Mesa Community College

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Abstract: In today’s economic climate, students often prioritize courses and majors that lead to immediate economic gain. Mesa Community College in Phoenix, Arizona is one of the largest community colleges in the United States. It serves a diverse student body who are primarily focused on economically-based skills and employment opportunities. Yet, as current and former faculty of the Women and Gender Studies program, we have noticed a hunger for knowledge and understanding about how social class and gender expectations have constrained many of our students’ lives, opportunities and dreams. In fact, we have found that these Women and Gender Studies courses have direct practical value for our students, particularly in the areas of educational and career goals, and managing issues of social justice in the workplace. This article presents a case study of Mesa Community College Women and Gender Studies program as well as findings from the 2016 Seneca Falls Dialogues.

The Road to Success: The Importance of Women and Gender Studies

for the Professionally-Driven Student

by Kathryn I. Sheffield and Elizabeth Ursic

Introduction

In higher education today we are seeing an increase in business and profession-related courses and majors. At the same time there has been a decrease in more traditionally academic and
theoretically-based areas. In today’s economic climate, students are understandably anxious about the cost of higher education. Fearing lasting debt and low return on investment, they are tending more toward prioritizing courses and majors that appear to lead directly to economic benefits, either by reducing the time until graduation or by expected earnings in their field afterwards. WGS, like many such departments and programs, has seen a rise in professionally-driven students who are taking these classes mainly as electives to meet graduation requirements. Cost considerations are particularly acute for community college students, who rely extensively on financial aid to pay for their classes, and who may move in and out of student status for economic reasons on their way to a certificate or degree. Jerome S. Parker, president of Dallas County Community College says that today’s students “are rationing their time and money” (Hoover). For them, every course may be weighed in terms of either number of requirements a course can fulfill, or the value of immediately marketable skills. And this trend is likely to continue. The Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education reports that its 50-state study indicates that through the 2031-2032 academic year US colleges will face stagnating growth in the student population (Knocking).

Nonetheless, we have found that Women and Gender Studies courses have direct practical value for our students, particularly in the areas of educational and career goals and managing issues of social justice in the workplace. Moreover, emphasizing the ways in which these courses impact students’ academic and professional lives and goals can help Women and Gender Studies (WGS) adjust to changing times. Addressing students’ concerns while
maintaining focus on core WGS principles and theories in the field, can also help to move the discipline toward new developments.

The authors of this paper have experience with this topic. Both have made careers as community college faculty and both serve on the Women and Gender Studies Committee at Mesa Community College in Phoenix, Arizona. Sheffield, an English and Humanities professor emerita at MCC, was director of the English as a Second Language program, where a high percentage of students wanted to improve their English language skills for employment purposes. Her undergraduate and graduate education included several courses in Women's Studies. Ursic began her college education as a professionally-driven student in business before returning for graduate study in the humanities. She is now a Women’s Studies and Religious Studies community college professor with a majority of her students having the goal of earning a college degree that leads to employment in a profession. Both authors did their doctoral dissertations on feminism within their respective fields of Linguistics and Religious Studies.

The Maricopa Community College District and Mesa Community College: A Case Study

A History of Women’s Studies at MCCCD and MCC

There are many structural and programmatic issues facing women and Gender Studies as a discipline at institutions of higher education. These include having no official department status, no full-time faculty line completely dedicated to the discipline, a curriculum that grows mainly through cross-listing of existing courses hosted in other disciplines, and a dependency on faculty whose main training has been in another primary discipline, with only a secondary
emphasis in Women and Gender Studies. The community colleges often face more acute versions of these general trends, such as enrollment more closely tied to short-term fluctuations in local economies and student bodies more affected by economic inequality and marginalization. A brief history of Women and Gender Studies in the Maricopa County Community College District will demonstrate how changing social and academic conditions have affected the developments of WGS in one of the country’s largest community college districts.

The Maricopa Community College District (MCCCD) began in 1960 with a single junior college in Phoenix, Arizona. Throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s the number of colleges, as well as enrollments in individual colleges, continued to grow, culminating today as one of the largest community college districts in the nation with ten colleges and combined enrollment over a quarter million students (Maricopa Community Colleges: Demographics). In the process, MCCCD also became known for its innovations, such as Rio Salado College, the “college without walls,” and training programs in new industries such as solar energy and new medical technologies. In addition, administrative and academic appointments began to reflect changes in society, with an increase in the appointment of women and minorities to positions of authority.

There were also changes in curriculum. Beginning in the 1970’s, faculty began to create courses within their disciplines that included or focused on women and women’s issues. By the late 1980’s there were many such courses across the disciplines in the MCCCD course bank.
Accompanying the changes in curriculum were changes in the fields women students chose. Between 1972 and 1982 the enrollment of women in traditionally “male” areas of study such as administration of justice, data processing, engineering, and management increased from 14% to 35% (Maricopa Community Colleges: Our History). This trend has continued through the 1990’s and beyond.

With the addition of women faculty and administrators, efforts to support women students both inside and outside the classroom received increased energy. At Mesa Community College, various faculty members began offering courses in their disciplines for and about women. By 1988, seven courses were being offered in sociology, psychology, music and management with the word “women” in the title. At the same time, Student Services Administrators advocated and ran support services for women, creating the Women’s Lounge to provide needed space for female college students to give and receive support and encouragement to attend and complete their college studies.

During the 1990’s efforts continued. By 1995 the first Women’s Studies course to have its own exclusive prefix (WST) was approved by the MCCCD District (Maricopa Community Colleges: Course Search). It was at this time also that MCC, which by the mid-1990’s had grown to become MCCCD’s largest college with a population of over 25,000, created a Women’s Studies Program, comprised of cross-listed courses from various disciplines, as well as new WST-only courses (Ibid.). New courses in both categories have continued to be developed.
Since the new millennium began, changing social conditions and a slowing growth rate in the Phoenix metropolitan area have begun to affect the pace of enrollment at the community colleges. In addition, demographic changes have increased the minority student population at MCC to 40%, with a 23% Hispanic student population. MCC’s female population has increased to 50% of the student body (Mesa Community College Fast Facts). As a result, support for women has been integrated into more general social and economic endeavors. For example, the Women’s Lounge has been absorbed into Student Services as the Career Re-entry Center. In addition, Women’s Studies itself began to enlarge its concerns in response to new social movements around gender. One result was a change in the name of the program in 2011 to Women and Gender Studies (WGS).

Student choices today center more than ever upon perceived career and economic realities. While some programs such as computer science have boomed, other areas have seen decline. College budgets have contracted and competition for student enrollment has increased. While the initial expectation at the formation of a Women’s Studies program included the creation of residential (tenured) faculty lines in Women’s Studies, this has never occurred. By the inception of Women’s Studies as a program within the Maricopa District in 1995, resources for full-time faculty lines were dwindling, and requests for full-time tenure-track WGS faculty were ranked lower by administrative decision-makers than other staffing priorities. Thus, the greatest challenge for WGS at MCC today is that no full-time faculty with a dedicated focus on Women and Gender Studies has been hired in over twenty years, even as retirement has resulted in the
attrition of the program’s founding members. Although some new hires have credentials in the field, WGS is not the main focus of their positions.

This lack of tenured faculty has created instability in the program. First, it has impacted the staffing of classes. Second, it has impacted extra-curricular activities of the Women and Gender Studies Committee, which organizes many one-time and ongoing events such as Domestic Violence Awareness and Women’s History month. These campus-wide events bring needed visibility and engagement with other departments and constituents on campus. This is particularly true at community colleges, where students do not live on campus. And with budget cutbacks that have eliminated compensation in time or money, few full-time faculty have been willing to take full responsibility for WGS on top of their already full workload. The result has been that responsibility for the WGS committee, student recruitment and advisement, and other crucial parts of a vital WGS program have been parceled out among faculty in various disciplines in a volunteer capacity, with assistance from interested retirees filling in the gaps.

**Approaches to Including Professionally-Driven Students in WGS Courses at MCC**

Because WGS has neither department status nor a dedicated WGS professor, it has grown its curriculum through two main means: offering cross-listed courses and encouraging WGS-inspired assignments across other disciplines. Both approaches have been highly successful in cultivating and maintaining both an awareness of WGS issues and theories, and participation in the WGS program itself.
Cross-listed Courses

Cross-listing courses has been a major contributor to building the field of Women and Gender Studies within the Maricopa District. Indeed, it was the primary and original means of introducing WGS issues, theories and methodologies into the curriculum before the establishment of separate WST-prefixed courses. Although cross-listing does not eliminate the competition for students among departments, it has allowed the rapid growth of a WGS curriculum. Also, cross-listing engages faculty across many disciplines on campus, which creates a network of allies and supporters of the field.

Within the cross-listed class, one benefit is the potential for increased diversity among the student cohort. Ursic teaches a course titled *Women, Gender and World Religions*. The course appears in the class schedule twice: as a Women Studies class and as a Religious Studies class. In this class, it is not uncommon to have committed evangelical Christian students who sign up through Religious Studies, and who want to learn more about what their sacred scriptures teach about women, men, and gendered roles. In the same class, there are also often LGBTQ atheists who sign up through Women and Gender Studies, and who want to learn how to argue against these very teachings, which have been used to negate, deny, or control their sexual and/or gender identity. As is typical for college-age students, almost all of the students are experiencing some kind of tension between their personal sense of justice and ethics and the teachings of their family, community, culture and/or religion.
The diversity of student backgrounds can be a gift for teaching this class because the students themselves generate the range of approaches to gender, sexuality, and truth claims that allow the professor to frame discussions with their relevant theories. For example, in regards to gender and sexuality truth claims, the students themselves often problematize the fixed gender binary and hetero-normative and patriarchal claims of the Adam and Eve creation story. This student-led discussion allows the professor to frame different student responses with explanatory theories. Even today there are students who are surprised at Judith Butler’s theory of Gender Performance (Butler), let alone E. Patrick Johnson’s quare theory, and its critique of queer theory using “racialized sexual knowledge” (Johnson). Equally important, when students claim the inerrancy of Bible texts as universal truths, their statements offer a way to introduce alternative approaches to sacred texts using a feminist lens. Reconstructionist feminist analysis interprets texts within their cultural contexts. Feminist liberation theology offers another approach that “whatever in Christian tradition precludes or diminishes the full humanity of women is not to be considered authoritative” (Reuther).

In order to encourage these types of discussion, it is important to create a classroom environment where all students listen to and learn from each other. When class members feel themselves to be a community, it encourages respectful dialogue and mutual support. Creating time and ways for students to get to know each other in small groups is also helpful, as it creates relationships that promote a willingness to listen to and support each other. Because community college students do not live on campus and most students have jobs and family commitments, there is less interaction with other students outside of class. Structuring class
time so that more human connections can be made not only enhances the learning of cross-disciplinary courses, but enriches the college experience overall (Reflexive).

When the experiment works, it works well. One semester at MCC there was a trans student who was performing female in preparation for surgery. Each student had to make an individual presentation and with encouragement from the class. The trans student organized a panel with her friends and mentors and we opened the presentation to the whole school. On the day of the event, the entire class, including young students who identified strongly as evangelical Christian and LDS, were a cohort in the front row showing their support for their fellow classmate.

Another benefit of teaching a course that is cross-listed with WGS is that certain topics concerning gender may be less nuanced or problematized in textbooks from disciplines outside the field. In religious studies, world religion textbooks can present gendered customs as universally accepted and unchallenged, when in fact women and men are seeking changes in segregated praying areas, restricting women from religious leadership and holy sites, and unequal customs regarding modest dress and marriage. Courses cross-listed with WGS, by their very structure, invite an investigation and discussion of these social norms.

Cross-listed courses reach a larger segment of the student body, including the numerous professionally-driven students at the community college, which has the potential to widen the points of view represented in the classroom. Additionally, their exposure to WGS issues and
theories carry over into their professional studies and lives. For example, one student became interested in supporting women-owned businesses in India and the US in her field of fashion merchandising and design as a result of taking a WGS cross-listed class. She designed a business proposal for developing long-fiber cotton that would benefit women in both countries.

**WGS Assignments Across the Disciplines**

We have found that another way to increase awareness of WGS across our campus is by encouraging instructors to include WGS-inspired assignments in courses that are not cross-listed with WGS. These assignments have the twin benefits of bringing awareness of WGS as a field of study across the disciplines, as well as helping to make the non-WGS disciplines more inclusive.

For example, Sheffield included an “Alternate Voices” assignment for each unit of her Humanities through the Arts course. While the curriculum focused on the Western Canon across the arts, this assignment allowed students to add to the Humanities canon by exploring artists and works that presented alternative visions, techniques, and art forms. In presenting the assignment, Sheffield prepared examples of alternative voices in an art form that had been silenced in one way or another, and modeled what form the assignment might take, encouraging the use of traditional written academic papers accompanied by various other forms of presentation. Students sometimes performed the art, such as one student who demonstrated tradition hula dancing, which led to a discussion of different ways women were seen to hold power in different cultures. Other times student choices led to discussions of
intersectionality, as when a student presentation on quilting led to a discussion of the language of quilts used by African-American and abolitionist women to mark stations on the Underground Railroad. This assignment actually sparked the development of a unit in which “women’s work” became the focus, involving a one-act play, “Trifles,” centering on sewing was paired with Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Use” and clips from the film “The Color Purple.” Assignments also focused on the “aesthetics of the oppressed” (Boal) such as tagging, or the roots of gangsta rap, which often led to discussion of intersectionality with gender issues. In end-of-class surveys students consistently listed this assignment as one of the best experiences of the course, if not of their college career thus far.

In an Introduction to Mythology course, Sheffield added feminist theories to the curriculum, encouraging their use in analyzing myths and their effects on their cultures. Students were assigned a term paper and presentation focusing on the interplay between a culture’s belief system and its social structure. Feminist theories often figured significantly in these. In one class, a trans-female who had been performing as a male asked to perform as a goddess in a presentation. This led to a full-class discussion of performativity and assigned gender roles, both before and after the student’s presentation. Again, students in this and other classes listed the “Power and Belief Systems” assignment as the most significant learning experience of the course. Another way we have found to increase awareness of WGS across our campus is by encouraging instructors to include WGS-inspired assignments in courses that are not cross-listed with WGS.
The inclusion of WGS-inspired assignments in non-WGS classes helps to present WGS theories, theorists, texts and practices to a larger portion of the student body, including those in pre-professional programs who may not sign up for a WGS or WGS cross-listed course as part of their Humanities requirement. Although we at present have no way of determining whether these assignments led to a change of major or the choice of additional WGS classes, the end-of-semester surveys indicate that awareness of gender-related issues have become part of students’ educational experience, which may have significant personal consequences for them and for society going forward.

**WGS Committee Activities**

The key to keeping the WGS program going at MCC has been the WGS Committee. Engaging faculty members in other departments for targeted programs, such as Domestic Violence Awareness Month and Women’s History Month has been successful. Over the past several years, the committee has taken on the task of outreach to the science, business and commercially-oriented departments. We have hosted panels of female faculty from these departments to present on their career paths. These have included faculty from several professionally-oriented fields. Panelists share how they chose and began their careers, what initial difficulties and opportunities they encountered, how the field has changed during their careers, and what changes they would like to see. One year our focus for Women’s History Month centered on the STEM fields. We requested faculty in those departments to identify and forward us the names of famous women in their fields to be featured. We saw this as an effective way to create a reason to engage the STEM departments, and to raise their awareness
of female leaders in their fields, and of the Women and Gender Studies program. Our library staff helped by generating brief and study guide resource lists of the women identified, and our Institutional Advancement team helped locate copyright-free photos to accompany the bios, for posting on our college social media and campus-wide TV monitors. Another benefit resulting from this STEM initiative for Women’s History Month is that we broadened our network of support for WGS across the campus.

**Seneca Falls Dialogues**

In bringing our experiences with the Women and Gender Studies program at Mesa Community College to the Seneca Falls Dialogue conference, we found certain themes echoed by faculty at other colleges and universities. During our session, it became clear that our experiences were not an anomaly, as other universities, colleges, and community colleges were facing similar constraints and challenges. This fact suggests that common challenges may stem more from the nature and placement of the discipline within our respective institutions than from conditions at different institutions themselves.

During the Dialogue we learned that WGS on many campuses appear to function as established programs with full institutional support, when many are operating with tenuous administrative backing. We found that many WGS departments actually operate with only one full-time faculty member, who may or may not be tenured. This faculty member is usually responsible for hiring and supervising adjunct faculty in order to offer a comprehensive program. On this skeletal structure devolves not only the duties of teaching, but also of curriculum development, budget
management, student recruitment and advisement, as well as publication. Also, while the faculty present at the dialogue felt personally committed to seeing WGS student groups and campus programs thrive, they rarely received additional compensation for this additional work. As a faculty member noted during the dialogue, if she were to leave campus for a sabbatical semester or year, the program would be severely compromised. Other programs, such as the WGS program at MCC, operate without department status at all, and rely on department chairs without expertise in the field to administer the WGS program.

Another concern brought up at the Dialogue was the debate within WGS itself as to whether the discipline should have an activist component in course content, or should be exclusively theory-oriented. During the dialogue, both points of view were represented. For some, connecting with students’ interests and experiences with WGS issues was paramount for engaging students in the field. This, for them, meant their courses led with raising awareness and offering assignments to engage with activist topics and causes. For others, WGS theory is where the students were able to make sense of their experiences. They also raised the issue that WGS, like all academic disciplines, rests upon a strong theoretical emphasis, and that certain students will be most excited about the field because of its innovative approaches and theories about topics of gender and sexuality. The theoretical framing offers ways to challenge hegemonic worldviews that are presented as absolutes. While there was general consensus among the faculty at the dialogue about the need for both grounded application as well as theoretical framing when teaching the discipline, the realities of the ways in which these programs are currently structured, particularly for professionally-driven students, means that
almost every course offered must assume that there are students for whom the class is an introduction to the field, which carries implications for balancing the two emphases.

Conclusion

The realities surrounding today’s students and their educational choices suggest the focus on professionally-driven majors will continue. We are pleased to see that WGS faculty are proactive in rethinking their programs in light of this trend as well as innovating new course offerings and partnerships on their campuses. As the Seneca Dialogue demonstrates, students are not only seeking ways to change the economic realities of their lives, but they are also exploring their sense of purpose and identity at the same time. Our experience advocating for WGS at a large urban community college has shown us the value of WGS for the professionally-driven student.

While we expect that there will always be students who pursue PhDs in WGS to become the next generation of academic and prophetic voices in the field, we recognize that serving the ever-increasing population of professionally-driven students is a different but equally important role for WGS faculty and programs. Because these students are already committed to another career path, the professionally-driven student will more often take one or two WGS courses, rather than a complete WGS program or major. In our experience, few students at Mesa Community College pursue the MCC certificate in Women and Gender Studies. However, we do
see students finding their passion and purpose in a WGS course that helps them connect their identity, talents, and interests. Sometimes we see that they switch to a career where they feel they can have impact in the area of women and gender justice. Our community college has a strong social work program, so many of our MCC students with strong WGS interest switch to social work as their career goal.

There are implications for WGS faculty to consider in the teaching and course structure as more professionally-driven students take their classes. More professionally-driven students suggests that almost every class will include students taking a WGS course for the first time as an elective. Unless there are stated WGS pre-requisites for a course, faculty will find some students needing an introduction to the field, even at the upper division and graduate level. Building time at the beginning of the class for foundational WGS readings and lecture content will help all students in the class to participate and succeed as a cohort. We see this “non-traditional” WGS student as a potential benefit for learning in the classroom. The more diverse the students are, including academic and career diversity, the richer the class discussions and learning can be. We encourage faculty to seek ways to open dialogue among students to learn and support each other whatever their background.

Innovative WGS classroom experience is critical especially for professionally-driven students. Modeling less hierarchy in the classroom with more collaboration and dialogue can help students to see hierarchy and patriarchy in other classes and work environments. Didactic and hierarchical forms of teaching and learning might be appropriate for professional courses
where specialized skill building is a focus, but eventually professionally-driven students will have to learn how to work collaboratively with a diversity of peers, subordinates, superiors, and clients. The WGS class can do more than just teach, it can model ways to put the teaching into practice that the professionally-driven student can introduce when given the chance in their career.

Discussion with faculty at the Seneca Falls Dialogue also showed the need for both grounded application as well as theoretical framing when teaching WGS. In our view, the theory versus activism debate is not as much an issue for students who are seeking both new ways to view themselves and the world as well as new ways to integrate these revelatory insights into their lives with concrete action. Activism may not be as evident on campuses today as when women studies programs began in the 1970s, and the shift to a focus on professions across higher education is certainly a major contributing factor. When students are pursuing their education to enter established professions, many are less interested in challenging the systems that they hope will employ them.

At the same time, we may well be seeing a different form of activism. Starting in the 1990s, some scholars began asking why protest marches were not as visible as they were in the 1960s and 1970s. One answer was that coalitions of feminists were taking their protests into institutions and working for change within the organizational structures of their professions (Katzenstein). There is purpose for activism both inside and outside organizational and societal structures, and a WGS class can help students reflect and identify where they see a best fit for their particular skills and talents to work on the causes they care about.
Theory is also facing new demands and realities within the professional degree environment. Because students are viewing their education in more utilitarian ways, they want to know, in short order, how a theory connects with their lives. In large part, we see this as a fruitful challenge because WGS theory in a vacuum can fail to inspire the societal change it points to. Theory becomes relevant and exciting for students when they can connect theory to their own individual freedom, agency, voice and identity as well as have new tools for social analysis and critique.

Instead of seeing these professionally-driven students as ancillary to a WGS program, we see an opportunity to have broader impact across the student body. Not only do these courses bring students together from a variety of backgrounds and interests, these classes provide a cohort of support for the students creating change on campus and in their communities. To use the students’ experiences in campus activities as topics for discussion, the students have real-time case studies to analyze, examine, and even try-out new ways of interacting with their peers.

The curriculum and student services issues that MCCCD and MCC have faced since the early 1990s regarding Women and Gender Studies are not unique to our institution. As we have seen, other institutions of higher learning have all faced challenges in anchoring faculty, sustaining funding and locating physical space for women and gender studies programs on their campuses. As was mentioned during the dialogues, WGS is a newer discipline that is constantly having to prove its value in ways that more established academic disciplines do not. However,
the challenges facing WGS are not unique. All academic disciplines must continually adapt to remain relevant to current trends and needs, both from outside and inside their institutions.

We see the challenges currently facing WGS as opportunities leading not only to its survival but to its growth and expansion. The population of professionally-driven students can be a significant factor in this flourishing. It is important to educate professionally-driven students to become aware of gender equity issues in the workplace so that they are prepared to address these issues when they arise in their careers. These actions can make the workplace more equitable for all and can be a potential gift for the larger economy and society. In addition, understanding how gender and sexual identities of workers continue to evolve and how employers are responding to these changing social norms and legal requirements is also essential knowledge for students as they embark on their careers today. In conclusion, WGS education for professionally-driven students is essential to students’ becoming transformational leaders that shape a better world for today and tomorrow. WGS offers students the education to analyze and reconceptualize the world around them and to find their voice for contributing to positive change in the world. Quite simply, when students connect their personal agency and passion with their career choices, they enter the workforce with greater confidence, focus, and purpose. WGS prepares them to be the kind of alumni that colleges and universities are proud to call their own.


Johnson, E. Patrick. “‘Quare’ studies, or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother.” Text and Performance Quarterly, vol. 21, issue 1. 2001. pp. 1 dx.doi.org/10.1080/10462930128119.


