



Mastering topics including sexuality, gender identity and Hillary Clinton can now earn you a major at Pitt.

While the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences has always offered a gender, sexuality and women's studies certificate, as of June 16, this will be the first semester it will be expanded into a major. Frayda Cohen, senior lecturer and undergraduate advisor in the GSWS program, said she has been working toward developing the major since she began teaching in the program in 2007. The increased interest in classes over the past eight years has made the major possible, she said.

Todd Reeser, a French and GSWS professor, credits the creation of the major to the increased visibility of gender and sexuality issues and the idea that gender and sexuality now qualify as a discipline of their own, rather than as a part of other disciplines.

"[Students] want to make intellectual sense of what's going on in the world," Reeser said. "Part of my job as a professor is to help students acquire a language and the concepts behind that language to talk about gender in smart and sophisticated ways."

As of now, there are eight professors teaching courses and 85 adjunct faculty members supporting the major. These adjunct faculty members have a range of involvement, from teaching classes to

providing research opportunities to undergraduates to simply providing a connection to other disciplines.

Because the University does not release the number of students working toward a certificate or major, Cohen could not give an exact number of students that have declared the major. However, she said this semester Pitt has approximately 250 students enrolled in GSWS courses, a number that continues to increase each semester.

“This is a place for students to really think about, from a theoretical point of view, how things are changing and how we can best address some of these developments,” Cohen said.

To complete the major, students must complete 30 credits from a possible 43 classes in GSWS and other departments, including three core courses, two lower level electives, four upper level electives and a senior capstone project. The upper level courses will range in topics from sex, race and popular culture to global LGBTQ+ literature to masculinity.

Reeser described the major as a “gumbo” of classes that offer a little bit of everything, as gender and sexuality touch on so many different aspects of life.

“Gay marriage, Caitlyn Jenner, Hillary Clinton running for president, reproductive rights — you see it all over Facebook all the time. People may not think about it as gender studies, but it is,” Reeser said.

According to Pitt spokesperson Anthony Moore, the proposal to develop a new major must go through a series of approvals and committees, including the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences Undergraduate Council, made up of Dietrich school faculty and five Student Government Board members appointed by the SGB president.

From there, Dean N. John Cooper approves the proposal and sends it to the Provost’s Advisory Committee on Undergraduate Programs. Lastly, Provost Patricia E. Beeson must approve the proposal.

Alexander McCarthy, a senior who had already completed the GSWS certificate, said he would like to complete the major, which he is two classes short of, if he can fit them into his last year at Pitt.

McCarthy, a transmasculine person and former president of Pitt’s Rainbow Alliance, said the formal GSWS major is long overdue, but it shows that Pitt is open and willing to engage in discussions about LGBTQ+ issues. For him, McCarthy said, the classes in the GSWS major have made him more open-minded and have helped him find his own identity as a trans individual.

“I knew I was gay,” McCarthy said. “But once we started talking about gender issues through the classes, I figured out my own identity.”

But for all students, McCarthy said, GSWS classes can open up doors to experiences and perspectives not offered in other courses.

“It’s kind of sad if you make it through a liberal arts school — and in this city — and you’re not aware [of LGBTQ+ issues],” he said.

Cohen hopes the new GSWS program will increase awareness and involvement. Cohen and Reeser are already looking for ways to reach more students, including adding more classes — such as a transgender class that Pitt will offer in the spring and a study abroad program in Florence focusing on food and gender this summer.

“It’s so gratifying to see that students are interested in [gender, sexuality and women’s studies],” Cohen said. “Our goal is to have everyone on campus take one of our classes.”

Reeser is confident that a major in sexuality, gender and women’s studies can help students with any career path they choose to pursue.

Aside from the traditional critical thinking skills and “general intellectualism,” the major can give students a leg up when dealing with gendered situations.

“Gender and sexuality are related to anything you do, professionally or not,” Reeser said. “If you can name a job that doesn’t have a relation to gender, I’d love to know what it is.”