

One for the Team

10 Years of Women's Studies at Saint Mary's

by Nancy Hungarland Fallon

They were, says former Associate Professor of Psychology Penny Jameson, an unlikely group of athletes. But the soccer team composed of Saint Mary's women faculty and staff in the late 1970s turned out to be pretty good. Good enough to win the B-Cup Trophy in a local league for three consecutive years, once in a double-overtime shootout.

But the team's most important victory went beyond the soccer field. Because, to a great extent, it was out of that athletic camaraderie and collaboration that the Women's Studies Program at Saint Mary's evolved. "Until then, many of us were teaching women's courses on our own, but we were talking only occasionally," explains Sister Miriam P. Cooney, C.S.C., professor of mathematics (on leave '95-'96). "But bonding as a soccer team carried over into our work. As much as anything, women's studies grew out of that bonding and those post-game conversations."

Today, the Women's Studies Program, celebrating its tenth anniversary of offering a minor, is firmly enmeshed in the life of the College. The program, which enables students to examine women's history and theories of gender, offers eight to ten courses each year. The program now has a formal steering committee composed of the approximately 20 women and men faculty who regularly teach women's studies courses.

Women's studies has come a long way, but it still has a lot in common with that soccer team. Faculty serve on the program's steering committee and develop new women's studies courses simply because this is something they want to do. "Women's studies is composed of people giving their time, energy and creativity — on top of everything else they do — out of love for the program," says Laura Haigwood, associate professor of English and women's studies coordinator 1990-92. And, like the soccer team, the program's organization is loose; while individuals play to their strengths in designing their courses, the steering committee's approach is cooperative. "As a soccer team, we learned the power of working together," says Jameson.

This resemblance is not lost on those who built the program. "The two — women's studies and the soccer team — were so intertwined that I couldn't say whether the soccer was a symptom or a cause," says Linnea Vacca, assistant professor of English and a founding member of the program, "but it *did* exemplify how well we work together."

In fact, while the soccer team may have provided the glue necessary to make the program cohere, a number of faculty taught individual courses for years before a minor was even proposed. "The program started the way every Women's Studies Program starts — with people teaching the courses they want to teach," says Ann Clark, acting chair and associate professor of philosophy.

Jameson was the first. Bothered by how Saint Mary's students allowed Notre Dame men to dominate class discussions, she researched the issues and began teaching a women's studies course in 1972 titled *The Psychology of Women*. There were no textbooks, and few other resources, available. "I would have women like Ann Clark from philosophy and Sister Elena Malits, C.S.C., from religious studies, come in and talk to the class about their disciplines," explains Jameson. "There was a lot of enthusiasm because we were all filling in the holes in our education."

Soon others were teaching courses in different departments. The effort to focus some attention on women gained a foothold in the College at large when then-associate dean Sister Eva Hooker, C.S.C., won a Lilly Endowment Inc. grant for course development with a proposal titled "Women in the Year 2000." She used the funding to encourage faculty members in different departments to develop courses within their disciplines.

Several took up the challenge, but it was new territory for them. "When I was first asked to think about teaching a course, I said, 'What do you mean? Philosophy is about ideas, not gender,'" recalls Clark. "I had no idea what I was getting into." She started slowly, focusing on the historical development of philosophical views of women; today her course deals primarily with feminist theory. "The course has changed as

resources have," Clark explains, "and as the degree to which students are willing to think about these issues has grown."

By the early 1980s, a core group of faculty interested in women's studies thought that there were enough courses in place to begin moving toward establishing a program. In June 1982, a report issued by the College's Committee on Teaching and Learning provided critical support by recommending the establishment of a women's studies minor. It took almost another three years of navigating the channels of curriculum change before the women's studies minor won final approval in March 1985. "We had to take the initiative," says Vacca. "Luckily, Penny Jameson had the patience to stick with it and keep working through the system."

The resulting minor requires students to take a

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minimum of five women's studies courses, spreading their choices among the various departments. Courses are divided between two categories; students must take at least two from each. While all the courses in the minor are organized around gender issues, one category's courses focus on the lives and contributions of women, and the ways in which women are represented in art, literature and popular assumptions. The other category's courses explore the theoretical underpinnings of women's studies and the implications of this theory for traditional disciplines.

With the establishment of the minor came a part-time faculty coordinator and an officially recognized steering committee. Now the program's leaders were able to begin expanding course offerings systematically. "The challenge," says Haigwood, "was not always in getting more courses but in making sure they were consistent in their focus on women and that they came from diverse departments. And we wanted to do this without diluting them intellectually."

Many faculty designed entirely new courses that focused on gender, such as Assistant Professor of Religious Studies Phyllis Kaminski, whose course examined women and sexuality within the Christian tradition, and Haigwood's own literature course on *Women Coming of Age: The Female Bildungsroman*. "This gave me the opportunity to design a course both literary and personal in nature because I believe that one important way to learn is through emotional

experience," explains Haigwood. "I saw that I could approach teaching literature very differently in a women's studies course."

Others took courses they were already teaching and restructured them — a shorter process in terms of winning College Curriculum Committee approval. Keith Egan, chair of the religious studies department, reworked the syllabus of his course *The Mystics* to focus on female mystics. With the recommendation of the Women's Studies Committee, the proposal was approved by the Curriculum Committee and is currently being offered.

John Pauley, assistant professor of communications, reworked his original *History and Criticism of Public Address* course that examined the speeches of public figures — overwhelmingly male — from Lincoln to Reagan. Now titled *Women's Voices: Women in Public Address*, the course draws on women like the late U.S. Representative Barbara Jordan and former First Lady Barbara Bush in order to explore the ways in which gender affects public communication. "Something is lost when you have to give up things like *The Gettysburg Address*," admits Pauley, "but it is important for students to understand that women in the public arena carry the enormous burden of justifying themselves and their right to speak. They face obstacles men do not."

Perhaps the single most important course addition was the approval in 1993 of an *Introduction to Women's Studies*, both as a program offering and as an option in the College's core curriculum. "This course will help us draw students in earlier," says Kaminski, who taught the course last fall. "And I think that allowing it to count as a core course says something about the College's commitment to women's studies."

Designed by a women's studies sub-committee, the course provides an interdisciplinary overview of the history of women and feminist theory. "We wanted," Kaminski says, "to keep the course's content fluid and to keep it connected to other disciplines and courses," so the committee agreed to rotate teaching duties and maintain ongoing dialogue between instructor and committee.

This commitment to being interdisciplinary and inclusive is central to the Women's Studies stability and success, agree many on the program's faculty. An approach that cuts across disciplines guarantees that faculty from every corner of the College invest in the program, suggests Kaminski, and that students in every department see the relevance of women's studies to their fields.

Students seem to appreciate this approach. Amy Johnson, a senior pursuing the first self-designed major in women's studies, says that the

interdisciplinary nature of the program attracted her as much as the focus on gender. "I've taken courses in so many different disciplines — business, anthropology, English and others — that I've really learned how many different perspectives there can be on any issue."

The Women's Studies Committee has also sought to avoid setting a political agenda that would dictate course development or strangle debate, according to Haigwood. "Proposals are treated with respect even if they don't toe the party line of traditional women's studies programs," she says. "This is particularly important because we see that same kind of diversity in our students."

Women's studies faculty say that their success in establishing the program and keeping it growing over the last ten years has had to do as well with trends beyond their control — changes in society that have made students more open to exploring gender issues. "Our students, like the culture at large, are increasingly sophisticated about women's issues," Vacca says. "The student who is interested in feminism or describes herself as a feminist is no longer an anomaly."

But even those students who don't arrive at Saint Mary's as committed feminists can grow from their exposure to the program, say faculty and students. "I knew very few things going into Saint Mary's," says Megan Welter '91, who graduated with a minor in women's studies, "but one thing I knew for certain was that I was not one of those awful feminists." But after taking a freshman writing course with Vacca and Jameson, who "de-demonized feminism," she became interested in taking women's studies courses.

Welter tells of a seminar on feminist scholarship that she took with Vacca. Of the course's five students, one had been signed up by her roommate as a joke. "It was fantastic," says Welter. "She really challenged us to think clearly and to argue our points clearly. No assumptions — ours or hers — went unchallenged."

For most students, the impact of these kinds of discussions is fairly subtle, Haigwood says. "Women flock to [women's studies] courses, although many of them would never see themselves as feminists. And maybe they still don't at the end of the course," she notes. "But they do emerge with a greater awareness of the issues and with the ability to think through issues with greater sophistication and rigor."

"You do see a difference," concurs Vacca. "They don't become Gloria Steinem clones, but they have come in with a lot of baggage and very little knowledge of the issues. You see that change."

The program's impact on the College as a whole is probably more subtle still, but not without significance, say its supporters. "I think that Saint Mary's is now a place where if you raise questions about a gender issue or do work in women's studies, people can't say, 'Why are you doing this?'" explains Clark. "Now there is acceptance, there's a sense that questions about gender are normal."

Jameson credits the Saint Mary's environment for this growing acceptance. "This program didn't grow out of the kind of anger and bitterness you see at other schools," she contends. "Here it grew within the context of how to best educate women."

The dialogue on making gender studies a strong element of that education forms the focus of the program's 10th anniversary celebration. The year opened in September with a lecture by Jameson and a luncheon to celebrate the program's founding. On October 26, Susan Van Dyne, chair of the Women's Studies Program at Smith College spoke on *Representing Women's Studies: Our Policies, Pedagogies and Public Image*. Alexander hopes to shift attention to the future, as the Women's Studies Program begins its second decade.

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