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The Relevance of Women's Studies to the South Shore - Editor's Introduction

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Last spring I experienced a moment of illumination that could very well serve to define and guide my career for years to come. For some time now, I have been well aware of the critics of Women's Studies Programs: some claim that they are out of step with the times and that they are unnecessary as women currently have achieved equality. Some claim that the issues on which Women's Studies Programs focus are outdated and passé. But the continued relevance became clear to me one Friday morning as I sat and listened to a discussion of the status of women in Northwest Indiana.

I had the honor and privilege of attending and serving on a panel convened to highlight the release of the Northwest Indiana Region Women Initiative and Quality of Life Council 2006 Indices Report that focused on the status of women in the Region. The Region Women Initiative invited nationally and locally prominent thinkers to discuss issues important to women such as health care, transportation, politics, work, and family. The presentations were edifying, and the speakers were interesting and inspiring. Following the meeting, many of the participants commented about how unique, amazing, and noteworthy it was to be in a group in Northwest Indiana whose primary focus was women and women's issues. They were inspired to be part of a group that takes women seriously and seeks to better the lives of women and their families in Northwest Indiana.

And that's when it hit me – this is why we still need Women's Studies Programs. Discussions like the one described above go on every day in Women's Studies classrooms. Women's Studies Programs provide a venue that takes women seriously and seeks to improve the lives of women. In the discipline we use research and theory to better understand issues that have an impact on women like health care, transportation, violence, immigration, poverty, motherhood, politics, relationships, work, family and the body. In the United States, women's studies “grew out of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s as both faculty and students saw that women's social and political inequality was reflected in and partly produced by the invisibility of women's experience in the curricula, research priorities, and methodologies in higher education” (NWSA, n.d.). The field has fulfilled some of its mission. Research from the field of Women's Studies now fills texts and has focused on recovering the contributions of extraordinary women from our past as well as celebrating the extraordinary women of our present. It has listened carefully to the lives of ordinary women and their extraordinary struggles as

well. Women's Studies purpose has been to "render those [gender] lenses visible rather than invisible, to enable us to look at the culture's gender lenses rather than through them"(Bem, 1993, 2). It also shines a light on other aspects of difference including race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and religion. The intersection of these aspects of human nature has surely enhanced research across disciplines as well. Helen Astin has suggested that at least, in part, as a result of the work of Women's Studies Programs, larger proportions of faculty claim to study women and gender and incorporate readings about women and gender in their college classes (Richter and Thomas, 1999).

I have had the great pleasure of being a part of the Women's Studies Program at Indiana University Northwest for over a decade. So, I get to experience first hand these dialogues with my colleagues and our students. Our campus, similar to many regional undergraduate institutions, enrolls a greater percentage of women than men (a little more than 70% of the student body at IU Northwest are women). Therefore, it is essential that there are events, courses and degrees that empower students to critically examine the theories, history, and processes of social constructions of gender as they relate to personal, professional, and political issues. As a faculty, we believe that gender plays a critical role in all societies; that gender is socially constructed and culturally determined; that the study of gender construction is an important component of a college education; and that the influence of gender systems transcends geographical, chronological, cultural, racial, economic, and disciplinary boundaries. Most importantly, "more than simply a body of information, however, Women's Studies is also an approach, a critical framework through which to view all knowledge" (NWSA, n.d.). Thus, students, with a background in Women's Studies can and do take the approaches or frameworks they learn in the classroom into their workplaces and homes to focus on women and women's issues and to seek out venues that take women seriously and seek to better the lives of women. I would like to take this opportunity to specifically champion Women's Studies Programs like ours at IU Northwest. Interdisciplinary programs such as Women's Studies and Minority Studies often have tenuous existences at colleges and universities. Take our classes, major or minor in our programs, and give us this support to validate the importance of this field of study. What we can give in return are the tools you can use to see the world through gender "lenses" and the skills to take action on issues that you feel passionately about now and in the future.

However, while much has changed over the decades since the inception of Women's Studies Programs, much has stayed the same. For example, while 56% of undergraduates nationally are women (up from 42% in 1970), they are still earning 77% of what their male peers are earning (up only 6% from 1970) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Caiazza, Shaw and Werschkul, 2004). Women are also completing their undergraduate degrees more quickly and at a higher rate than males (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). However, women still comprise only 14% of the Congress and were only 8 of the CEOs at Fortune 500 companies as of 2004 (NCWO, 2005). Clearly, these numbers do not reflect that women make up 52% of the U.S. population. Currently, the IRS taxes married working women's income at a higher rate than single women's income, a phenomenon known as the marriage tax. The

two-earner tax is just one of many features that make it hard to be a working married mother (McAffery, 1998). As Deborah Rhode asserts “while research on women and gender has dramatically altered the academic landscape, I think the progress has created its own obstacles to further change. Women’s growing opportunities are taken as evidence that the women’s problem is solved.... We have not successfully managed to mainstream these issues and I don’t think we know enough about the dynamics of denial that keep people from thinking that these ought to occupy a central place” (Richter and Thomas, 1999). I offer as anecdotal evidence the collective amazement at a two hour public meeting focused exclusively on women’s issues in Northwest Indiana.

The National Council on Women’s Organizations (NCWO) recently published *50 Ways to improve Women’s Lives...The Essential Women’s Guide to Achieving Equality, Health, and Success* (2005). In a subsection entitled, “Grow your money, Grow your Mind”, the book advocates championing Women’s Studies Programs and Achieving Higher Levels of Education as 2 of the fifty ways to improve women’s lives. For me, that small statement really resonates with my philosophy as a college professor. I can’t think of a better way for me to help improve women’s lives than by advocating higher education. Higher education is a way out of the neverending, backbreaking cycle of minimum-wage work that is inadequate for women to support themselves or their families. The gap between males and females in employment rates and salaries, for example, is not as great at higher levels of educational attainment as it is at lower levels. Today in Indiana, 19.4% of the population 25 years of age and over holds a bachelor’s degree as compared to the national average of 24.4%. This finding is mirrored when you focus on gender - 18.1% of women age 25 and over have a bachelor’s degree as compared to the national average of 22.9%. (US Census Bureau, 2000). We have some catching up to do, and one way to do so is to focus on a wide set of concerns and strategies that work with women learners and work well with non-traditional students and other traditionally underrepresented student groups. These are strategies that Women’s Studies Programs have pioneered, and we are well positioned to help women and men in Indiana succeed in higher education. I hope that the energy, enthusiasm and goodwill engendered by the Region Women Initiative 2006 meeting can enhance, and in turn, be enhanced by the Women’s Studies Programs in the Region as we work together to improve the status of women along the South Shore.

As a result of serving as the Director of the Women’s Studies Program, I was approached by the Northwest Indiana Quality of Life Council and The Indiana University Northwest Center for Regional Excellence to serve as the Editor for the inaugural issue of *The South Shore Journal*, whose theme for 2006 is Women Centered Research and Creativity. It has been my pleasure to do so. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Daniel Lowery, Executive Director of the Quality of Life Council, and Patricia Lundberg, Executive Director of the Indiana University Northwest Center for Regional Excellence, for their vision and support, both emotional and financial, of the journal. Without their efforts, *The South Shore Journal* would not exist today. I would also like to thank the Editorial Board for their tireless work over the summer and into the fall of 2006. The 2006 Board included Pat

Carlisle, Barbara Goodman, Robin Hass Birky, Patricia Lundberg, Becky Stankowski, Tina Rongers, Eileen Stenzel, Tracy Traut, and Lissa Yogan. They represent universities in the area including Purdue North Central, Purdue University Calumet, Indiana University Northwest, Valparaiso University and Calumet College of St. Joseph as well as the Region Women Initiative. Thanks are also extended to Arvid F. Sponberg, who has deftly served as Book Review Editor for this issue. Special thanks The Relevance of Women's Studies to the South Shore to Editorial Assistant Tracy Traut and Copy Editors Barbara Goodman and Robin Hass Birky. Any mistakes in the journal are my sole responsibility, as they went above and beyond the call of duty in order to make our November 2006 deadline. A warm thank you to all of the reviewers of individual papers for the journal as well. Sixteen pieces were submitted to the journal for consideration for publication, and each received two independent blind peer reviews. This ultimately resulted in the publication of the nine works in this issue. Your careful attention to detail and the rigor of your analysis was much appreciated by me and the rest of the Editorial Board.

I am pleased to turn the editorial "reins" over to the able hands of Robin Hass Birky and Eva Mendieta Lombardo. The theme of the next issue of the journal is "Urban Renewal through Arts and Culture". Please see the 2007 call for papers for more information about submissions at <http://www.nwiqlc.org>. Additionally, the journal is currently seeking suggestions for upcoming issue themes. Email your suggestions to ssj@iun.edu.

As Bonnie Thornton Dill so eloquently stated, "part of the impetus for the origins of contemporary women's studies was the need to tell our own story in our own words, the need to recover that story and to create intellectual and social space for our thoughts (Richter and Thomas, 1999). This issue of The South Shore Journal does just that. Allison Schuette-Hoffman's and Connie Sowa Wachala's tales of two strong women focus on alternative meanings of "family" in Exposed and Peaches. Stephanie Smith's and Steve Marks descriptions of 3 ardent preservationists in Alice Gray, Dorothy Buell, and Naomi Svihla illustrate one community's passion for South Shore landscape treasures. The evocative images of Patti Lundberg's poetry in Cherrywood, Red Roses and the Red Caddy, Graveside and Lines on Reading James Joyce's story "The Mother" complement the other creative work selections. Lissa Yogan's and Lee Michael Johnson's formative research on Gender Differences in Jail Art and Graffiti conducted at the old Porter County Jail reemphasize the dramatic differences between the male and female experience. Tanice Foltz' percussive journey in Contemporary Women Drummers and Social Action inspires not only a call to activism but to rhythm as well. Allison Schuette-Hoffman and Nancy Bernardo turn Gray's Anatomy on its [un?]gendered head in Public Anatomy through the use of narrative and graphic arts. Finally, Sarah Howard's focus on Women's Ways of Using Caring, Connection and Collaboration uses women in leadership positions in Northwest Indiana as illustrations to support her thesis regarding women's leadership styles.

I thank our authors and book reviewers - Stephanie Shanks-Meile, Carolyn Leeb and Kevin Ostoyich -

for their thoughtful and thought-provoking contributions to this issue of The South Shore Journal. They all have a story to tell, with words and thoughts of their own, so settle back and enjoy this, the inaugural issue of The South Shore Journal.

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