

Where the Women Are

A look at women's studies programs at Andrews and elsewhere

by Lisa Rollins

Women's Studies: An interdisciplinary academic field which focuses on women's experience in the analysis of human culture, examines the contributions and status of women, and explores the dynamics of sex roles and gender ideals—past and present.

While some schools emphasize they have been educating women for 100 years, women's studies programs were not formally approved until 1970 when San Diego State University received the distinction of providing the first recognized program.

In 1990 the National Women's Studies Association surveyed American colleges and universities and found that 621 women's studies programs existed. From small beginnings in the 1970s, women's studies programs in America have seemed to increase rapidly with each passing year.

A minor in women's studies was established at Andrews ten years ago, but it has been slow to attract students. However, hundreds of undergrads enroll in the variety of classes that comprise the minor.

The almost "faddish" popularity of any idea often gives rise to questions about its validity, and the critics of women's studies programs have not failed in that respect: *Is this program creating antimale sentiments in impressionable college students? Are women's studies just the result of political correctness? Is it harmful for our children to be exposed to feminist ideas? Is the female perspective on art and history and politics and literature and science a valid perspective, worthy of acknowledgment?*

Other questions, however, are much more basic: *What compels people to go against established ways of perceiving the world and, despite brutal criticism, create a new intellectual outlook which focuses on and explores the lives of women? What do women's studies programs offer that continues to draw students to pursue a women's studies emphasis, minor, major or even graduate degree?*

Although colleges and universities provide purpose and mission statements to support the existence of their women's studies programs, the real reason such programs exist anywhere is because professors who create and teach the courses are personally and passionately drawn to the topic themselves.

Andrews professors with a history of involvement in Andrews women's studies courses say it was their own interest in women's issues that made them want to participate in the women's studies minor. The curriculum includes courses such as Introduction to Women's Studies, Women's Literature, and Women in Contemporary Society.

The existence of the minor at Andrews can also be linked to another group of individuals interested in women's topics on a personal level. Those individuals, active in the Association of SDA Women, later made up the Andrews University Women's Concerns Advisory Committee, which was instrumental in instituting the women's studies curriculum.

While professors' personal interests may have inspired the genesis of women's studies programs around the nation, it takes an additional element to sustain loyalty to a program continually threatened by intellectual critics, uninterested students and unsupportive administrators. This motivation is provided by not only the professors' own "intellectual and political commitment to the discipline," but, according to the Association of American Colleges and National Women's Studies Association, "by the intellectual and personal transformations they consistently witnessed in their students."

Watching students develop intellectually and emotionally—even reach an "epiphany" during the course of a quarter—is what makes the class in women's literature one of Professor of English Meredith Jones Gray's "most rewarding classes."

As with many elective classes, students take women's studies courses for a variety of reasons: The class time was convenient, the class met some needed requirement, a friend or adviser recommended it, or, ideally, they had a personal interest in women's issues. Despite the many reasons for enrolling in the class, however, student responses to women's studies courses are often similar—and overwhelmingly positive.

One student in a women's studies emphasis course comments: "This class exposed me to discussions—intelligent ones—that I don't think I would've experienced in any other class. Looking into the different roles that women have played in society and the evolution of those roles was an important theme in this class."

The Association of American Colleges and the National Women's



Enchantment and the Kingdom, a lithograph by Marc Chagall, suggests the role of women's studies programs on university campuses. The signed print, a gift to the university from Lawrence Gipson, M.D. of Charleroi, Penn., is currently on display in the Office of University Relations at Andrews University.

Studies Association, in *The Courage to Question*, observe that women's studies curricula provide "a dynamic, interactive environment that encourages critical thinking, empowers students as learners, enriches their sense of civilization's heritage, connects their knowledge from other courses, and challenges them to become actively engaged in shaping their world."

This freedom to step outside educational norms invigorates students and stimulates their minds. Women's studies courses can result in heated discussions, which help students develop new ideas and serve as catalysts for personal growth. Women's studies classes are not boring, students report.

Currently there seems to be a trend—perhaps a backlash against "political correctness"—to change women's studies into *gender studies*, at least in name. Many gender studies programs include a number of courses that discuss gender in general (*Gender in Society*, *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe and America*, etc.), but there still remain a majority of classes dedicated specifically to feminism and women's topics.

Whatever the reasons for this renaming, the message of the women's studies movement seems to be the same now as it was nearly 30 years ago: *The study of what women have to say about their world and themselves is valid and rewarding.* And many professors and students still believe this is a study worth pursuing.

At Andrews, the women's studies minor also seems to be the same as it was ten years

ago. Some of the women's issues courses are thriving, while some receive little attention. The minor faces the challenge of any interdisciplinary program—no one department holds responsibility for its direction, promotion or development; therefore, the minor suffers from lack of these elements which cause an academic program to thrive.

Even though, according to the current academic bulletin, the minor is designed to complement "most majors in the humanities and social sciences, as well as many in education and the natural sciences," and to "broaden the perspective and increase the usefulness of students entering programs related to public services," only one student has completed the minor. And many students do not even know it exists.

While the future of women's studies at Andrews remains uncertain, one of the university's most attractive features is the diversity of the student body and faculty—ethnically and culturally. The school uses this diversity as a selling point, and its women's studies program certainly provides a platform for examining such diversity.

Exposure to a variety of perspectives is one of the most valuable elements of education since in studying how other people think and feel, students acquire a more complete picture of humanity.

One student summed it up this way: "I am not willing to limit my learning processes to areas which are historically or socially defined as valid. There is so much we don't know about the world we live in, so much to be learned."

Women's studies just might be a fascinating place to start.

Lisa Karpenko Rollins (BA '96) majored in English literature and currently works on campus as a secretary for the Department of Church History in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary.