

Where Does Simmons Stand on Women's Studies?

by Kate Triggs



It is rather surprising that the issue of women learning about women should have to be raised at a women's college. In the last few years, there has been an emergence of women's studies courses and departments in colleges across the country. In fact, most colleges now offer at least one or two courses about women. Although eventually these courses might become gender studies or sex-role studies combining both sexes, at the moment they are courses specifically about women designed to correct distortions and to enable women to take their rightful place in the academic world.

What are women's studies? Janice Law Trecker, in her article "Woman's Place Is in the Curriculum," says women's studies should "provide alternative ways of looking at women, and at the assumptions of our culture, including our sciences, and to provide new information about women, their history, and their accomplishments."¹ The next question to ask is, Where does Simmons stand on women's studies?

There are no specific plans as yet for a women's studies department at Simmons. However, the College does offer courses on women; such as Women in American History, The Sociology of Women, and The Behavioral Implications for Women in Management. Provost William Kahl says women's studies are open to what faculty and students want to do with them.

As to the real academic need for a separate department for women's studies at Simmons, Ms. Kathleen Lyman, Assistant Professor of Education, expresses the consensus of the College with the statement, "It is important that Simmons be a women's college instead of a college where women go." Since Simmons is not a coeducational college, faculty and administration stress their belief that women's studies should be incorporated throughout the entire curricula.

Dr. Athena Theodore, Associate Professor of Sociology, teacher of the course The Sociology of Women, and author of *The Professional Woman*,² supports the prevalent opinion that all courses should deal with the "sex variable," as she calls it, and that courses already offered at Simmons should be re-structured to cover women. Both Dean Charlotte Morocco and Dr. Theodore are apprehensive that a women's studies department might tend to segregate those women who are more in favor of women's liberation while the rest of the College ignores the issue. Dr. Theodore cautions, "I think we could overdo it. Women must be careful not to alienate other women." Dr. Sally Kohlstedt, Instructor in History and teacher of the course Women in American History, believes that it is easier for a woman to find a job if she has a discipline background (such as history or English). In her opinion, women's studies should be a minor concentration.

Other factors that seem to prohibit the formation of a women's studies department are the red tape and money involved. Dr. Theodore suggests that money could be better used toward direct action for women. "We could put emphasis on new career areas that aren't traditional for women." She recommends that the College put more emphasis on getting women into graduate schools or on getting them good jobs so they can begin to break the stereotypes and start setting examples.

If Simmons does not want a separate department of women's studies, what does it want for its women? The courses on women that are already offered at the College indicate in themselves that there is a need for separate courses on women because, as Dr. Kohlstedt states, regular textbooks and courses just don't cover the subject. Dr. Theodore stresses the need for these courses at this particular stage in women's liberation because women should be trying to build up their consciousness level.

Women's courses, as a rule, serve as impetus for change. The Provost, for example, favors an interdisciplinary program with faculty in each department committed to teaching courses on women. He believes that once the past and present situation of women is fully recognized through these courses, women's studies can be incorporated into the entire curricula.

The most specific plans for change were put forth by Dr. Margaret M. Hennig, '62, Associate Professor of Management and teacher of the course Behavioral Implications for Women in Management.

Dr. Hennig, whose doctoral thesis *Career Development for Women Executives* is soon to be published, believes that Simmons should have a unit of people working at the College to coordinate research on women, uncovering and developing new materials for teaching women's studies. This unit would report new research and conduct research on its own—in career areas, for example—and feed the findings into the curricula. She sees it as a "catalytic force" that would stimulate the academic departments to make sure women are adequately covered in courses and that new knowledge is continually added. Women should be highly represented in this unit, she says, which should include in its membership professional researchers and qualified people from outside the College. She also proposes that the faculty now teaching courses related to women organize as a group to define their courses and open up new areas. Dr. Kohlstedt recognizes this need, too. "It's too bad we've left it so informal, because professors need to know more about what is offered now in order to effectively guide students."

Dr. Hennig goes on to say that these two groups would work together. She adds that the original plan for the Needham Career Planning and Counseling Center included a research unit that could have performed this service; however, the Center evolved in the direction of counseling. Right now she knows that the big problem is to find money in a tight budget to develop her idea.

For the present, the OPEN Program provides the flexibility for a student to major in women's studies right now by combining courses in various departments to form her own major. No student is doing so as yet; however, Professor James Newman, Director of the OPEN Program, said that if a pattern should emerge of many students wanting to major in women's studies, he would advise the College to set up a formal concentration in the subject. In this way, students could bring about a program in women's studies themselves. In fact, Dr. Theodore would prefer that students be the agents for change at Simmons. They should remind professors to include women in their courses and bring up subjects related to women in class, she says.

Dean Morocco would like to see a course instituted on decision-making. "Too many women students let their decisions be a matter of chance, not choice." The Dean also mentioned that an introductory course on the experience of women is needed "to tie everything together." She suggests that perhaps this could be done by incorporating the seminar for Student Advisers to Freshmen into an academic course. Jean Semrau, Director of Students, and Dr. Johathan Ehrenworth, Director of the Needham Career Planning and Counseling Center, put together this seminar, entitled "Forces Affecting College Women," to provide the advisers with an intellectual focus on college women. The seminar is a series of seven lectures by Simmons professors and personnel on different aspects of women; such as their history, their education, and their job opportunities.

Dr. Hennig believes there should be a course that would "impart to young women what we know about women." Faculty now teaching women's courses would have to sort out the central themes from their particular disciplines. These themes would form the basis of such a course, and this course, in turn, would serve as an introduction to the other courses on women. It might well be expanded into a seminar for faculty members, Dr. Hennig adds, so they can better understand what is different about teaching women and what are the implications from that difference—what special skills and abilities they need to build.

Dr. Kohlstedt cautions that no student should be required to take a course on women. Students may become alienated by so much talk about women's issues. Dr. Hennig thinks that the approach should be, "A woman is a person. We want to help you as a person. Too many people try to tell a woman what she must be rather than help her understand what she could be."

When asked who they thought could best teach courses on women, those interviewed left the field open to both sexes. However, the Provost believes that only women can teach certain kinds of courses on women, such as courses concerned with female behavior and the exploitation of women. Dr. Theodore suggests that perhaps some courses could be taught jointly by men and women to give two perspectives to the course. She hopes that eventually she will be able to change the title of her Sociology of Women course to the Sociology of Sex Roles.

Where does Simmons stand in its role as a women's college in comparison to the roles of other colleges? Dean Morocco, the Provost, and Dr. Kohlstedt think that Simmons is in step, but not avant-garde. However, in the Provost's opinion, Simmons is "miles ahead in the relationship of the career issue versus marriage," and is also very responsive in areas of counseling women.

Although Dr. Hennig believes that in some areas—such as counseling, self-directed study, and continuing education—Simmons has done well, she says that Simmons should have begun research to develop new teaching techniques and materials on women ten years ago. She also points out that Simmons should have been active long ago as an initiating force for women in the outside world. "If we are serious today, we have much to do and very little time in which to do it."

1.
Janice Law Trecker, "Woman's Place
Is in the Curriculum," *Saturday Review*,
October 18, 1971, p. 84.

2.
Schenkman Publishing Co., Inc.,
Cambridge, Mass., 1971.