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Women's studies: Program changing as focus expands



Todd Reeser

After two years of sometimes contentious debate, the 41-year-old women's studies program is about to gain a new name, its first male program head and the addition of courses signaling fresh directions.

The new name, the gender, sexuality and women's studies program, has passed successfully through three committees, received a letter of support from Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences Dean N. John Cooper and awaits the provost's approval.

Says Irene Frieze, one of the program's three original faculty and a psychology faculty member: "Many of us, including me, were really upset about the changes" being debated for the program name. Early suggestions included dropping "women's studies" from the name, substituting "feminist studies," adding "gender studies" and "sexuality studies."

“Because some of us, especially the old-timers like me, angered so strongly” at the prospect of dropping “women’s studies” from the program name, Frieze says, there was a compromise to keep the long-used term.

But Frieze acknowledges that, because women’s studies has become well established in its 41 years at Pitt and across the nation, it has “become a well-integrated area within the humanities ... so people have expanded their focus” from women’s studies to include examinations of gay and lesbian issues, and more recently the subjects of masculinity and transgender people.

By all accounts, once the new head, Todd Reeser — a faculty member in French and Italian languages and literatures — met with the program’s steering committee, they were convinced he was a suitable choice. In fact, he received their unanimous endorsement. Today, many long-time and newer faculty members alike see the appointment of Reeser, and the program’s expanded foci, as part of a natural evolution in women’s studies here and elsewhere in academia.

English faculty member Marianne L. Novy, who helped form the women’s studies steering committee in the mid-1970s and has been a member ever since, says, “I thought it was really important that we change the name and that we open ourselves up to important changes,” such as expanding the subjects of research by program faculty. Before the advent of women’s studies programs here and across the nation, she notes, “Scholarship used to look at the experience of men and assume this was human experience.” More recently, women’s studies programs have been opening to research about gender and sexuality as well.

Having a male program head, she adds, “really emphasizes that we’re not just looking at women’s experience and what we’re doing is not just relevant to women.

“We certainly don’t want to lose people who have always been interested in the fact that the program focuses on women’s experience,” she adds. However, the expansion of the program’s emphases will give its faculty the chance to create new courses “that will make students understand how more issues are relevant to them.”

Says Frayda Cohen, a program lecturer and its undergraduate adviser: “Part of what makes a women’s studies program really special, even more than other departments, like anthropology, which is my own department, is that it is very multi-disciplinary.”

Cohen has been teaching in the program for seven years, on sex, race and popular culture and on gender and the politics of food. She found the two-year internal deliberation about the changes to be “a long, really thoughtful process,” which examined what other university women’s studies programs are doing as well. The appointment of Reeser, she says, “has been a long time coming. For anybody who has been

involved in a program like the women's studies program ... to just focus on women as social actors is fairly narrow. Thinking of masculinity as socially constructed is an equally important idea."

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Reeser has a number of goals for the program, including his top goal of creating a gender, sexuality and women's studies major. He and program faculty are in the process of creating required courses and plan to send their proposal to the dean's office this spring.

He also hopes "to continue to create an interdisciplinary research profile that reflects the various wings of gender and sexuality [and] highlights research in gender and sexuality that is going on at Pitt, by faculty, by grad students and by undergraduates."

The program already has begun this effort by bringing in scholars from other schools, and faculty are discussing the creation of an interdisciplinary conference, Reeser says. A program-wide theme for this school year, Gender and the Global, is being reflected in lectures, reading groups, research and course content, while next year's theme, Embodiment: Experience, Representation, Politics, aims to have the program focus on the manner in which different kinds of bodies are presented in media, literature, politics and elsewhere.

"We didn't take this lightly," he says of the two-year debate about the current changes. "Not everyone agrees perfectly with the name, of course, but everyone I've talked to agrees that it's good for the program and good for Pitt to have a name that represents a new period of teaching gender, sexuality and women's studies.

"I personally could have gone either way on that question" of the name, notes Reeser, who has been teaching in the program for seven years. "You'll notice that the new name is alphabetical ... that factored into the discussion."

Of course, he added, by itself "the name change means nothing" unless it represents a reconfiguration of the program.

"Women are still an object of inquiry" in academics, he says. "Feminism is still an object of inquiry. They've been added to. They have inspired intellectual progeny. Sexuality has extended in a big way into the field." In fact, he calls the name change almost "retroactive," acknowledging trends already evident in recently added courses.

For instance, at the graduate level, the core course Theories of Gender and Sexuality was developed several years ago by English faculty member Nancy Glazener. New courses for spring 2014 include Masculinity in Theory and Practice, and Sex and Sexualities. The introductory course for freshmen and sophomores has been revamped to take into consideration gender and sexuality as well.

Says Maureen Greenwald, one of the program's three original faculty: "As it has aged, the invention and reimagination has been quite wonderful. When the women's studies program was just established ... it was a program that had multiple responsibilities but it was a kind of groping or had to discover what in fact it should be about in terms of courses and programming.

"A program that would be quite brief — that was the expectation at the time. The dean viewed women's studies as compensatory work: 'You will be putting women back into the curriculum. That will take a finite amount of time.'

Greenwald adds: "Women's studies now has reached a new stage in which its identification, in terms of the name of the academic program, has really caught up with what the program has been about for a very long time. For some of us, gender relations is what the history of women has been concerned about. You can't study one gender group without studying others and their interactions."

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Julie Beaulieu, who joined the program last year as a teaching fellow and is a lecturer this year, earned her BA in women's studies but her work is in gender and sexuality.

"I always knew we did this other kind of work under women's studies. I was delighted to keep 'women' in the name, but I also would have been happy with just gender and sexuality."

As for those who might still wonder whether a male program head is warranted, Beaulieu says: "I like that that question gets asked. Sometimes students will be surprised by it. It allows you to have conversations about men's involvement in this scholarship."

Thirteen-year program veteran Scott Kiesling, a linguistics faculty member, is equally enthusiastic about the changes: "I think it better describes what I do ... so it reflects the field a little better, while at the same time not forgetting some of the history of the program. Hopefully it will bring more students and faculty in so it will be even more interdisciplinary."

--**Marty Levine**

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