

SACS Document Women's Studies 2008

The **Learning Objectives for the major** are consonant with the general philosophy of Trinity College (<http://www.trinity.duke.edu/about/philosophy.php>), with more specific guidelines on education in gender-based scholarship in a variety of disciplines.

Knowledge students are expected to gain

Students will gain a clear understanding of the major movements of feminist thought and related areas of the body of knowledge making up the field of Women's Studies.

The strength of the Major is that it offers students comprehensive instruction in the rich interdisciplinary traditions of Women's Studies scholarship, and most importantly, its emphasis on intersectional, international, and transnational approaches and perspectives. Such traditions include materialist, liberal, critical race, poststructuralist, postcolonial, queer, diasporic, and psychoanalytic feminist scholarship. The major also explains the history of itself as a host of new objects of study, modes of inquiry, and speculative projects have come into being, such that it is no longer accurate to describe Women's Studies as the study of women. We do study women, but we also study masculinity, sexuality, the historical emergence of identity as a form of human self-recognition, the relationship between nation formation and gender systems, the force and form of race and ethnicity. We show how feminism is a historical movement and a tradition of critical thought.

Program Methodologies

For an increasing number of practitioners in the field, including most of the faculty in the program at Duke, Women's Studies is less the name of an object of study—women—than a *domain of inquiry* including a variety of methodologies employed to address gender related issues.

Introductory courses to Women's Studies as an interdisciplinary field teach each student how to analyze gender in its complex intersection with race, class, and sexuality. This is referred to in the field as "intersectionality." By forging connections between personal experience and larger social institutions and practices, they orient students toward a critical vocabulary that includes (but is not limited to): the sex/gender distinction; biological determinism, ideology, commodity culture, essentialism and social construction; the sexual division of labor; colonization and postcoloniality; imperialism, racialization; and heteronormativity. The field employs a variety of methodologies both drawn from the traditional disciplines and altered when necessary for a more nuanced theoretical understanding of gender than is sometimes possible within those methodologies. For example, quantitative methodologies rarely supply the forms of nuance necessary for an understanding of intersectionality.

More advanced courses instruct students in a) interdisciplinary methods for understanding definitions of culture, ranging from anthropology, sociology, political science, literature, and film; b) developing skills in writing across the disciplines through a topical focus on issues central to contemporary gender studies. In addition, they c) provide students with a rich understanding of the events that shape contemporary culture's portrayal of feminism, both in the US and as a global discourse about women and social change; d) orient students to perform some critique of these narratives. It is our hope that students understand both the strengths and the shortcomings of the particular ways U.S. feminism has been executed, and to do so from within a broader historical understanding of the western critical frameworks on which feminism has often unconsciously relied.

In this regard, the major contextualizes the necessity, articulated throughout our undergraduate curriculum, of an intersectional and post-U.S. national perspective for Women's Studies as an interdisciplinary field.

Development of Intellectual Skills

The major trains students in critical thinking in various disciplinary traditions, the ethics of understanding disciplinary responsibility in order to conduct interdisciplinary work, and to attune students in gender and related forms of analyses. Three objectives of this sort of learning are critical thinking, ethical development and analysis techniques.

As an interdisciplinary field that explicitly focuses on the interconnections between a number of key questions regarding the production of knowledge about gender and its social, political, material, technological and discursive implications, Women's Studies is not organized according to discrete "subfields." As such our core faculty does not reflect such a breakdown. However, each of our core faculty provides the program with different methodological approaches to engaging the intellectual skills for analyzing the dynamic articulations of gender in society, on the basis of research conducted in a variety of specific sites of scholarly engagement. Students learn to work with different expectations of critical thinking and intellectual skills like close reading, archival work, anthropological field work, and different theoretical bodies of knowledge from political science, literature, psychology, historiography, and philosophy. They also learn the challenges of bringing these together to allow the assumptions of one discipline to be exposed, enhanced, or challenged by another.

Indicators of Achievement of Objective Goals

- Demonstrating knowledge of the historical and philosophical trends in the field.
- Understanding the scope and changes within the field with an ability to assess strengths and weaknesses of various positions, methods, and beliefs.
- Being disciplinarily responsible and understanding the strengths and limitations of interdisciplinary work.

Assessment Methods

Capstone Experiences

The final class of the major gives students the opportunity to produce their own interdisciplinary research project around compelling issues in feminist studies and provides a cohort experience for each graduating class. Students are assessed in terms of their **reflections on the major**, which both assesses their grasp of this interdisciplinary field and helps the faculty to understand the students' evaluation of the major as a whole. Students also produce a portfolio to allow them to produce a final project not just for the course but for the Women's Studies major.

Some years, the course requires a portfolio. **The portfolio** includes a meditative statement (4-5 pgs) demonstrating critical thinking about the materials in the portfolio indicating a theoretical intent. Other components of the portfolio (10-15 pgs or their equivalent) include: a syllabus for a Women's Studies course, a new or revised academic paper that takes intellectual shape around the issues covered in this course, an oral

history, a performance piece, a media project, or a critical travelogue. In the early part of the course, students meet with the professor prior to submitting a prospectus outlining plans for the portfolio.

In addition to the portfolio, students participate in both class discussion and campus events aimed at deepening understanding of Women's Studies as an interdisciplinary field. They work in collaborative teams to prepare questions and lead class discussion as part of the participation component of the course. This allows them to assess collectively on their **values, attitudes, and beliefs** as they have been influenced by their interdisciplinary work in Women's Studies. Some professors teaching the course require **community service** thus activating the more practical response to the academic sphere of the major and demonstrating how they have achieved skills in **effective problem solving**. By assessing the shortfalls of these techniques through reading critical literature that alerts the students and the faculty to potential pitfalls, the problem solving framework is often revealed to be problematic in itself.

- **Performances**

A drag competition, highlighting understanding of gender performance, is held every year and judged by graduate students and associates of the Program. The relative sophisticated understanding of contemporary theories of performance is gauged through the student performance and their own narrative about how they understand the function of their performance.

- **Honors Thesis**

Some students pursue an Honors Thesis, which includes **input from and assessment by many members of the faculty**. Students make public presentations of their work before graduation each year. Professors from multiple disciplinary backgrounds read the work and assess whether it is both responsible to the disciplinary protocols, and whether the range of approaches is adequate to the topic.

- **Presentation to Alumni**

Undergraduates, alongside graduate students and faculty members, have presented to the alumnae of Women's Studies for the last few years on Women's Studies today.

- **Faculty Assessment of Interdisciplinary Skills**

Because each faculty member has different disciplinary training, an assessment of the skills of the student as they pass through the major allows us to evaluate the relative success of earlier disciplinary and interdisciplinary training and responsibility. This includes **ratings of student skills by experts in a variety of fields and in interdisciplinary terms**.

Reports Regarding Assessment Findings

In order to respect confidentiality, advisors do not share discussions with students, but, when there is a perceived problem, will assess papers from a variety of Women's Studies courses to assess the various skills of critical thinking, writing, historical and theoretical understanding through the deployment and critical evaluation of materials discussed. The advisor along with the DUS and the DUS assistant will encourage students to retain a portfolio of their papers from all Women's Studies courses to reflect on and ultimately to represent the trajectory of the careers so students receive feedback at every turn.