, “and I actually got to sit down and talk to her, one on one, as a fifth grader.” The several women of color in the program endorse feminism, too, but with a caveat that issues of race and ethnicity must also be considered in gender studies.

All of these definitions suit the program. “We have self-consciously decided to let a thousand flowers bloom,” Professor Littleton says, “so we embrace work that is not explicitly feminist but is about women.”
Uncovering and documenting the experience of women—both here and around the world—"may or may not have political connotations of equality," she says. "We have no party line that people have to ascribe to, but people who are interested in women's experience tend to be feminist."

Does a different culture result from the feminist orientation of the program and the fact that it is mostly women, faculty and students? Professor Littleton says, "our students say they find us more encouraging of their efforts, but not less rigorous." A feminist pedagogy prescribes "helping students to work better rather than simply being critical of their failings," she says. "There are many ways to help students achieve excellence, some of them more democratic than others." The goal is to treat each as a person and an individual, not as a commodity to be pushed through the system, Professor Littleton says. "We're working to make our students our equals—or even to surpass us—that's our job."

Graduate students come to the doctoral program from different backgrounds and by different roads. Some were undergraduate majors in Women's Studies, while others take their first courses in the field as graduate students. Some come directly from their undergraduate work, while others have more or less extensive careers before settling into Women's Studies. The openness characteristic of a new discipline is what drew Anna, as early as her undergraduate years at UC Santa Cruz. "Undergraduates played a role in shaping the field," she says. "That was exciting for me." Laura also liked the idea of helping to develop a discipline, and her choice of Women's Studies was deliberate. "Going into the PhD program is a political risk and a political commitment," she says. "I felt passionate about Women's Studies."

Some students deliberately choose Women's Studies even when their research area could belong to an older, more established field. Karina Eileraas, part of the first doctoral class, had always been interested in Francophone studies and began her doctoral studies in French. She decided to switch to Women's Studies when she heard from her adviser about the exciting new program just beginning at UCLA. She did so, as she said at the time, because "It's not a parenthesis or an add-on; Women's Studies is the main thing."

Dr. Eileraas' dissertation addresses art and autobiography by contemporary North African and Southeast Asian women. It examines the relationship between fantasy, identity and transnational trauma such as war, colonization and sexual violence. Eileraas is especially interested in how women are evoked in national memory and how feminist artists and writers have chosen to negotiate or rewrite these "official" representations. For example, one "public fantasy" is that women actively participated in combat roles during the Algerian revolution, whereas writers like Assia Djebar and Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas highlight the national symbolism that facilitated women's confinement to traditionally "feminine" roles.

Dr. Eileraas has just completed a prestigious Mellon postdoctoral fellowship at Carleton College in Minnesota but is looking for a tenure-track position. Although her passion for Women's Studies still defines and animates Eileraas’ career path, she has seen some disadvantages to her choice. Most conventional departments, such as French, still hire people with PhDs in their own departments; direct appointments in Women's Studies, she says, "are few and far between," although "there are more postings each year. It's been a real challenge." Professor Littleton acknowledges that when Women's Studies jobs are filled through traditional departments, potential employers may think of their program first and then look for someone "with a little bit of women's studies—not too much." She foresees an increasing need for faculty in Women's Studies departments, however, and believes that the transition of UCLA's program to departmental status may help graduates obtain these positions.

In the meantime, Dr. Eileraas is returning to teach at UCLA this spring. As a student, she says, "I had a great experience at UCLA, and I was surprised by that. Coming from Wesleyan, a small liberal arts college, I expected to find less of a commitment to critical inquiry and less engagement at a large public university." The key factor in her positive experience was one mentioned by a number of students. "The community in Women's Studies at UCLA is dynamic, rigorous and invigorating," she says. "It is rich with opportunities for lively intellectual exchange across traditional disciplinary boundaries."