

## Inventing a Feminist Institution in Boston: An Informal History of the Graduate Consortium in Women's Studies at Radcliffe College

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The Graduate Consortium in Women's Studies at Radcliffe College began as a conversation among friends in 1988. Everything followed from this beginning: as feminist scholars we dreamed up the Consortium because we wanted to work together in an institution of our own. That the

impetus came from scholars rather than administrators or even students accounts for much. The Consortium was shaped by who we were as well: six white women in our forties and fifties who worked in Boston-area universities, trained in traditional disciplines and connected to women's studies since the 1970s. We were middle-class by virtue of our education and jobs, politically left of center, with the imprint of the 1960s on us. We were all interested in how sociological location and international power relations constructed knowledge and culture; we were acutely aware of our individual limitations and hopeful about the potential of collective learning.

We were also concerned about the future of women's studies: Graduate women's studies programs and even graduate courses with an analysis of gender at their center are scarce at most universities. Feminist scholars in the academy worry about how to train the next generation of feminist scholars and teach them the art of interdisciplinary thinking and research that some would argue is at the heart of women's studies. This is all the more important since feminist scholarship continues to develop within the disciplines, radically reconceptualizing research questions, paradigms, and models of knowledge.

These two complementary concerns—training the next generation and moving the field of women's studies forward—led to the creation of a unique collaborative institution that has enormous potential for educating future feminist intellectuals and for pulling together the local community of feminist scholars: the Graduate Consortium in Women's Studies at Radcliffe College. For the past three years, the Consortium has offered interdisciplinary, team-taught seminars to qualified graduate students from the participating institutions in the Boston-Cambridge area. Bringing together faculty and students from Brandeis University, Boston College, Harvard University (its Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Divinity School, and Graduate School of Education), the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Northeastern and Tufts Universities, these courses are intended to harness the strength of the many feminist scholars in the Boston area and to engage students in the production of new knowledge. How this project developed and took shape is a story of endless conversation, hard negotiation, and genuine intellectual collaboration.

### The Needs of Feminist Faculty

Boston, like many metropolitan areas in the United States, has a number of academic institutions with a great deal of brainpower in close proximity. Yet there is little and only very selective contact among students and faculty from different institutions. Feminist scholars in

particular often feel isolated in their own institutions and like "token" members of their own departments; in some institutions feminist intellectual and pedagogical innovations are marginalized and even ridiculed. But together feminists in this large metropolitan area constitute an intellectual community with great diversity, range, and power.

The original idea behind the Consortium was to regroup these "token" faculty feminists from Boston's institutions of higher learning for their own intellectual advancement, psychic reconstruction, and intergenerational training. We wanted to create a feminist institution that would operate according to utopian principles of openness and equality, within which to freely explore ideas generated by an analysis of race, ethnicity, class, and gender as played out in our postcolonial, postmodern, and multicultural world. In practical terms, this translated into the task of working with interested graduate students from different fields, many of whom had taken at least some women's studies classes as undergraduates but little advanced course work. We wanted to reconnect academic women's studies with feminist policy issues from outside the academy. We wanted to teach on the borders of academic disciplines where our research interests came together and create interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approaches to new topics that existed nowhere else in traditional curricula. We wanted to work with colleagues who shared our intellectual orientations and interests. We wanted to put our pedagogical skills where our hearts were, so to speak, and to bring to one enterprise the feminist intellectual labor that remained alienated and fragmented in our separate universities.

### The Needs of Graduate Students

Despite the wide range and high quality of women's studies programs in the Boston area, students interested in women's studies approaches to their chosen fields often find curricular gaps in particular subject areas at their home institutions. Few, if any, women's studies programs are given control of faculty lines, which means that most women's studies courses are taught by faculty hired by and for other departments. This scatter-shot method of recruitment means that problems of depth and range, continuity and regularity are endemic. Women's studies programs, like their social gatherings, are run on a potluck basis.

This problem of a shifting and partial curriculum is even more glaring at the graduate level. When we began to plan the Consortium in the late 1980s, no graduate program in women's studies existed among our various schools. Outside of an occasional course (usually in literature, religious studies, sociology, or history), few offerings with a specifically feminist approach existed. The result was that doctoral students special-

izing in women's studies topics often completed their formal course work without doing any advanced theoretical work in women's studies either in their own discipline or in interdisciplinary courses. Over and over again students expressed their desire for graduate-level women's studies courses. Their frustration was one of the motivating factors for our Consortium initiative. We felt that we needed to provide a kind of institutional access to rapidly expanding frameworks of knowledge that no one university could offer, to ways of knowing with which younger scholars would be expected to acquaint themselves as they began their own careers in earnest.

Let one example illustrate the problem we faced: In the early 1980s, Joyce Antler, then Director of Women's Studies at Brandeis, at that time a small program without administrative support, tried to address the lack of feminist resources that students in the university's Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies had encountered by bringing them together with students and faculty at the Women's Studies in Religion Program of Harvard Divinity School directed by Constance Buchanan. Divinity students had the benefit of an established program for visiting lecturers and research associates and a curriculum rich in feminist resources but envied the availability of Jewish-oriented courses at Brandeis. Antler and Buchanan wanted to develop an exchange that would allow their students to participate in each other's course offerings and work together in areas of common interest, but institutional constraints prevented any such sharing of resources. The failure of this effort confirmed our conviction that a new and unique interinstitutional program had to be established—from the ground up.

### The Planning Process: Creating an Intellectual Model

The initial "what if" conversations among friends soon widened to include a working group of interested colleagues from most of the doctoral degree-granting institutions in the Boston area: MIT, Harvard, Brandeis, Boston College, and Harvard Divinity School. We were historians, literary critics, and feminist theorists whose specialties spanned disciplines, cultures, and continents. Some were experts at interdisciplinary studies; others had administrative experience. A small planning grant from the Ford Foundation, the residue of a larger grant whose original stated purpose was to strengthen the presence of women's studies in formerly male institutions, enabled us to pay for a few planning dinners over the next year.

The earliest meetings were informal gatherings over a bottle of wine in Ruth Perry's kitchen. More to the point, they were gatherings of women friends whose overcommitted lives included responsible professional po-

suons, families, and deep and long-term friendships. Because keeping up friendships required the most planning (keeping up with work and family took up virtually all of our time and energy), the Consortium meetings were a welcomed opportunity to get together, even the endless round-robin phone calling to schedule meetings had its pleasures. Our affection for one another rewarded our efforts and replenished our energy.

At our meetings we discussed such start-up questions as, What is a Consortium and how should it work? Who should be included in the membership? What kinds of courses should be offered? How should the Consortium be governed? Where should it be based? Where could we locate support? These questions involved many different intellectual, political, and management issues, and it was heartening to see how the relevant skill and knowledge to address them kept surfacing among us, moving our ideas along.

In between discussing these major issues, group members gave vent to problems at their jobs or with their children and spoke of their current writing projects and travel plans. It was as though our public and private lives were of a piece, except that everyone always knew where the seams were, and we could refocus immediately when called upon to do so. From Ruth's kitchen, we would march off together to one of the restaurants in the neighborhood with large tables and an atmosphere that allowed for conversation. The choice of dishes fell to whoever knew most about a particular cuisine; our expertise about literally everything on the table was revolving.

So much happened at those early meetings. We worked out our organizational model: courses would be taught by interdisciplinary teams involving faculty from at least two institutions for the benefit of graduate students from any of the participating institutions. The idea was to invent unique courses in areas of contemporary academic concern that could not be taught in any single department or at any single university but that drew on the faculty resources of several. Our series of courses would complement rather than replace existing graduate programs.

At this stage, our course criteria were fairly simple. All courses would have to be (1) interdisciplinary, that is, team-taught by at least two faculty members trained in different disciplines and open to both theoretical and more empirical approaches; (2) innovative, that is, committed to breaking new ground and developing new materials rather than reviewing, summarizing, or presenting the latest research; (3) epistemologically self-conscious, that is, explicitly aware of the historical and cultural location of the intellectual sources on which they drew. Even courses dealing with purely theoretical approaches to gender would be expected to put into historical and cross-cultural perspective the sources of the theories they examined and developed.

Oddly perhaps, the foci on global location, class, and race were not

mapped out before the collaborative process was set in motion but rather evolved as courses took shape. The only inviolate principle articulated early on was the processual principle of governance by a rotating, collective body drawn from participating institutions. We were convinced then, as we are now, that this one overriding principle would ensure the democratic flexibility of the institution to serve a variety of different purposes and prevent any one group or individual from dominating it. We felt that if intellectual and policy decisions were made by such a rotating, collective group, we could trust the process to take care of whatever issues came up.

For a long time these guidelines constituted our entire intellectual agenda. Although we thought of the Consortium as a place in which bureaucratic forms would be altered to accord with our feminist philosophy and aims, we stumbled upon the particulars of our intellectual ambivalence (i.e., radical interdisciplinarity and global contextualization) in the course of our open meetings with interested feminist faculty in the community. But that is getting ahead of the story.

As we worked on our intellectual model and shaped a plan for administration, we needed to solve other key issues: Where would the Consortium be housed and how would it be funded? Should the location of our facilities and home rotate? Should the Consortium be administered jointly or perhaps as an independent entity, like a few other jointly sponsored academic institutes in the area? Were there other kinds of innovative structural arrangements that could develop through collaboration, just as we had evolved our intellectual model?

### Finding a Home: The Radcliffe Connection

Although any of the participating institutions had been a possible location for the Consortium, the inauguration of Linda Smith Wilson as president of Radcliffe College in 1990 seemed the perfect opportunity to identify our collaborative project with a distinguished institution with several pioneering ventures in women's studies education and research to its credit—for example, the Bunting Institute, the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, and the Murray Research Center. Florence Ladd, Director of the Bunting Institute, encouraged us to speak to Radcliffe's new president, and our initial conversations made all things seem possible.

Some of us remember meeting in the drawing room of Wilson's presidential residence on Brattle Street, with its oriental rugs and dark antique furniture; it was an unusual gathering of Boston's feminist intellectuals. Wilson welcomed us warmly as we shared our notions about the proposed Consortium. At first, she seemed more interested in how the Consortium might function as a resource for faculty development, perhaps on a na-

tional scale. We explained why an institution serving Boston's graduate students in women's studies was desperately needed and would represent an innovation in the cooperative use of faculty resources. Harvard law professor Martha Minow spoke clearly and firmly about the need for new institutional forms to embody feminist educational values. President Wilson responded generously to our request for space with an impulsive, enthusiastic offer that raised our spirits even higher. During that first, exploratory conversation, President Wilson also remarked on the unwieldy nature of our proposed collective's rotating governance structure and suggested that we at least choose cochairs from our steering committee (which would become our Board of Directors). This was the first of a number of her practical administrative suggestions and observations that proved very useful.

By the time Radcliffe came into the picture in 1990, we had agreed that teaching our seminars would be counted in the regular workload of faculty members, rather than being done as an overload, a second job, as was too often true of women's—and women's studies—work. For this reason we needed funding to replace a faculty member absent from one course at the home institution when that person was teaching a Consortium course. And we needed a mechanism for granting acceptable degree credit to graduate students who successfully completed Consortium courses. Radcliffe provided the essential funding for released time and an infrastructure for arranging course credit, both crucial contributions to this major experiment in women's higher education.

### Confronting Issues of Exclusion, Diversity, and Overwork

Our rotating governing body formally took shape in 1991. All intellectual decisions (as opposed to administrative decisions) would be made by a group of representatives drawn from the women's studies programs at each institution. That is, the women's studies programs at each school, rather than deans or department heads, would choose their representatives. This governing group became our Board of Directors, which had to grapple with many issues and limits arising from the Consortium's position within, rather than independent of, existing universities.

After considerable discussion about issues of inclusion, we settled on a scale: the participating institutions would be limited to those that granted doctorates and trained graduate students. Tufts and Northeastern Universities were brought aboard last, partly owing to the accidents of friendship. Boston University's administration opposed women's studies, and the mounting pressure on faculty at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, pressure due to state budget cuts, interrupted their participation. To those institutions without doctoral programs the Consortium had

nothing to offer except faculty enrichment. Thus several institutions with strong women's studies programs and excellent faculty, such as Wellesley, Simmons, Emerson, and Wheelock Colleges, were not included in the Consortium's original planning sequence.

There were political reasons for this decision as well. The Harvard and MIT representatives on the board worried about the resistance in their deans' offices to the entire project if it included smaller, liberal arts colleges and universities without PhD programs, especially those with less academically elite histories. Thus is the hierarchical bias of those with power perpetuated by those who work within the system. After considerable debate, the board reluctantly acknowledged the difficulties of creating a cross-institutional credit-granting mechanism for graduate courses offered by faculty who did not teach PhD-level students at their home institutions. The ongoing class-based prejudice among Boston-area universities coupled with our awareness of the tough administrative issues that lay ahead led us to exclude these colleges. We vowed among ourselves that this limitation was temporary; once the Consortium was functioning, it might expand to include the master's degree-granting institutions. In the next three to five years, we hope to include most of the other women's studies programs in the Boston area.

Thanks to President Wilson's generous offer of support, we now had a new place to meet—the Lyman Common Room at Radcliffe. Our planning and networking meetings continued and grew larger as we tried to involve as many people as possible in this new phase. Through the women's studies programs of the participating institutions, we invited faculty and graduate students to discuss the courses they would like to teach and to take. We needed to identify potential faculty as well as the subject areas that graduate students thought needed collaborative and interdisciplinary work. Now that we had cast our net wider, we saw how the limitations inherent to institutional recruitment practices would also limit us. For example, we found that both economists working on gender and scientists interested in feminist questions were in short supply and that there were also surprisingly few psychologists doing gender work in our Boston universities. Situating our initiative within existing institutions meant living with—and trying to mitigate—the effects of structures and values already in place in those institutions: hierarchical power, competition, idealization of the individual scholar working alone, as well as the racism, elitism, and sexism that operated in the selection of faculty and students.

At our meetings we also confronted another undeniable dimension of the institutional cultures from which we came: overwork. Potential faculty participants repeatedly raised the practical question, *Won't the Consortium put additional demands on a faculty cohort already stretched to the limit?* Women's studies programs in most of our institutions already have trouble paying for—or trading for—faculty time to teach women's

students courses. The few women in most of our academic institutions had a disproportionate amount of their time to committees and student advising. Women's studies faculty in all of our institutions are seriously overextended. Unfortunately, we had no easy or immediate solutions to this problem, so we opted for the ideal: if the intellectual rewards of the Consortium were significant enough, and if participation was not penalized, Boston feminist scholars would somehow find a way to shift their load and rearrange their burdens in order to participate in this experiment. But actually constructing faculty teams and promoting the development of courses that met the criteria of the Consortium was a challenge that required a unique approach.

### Getting the Word Out and Intellectual Mixing

In 1992 our planning meetings metamorphosed into the occasional subject-focused Saturday-morning gatherings at which local feminist scholars could meet one another. These became an essential part of our process. We soon realized that although the idea of interdisciplinary work was generally admired, feminist scholars did not actually know one another's cutting-edge work outside their own fields, let alone at other universities. So we developed strategies for "intellectual matchmaking" for purposes of course development.

We began by sending out blanket invitations to these Saturday-morning sessions to all women's studies faculty at all the participating institutions. Over coffee and muffins we would describe the Consortium, explain its potential, and then ask those present to introduce themselves and their work to the others. Then we would go around the circle with names and institutions, each person telling what it was she or he was working on, what kind of course she or he would like to teach, and what kind of intellectual collaboration she or he was looking for. These brainstorming sessions came closest to embodying the Consortium's original goal—to create an institution in which bureaucratic compartmentalizations and unchallenged intellectual habits gave way to feminist intellectual consciousness raising, and in which collaborative work could create a viable community across institutional boundaries. The Consortium could be a resource for feminist intellectuals, a wellspring for intellectual innovation. We were pleased when participants included faculty—men as well as women—who had never taught nor done research in women's studies but who were interested in learning more about how feminist scholarship illuminated the intellectual problems in which they were interested. In this way, our "mixers" spread the theory and practice of feminist scholarship beyond already knowledgeable and committed faculty.

Drawing on the strengths of these informal matchmaking sessions, the board began a series of more specific forums and workshops on subject areas that were obviously of particular interest. These events, which began in May 1992, last for two to four hours and are facilitated by board members and several invited local experts on the topic at hand. In quality and scope, they are like miniconferences, and the scholars who attend (usually one to four dozen) do so out of professional interest, curiosity, and the desire for intellectual community. These motivations lead to more sustained intellectual generosity and openness of exchange than one usually encounters at academic occasions.

Over the past four years workshop titles included *Sexuality and Reproduction*, *Women, Gender, and the State*; *Gender, Science, and Technology*; *Gender, Media, and Popular Culture*; *Women's Place in the Transnational Corporate Economy*; *Gender and Colonialism*; *Women and the Creative Arts*; *Gender, Religion, and Cultures*; and *Feminist Pedagogies*. The workshop on sexuality and reproduction, for example, attracted some twenty faculty members from various fields, among them biologists (Rose Frisch, from the Harvard School of Public Health, working on environmental factors in women's reproductive lives), historians (Mrinalini Sinha, from Boston College, working on the gendered dimensions of imperialism), and literary and cultural critics (Bradley Epps, from Harvard's Department of Romance Languages, working in Latin American Studies). These scholars addressed some complex questions involving biology, culture, history, and representation. Some participants suggested, for instance, that the intersections of technology, science, and sexual identity could provide the core matrix of a course in which scientists could present biological "facts" while cultural critics and historians could question the cultural assumptions underlying them. Others pointed out that students might look at various cultural documents that complicate the epistemological assumptions of biological narratives while scientists would critique the often naive and overdetermined cultural constructivist explanations so fashionable at this time. Another suggested quite simply that having literature students read scientific reports and having scientists read fiction could in and of itself fuel serious interdisciplinary dialogue.

This kind of intellectual brainstorming about form as well as course content occurred at all of the workshops, leading many participants to say that these conversations were of a higher intellectual caliber than most of the major conferences they usually attended. Indeed, these workshops began to create a community in which everyone could become passionately involved in the debate while feeling respected, heard, and enlightened. Most of the Consortium courses generated to date have been taught by faculty who met in the midst of great enthusiasm at such events.

## Making Policy: The Mission Statement

All this early generative activity—collecting ideas and personnel for collaborative projects—occurred without the formulation of rigid principles of operation or statements of policy. Some of us were allergic to written policy; others simply thought that any formalization would be premature and trusted the consensual process to handle future issues as they arose. What was finally to become our mission statement, as with so much else, grew out of our process. The idea simply emerged during one of our open meetings. Jacqui Alexander, then teaching sociology at Brandeis, raised the question of a statement in a group of twenty women—some new recruits and some regulars—who had gathered in response to a phone call about another Graduate Consortium, or “gradcon,” networking meeting. Alexander had attended a few earlier meetings, and on this occasion she spoke eloquently about the need for a mission statement. She defined it as something midway between a declarative *raison d'être* and a spiritual guide: something the community could draw on later in times of distress, a time capsule of faith to bury until it was needed. She spoke of spiritual sustenance in a language that was largely foreign to our secular ears, but the upshot of the plea was that a committee was formed, including Constance Buchanan of the Harvard Divinity School and Jacqui Alexander. The document they drafted served as the model for our mission statement. We quote from it here:

Learning and teaching in the proposed Consortium will be informed by a comparative framework in which questions of race, gender, sexuality, and empire are posed. This comparative approach recognizes the need for historical order—to the power dynamics among, as well as within, nations. It reflects the Consortium's fundamental intellectual goal of exploring the ways in which gender orders interact with economic and political orders internationally. Several aspects of the contemporary situation underscore the need for such exploration. A distinctive feature of modern advanced societies is the internalization of their economies and labor forces, and the massive migrations of ex-colonial populations that have created new kinds of multi-ethnic and multi-racial social formations. Further, it has become apparent that the experience of slavery and colonization, and certain systemic ideological and socio-economic processes, position “Third World” peoples in relationships to the American state similar to those which are part of the history of American racism. On the other side of the geopolitical divide, capital has often realigned itself to retrieve the financial losses it has sustained in the “First World” by consistently devaluing women's labor elsewhere; in some instances, indigenous nationalisms struggle to undo some of the more persistent vestiges of underdevelopment by utilizing strategies which further entrench certain modes of patriarchal power or suppress nascent feminisms.

It is important that feminists across the spectrum of disciplines refine

their intellectual frameworks to grapple with these complicated histories and geographies, the points of convergence as well as the specific ways in which these processes have differential impacts on different racialized groups. Deeper understandings of a gendered social order, of the discourses that have accompanied domination, and of power in terms of resistance are crucial if our analyses are to be theoretically and politically relevant.

In addition to the comparative emphasis outlined above, the intellectual mission also emphasized that the teaching and learning supported by the Consortium should examine the implications of theoretical formulations for public policy in keeping with feminism's early promise to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The scholarship on women and gender has reformulated central questions in the disciplines of the arts and sciences, thus providing a basis for challenging the assumptions that shape many policy fields and agendas.

The intellectuals who wrote and approved the mission statement emphasized the need to think anew within the context of the differences between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres so often ignored by traditional scholars. We wanted to ensure the Graduate Consortium's sustained attention to questions of race and class and global location so that we would not simply duplicate the work already being done by the relatively homogeneous, white, elite, and essentially male institutions whose anachronistic analyses often leave out the rest of the world.

### What Do Graduate Students Want?

In addition to drawing on a broad cross-section of interested faculty, we tried to make sure that the courses we dreamed of offering would appeal to graduate students. As early as May 1991, we put out a word-of-mouth call to area graduate students, and sixty of them flocked to Radcliffe's Lyman Common Room to hear about our new feminist collaboration. We explained that we saw the courses we would offer as existing primarily for intellectual enrichment rather than for matriculation; our program would not lead to a degree. None of our courses would necessarily replace required courses offered in students' home institutions; yet they offered challenges to a group often accustomed to narrowing rather than widening their vision. Moreover, in almost all cases we had paved the way for elective credit from the various graduate departments.

We then asked for ideas about women's studies courses that graduate students would like to take. After several hours of intense conversation and debate, seven distinct subject areas of interest emerged: feminist pedagogy and methodology; women's postcolonial experience; gender and technology; gender and the state; a cultural analysis of Latin American women; North American cultures; and the construction of female selves.

The students, in smaller groups with participating faculty, then refined these ideas in view of possible courses—attempting to define geographical and historical time frameworks, disciplinary perspectives that would radically redefine the subject, sets of preliminary questions, and local faculty who might teach the courses. Our initial meeting with the area's students made clear that there was an eager audience for Consortium courses and proved to be a source of topics and faculty as we planned later subject-focused workshops.

### Selling the Consortium to Our Institutions

While we were locating faculty and students and identifying the intellectual issues that interested them, we were also negotiating the formal mechanisms for Consortium membership and credit transfer. Our representatives were busy describing the project to high-level administrators at their own universities. By the time of our first meeting with Linda Wilson, our institutions were largely on board. Harvard was somewhat suspicious of this enterprise, but Brandeis, Boston College, Tufts, MIT, Northeastern, and the Harvard Divinity School were enthusiastic. A number of organizational arrangements like ours already existed among our institutions, a fact that helped make this particular consortium sound like business as usual.

Over the next year, each of us continued to explain the potential advantages of membership in the Consortium to our home institutions and to allay residual doubts. We highlighted the fact that allowing graduate students to take Consortium courses without extra tuition charges would multiply the course offerings available and make Boston institutions attractive to potential graduate students. The same was true of faculty: the Consortium would offer an attractive teaching possibility, thus giving member institutions an edge in faculty recruitment. The collaborative work in preparing and teaching Consortium courses would provide genuine faculty development in a formal work setting. The intensity of the course development discussions and the excitement they produced would enlist faculty who might not otherwise have involved themselves in women's studies teaching.

For graduate students as well, the opportunities were far-reaching. Giving students a chance to work with faculty from other Boston-area institutions would multiply their professional connections and simultaneously provide a wider community for students who were isolated and unhappy at their individual institutions (as women graduate students often were, for example, at MIT). The Consortium would prestigiously represent the consolidated strength of women's studies in a major US

urban center—something that could only be an asset to the individual participating institutions in the long run. Overall, in a time of financial constraint, the Consortium would offer a cost-effective means of enhancing graduate education and faculty development. Such arguments were very attractive to many of the participating institutions' administrators.

### Formal Arrangements: A Memorandum of Understanding

By early 1991, Linda Wilson had garnered the backing of Radcliffe's trustees to explore financial and interinstitutional support for the new Consortium venture. Now came the tricky process of specifying each institution's endorsement and responsibility to the collaboration and spelling out academic and administrative details. After eliciting letters of institutional commitment from the chief officers of each of the participating schools, Wilson drafted a memorandum of understanding, outlining the Consortium's purpose, principles of governance, staff and space requirements, program responsibilities, and relationship with Radcliffe.

Because this was to be a pioneering venture in form as well as content, the draft agreement provoked spirited discussions about the specific roles, functions, and limitations of the Consortium partners in their relationship with Radcliffe. Our goal was to create a democratic, nonhierarchical, self-governing feminist collective working in close collaboration with Radcliffe, whose fiduciary responsibility for the Consortium had its own imperatives. Administrative decisions were to be vested with Radcliffe and intellectual decisions with the Consortium's Board of Directors. But because these functions were not always easily separable, the bounds within which both Radcliffe's president, Linda Wilson, and the Board of Directors could act had to be carefully negotiated. Balancing institutional necessity with principles of feminist theory and pedagogy turned out to be a challenge. The memorandum of understanding went through several drafts before a final document was perfected. Linda Wilson's skill within bureaucratic settings combined with our experience as educational innovators worked together to create a distinctive feminist institutional framework.

Radcliffe agreed to provide the initial funding, the space, and the institutional identity for our new venture. The memorandum of understanding was signed by Linda Wilson and the cochairs of the newly official Board of Directors, Joyce Antler and Ruth Perry, and sent to chief officers at each institution. Deans, presidents, and provosts read the formal description of the Consortium's intellectual mission and weighed the institutional benefits of participation; their letters of commitment came back, one by one, over the following months.

## Making It Work: Administration and Course Review

With start-up funding from Radcliffe, we were able to hire a part-time administrator in March 1992. Early on we had envisioned our administrator as a coordinator, someone to pull together the many pieces of our novel venture and to guide and respond to the planning and decision making of the Board of Directors. Moreover, our rotating structure of governance meant that before long the administrative responsibility of the Consortium—not to mention its institutional memory—would reside in the coordinator. Thus the creation of the position, which eventually became full-time, came none too soon.

Renee Fall was hired and took the day-to-day burdens of running the Consortium off our shoulders. She helped the board think through the next administrative steps, carried out such concrete tasks as reserving rooms, sending out mailings, writing publicity, talking to interested callers, and generally serving as point person and information resource. She served as a liaison among the participating faculty, the Board of Directors, Linda Wilson (who had placed the Consortium in her own portfolio of special initiatives), Radcliffe's development staff, graduate students, and the public. With an office and a paid administrator who answered the phone saying cheerfully, "Graduate Consortium in Women's Studies, Renee speaking," the Consortium had a place and a voice.

All this we did—and it is all much easier said than done—before we actually figured out how we were going to encourage potential faculty to attend to the original intellectual guidelines we had identified as essential to our courses. Consortium courses were to be interdisciplinary, innovative, and epistemologically and culturally self-conscious; but we had no mechanism for ensuring attention to these concerns. We felt queasy about telling anyone what to teach; nobody ever really tells a faculty member what to do in the classroom, especially a senior faculty member. Because Consortium courses were supposed to allow faculty to teach where their research interests were, to help them break ground on new materials, all external directives seemed coercive and disrespectful. Still, we wanted to use our skills and accumulated knowledge to encourage certain kinds of exploration, such as placing questions of gender in a global context.

The process of overseeing course development proved unexpectedly delicate. We had hoped that we could contribute to one another's intellectual growth, improve one another's work, and constructively comment on syllabi in the process of vetting courses and reviewing reading lists, a task that fell to the Board of Directors from the beginning. No one was prepared for the touchiness of the teaching teams with respect to our suggestions. We realized too late how much rides on peer review in the academy, to which we have been so well socialized. Jobs, tenure, raises, and publication (just to state a few of the stakes), with their inherent

anxieties, all are granted or withheld on the basis of peer evaluation. It may be impossible to take criticism disinterestedly, we learned. When wounded feelings and defensiveness surfaced among respected colleagues during the first course review, we decided that we needed to build dialogue into the process. We arranged face-to-face meetings with the instructor teams instead of sending written suggestions, which made the process more collegial and dialogic even if it did not end all potential for bruised pride. This way, the reviewers' questions about how texts would be approached or disciplines used could be answered in person. Likewise, faculty who had spent hours developing a course could meet with these reviewer-peers who took such an interest in every detail of their syllabus, hear the excitement in their discussion, and recognize their criticism as encouragement to make their seminars as imaginative and informed as possible. Bringing bodies and minds together in one room is almost always preferable to, and likely to create more intellectual energy than, any form of long-distance communication.

## Rethinking Interdisciplinarity

Major differences about the meaning of interdisciplinary teaching and research also surfaced surprisingly in the process of course planning, when we began to work through our definitions operationally. Feminist scholars in the Consortium who had been teaching and publishing in women's studies for some twenty years thought their work was already interdisciplinary. Many had worked on subjects that required knowledge of more than one field of study and multiple perspectives. But as the board began to scrutinize proposed syllabi submitted for approval, and press for the *actual* collaboration of faculty teams in every single week's work, a new and more advanced model of interdisciplinarity emerged.

What most of us had meant by interdisciplinary work until then involved bringing the contribution of several different academic disciplines to bear on a single problem. It was like training several spotlights, each a source of illumination, upon a single object. Each discipline's methods would discover different relevant truths about the object, with the result that an "interdisciplinary approach" entailed at least twice the analytic focus of the merely unidisciplinary approach. For example, to investigate the demise of small towns in the United States, a historian might examine national economic trends in the context of international politics; a sociologist might detail the unraveling of the social fabric, the exodus of young people, the dwindling numbers of people in church; a fiction writer might describe—and a literary critic analyze—the symptoms, signs, aesthetics, and effects of these changes: empty offices in the town hall, abandoned warehouses, perennial going-out-of-business signs, teenagers



scuffing on a dusty street. However, this form of interdisciplinarity leaves the methods of investigation in each discipline intact, integrating or synthesizing only at the level of findings. The historian, sociologist, and literary critic each describe their separate aspects of the problem—like the blind men describing the legs, sides, trunk, and tail of an elephant and then trying to intuit a whole animal from each of these parts.

In contradistinction to this accepted model, the interdisciplinarity that evolved through the process of the Consortium board meetings moved each interrogation much closer to the sources of our questions and the goals of our enterprise, asking what actually constitutes evidence or even insight when approaching a given problem—whether for the historian, the sociologist, or the literary critic. This turns out to be a much more difficult and radical sort of interdisciplinarity, in which the members of a team do not take turns presenting their discipline's take on a subject but slog through every aspect of the problem together, paying attention to their differences. Using this approach, the problem itself—the demise of small towns, for example—becomes only one of the foci, and the process of one discipline questioning the rhetoric, assumptions, and methods of another discipline becomes another set of foci. This is the point to which our insistence on the need for epistemological self-consciousness has led. To stay with the metaphor of the blind men describing the elephant, we began to encourage each investigator to be clear about which part of the elephant she was describing, about what her evidence and methods were, and to pay attention to the evidence and methods of her coinvestigators as well. Simply put, questions involving the forms of knowledge production became as important as the content of knowledge itself.

It is therefore hardly irrelevant that the first course the Board of Directors reviewed, discussed, and approved was a course in feminist methodology, taught by a historian, a sociologist, and a literary critic. From these beginnings, in developing the Consortium's first offerings, the idea of interdisciplinarity has taken shape in Consortium faculty teaching, research, and thinking. We have all been profoundly changed by that experience. Conferences in our own disciplines—even the work of feminist scholars—now seem even more narrowly focused and ill-equipped to deal with the difficult but central problems that cross disciplinary boundaries. A Consortium board member at a recent conference on women's history found her colleagues' research exciting but was irritated by their failure to address the impact on historical questions and methodology of new feminist approaches in literary scholarship and the behavioral sciences—an expectation conditioned by Consortium board meetings, workshops, and forums.

### Topics in the Consortium Classroom

The Consortium has now successfully operated for seven semesters and has offered five remarkable graduate courses. *Feminist Perspectives in Research: Interdisciplinary Practice in the Study of Gender* was the first course offered through the Consortium and has been repeated, in revised forms, once each academic year. Since the topic is central to graduate women's studies, student interest has remained high. In this seminar, participants learn to rethink analytic paradigms and create new theoretical models to guide their work. They examine how knowledge is constructed and deployed; how interdisciplinary feminist perspectives inform research methods; what the practical implications are of these methods; and how feminist analysis redefines traditional analytical categories and disciplinary concepts through its attention to gender as it is inflected by variables such as race, class, culture, sexual orientation, and age. Students study major feminist works in history, literary theory, and sociology, paying special attention to methodology. They then look at how interdisciplinary feminist methodologies have been brought to bear on a series of specific topics. Discussions are unpredictable in classes in which the instructors and the students all have different training and information. In the worst instances, people talk past one another or discount one another's approaches as a waste of time. In the best, professional jargon is minimized or else thoroughly explained across fields and metaphors common in one field (e.g., "cultural work") prove suggestive to others.

This course was initially developed and then taught in spring 1993 by Laura Levine Frader, Associate Professor of History, Northeastern University; Mary Loeffelholz, Associate Professor of English, Northeastern University; and Shulamit Reinharz, Professor of Sociology, Brandeis University; it marked the formal opening of the Consortium. In fall 1993, Laura Frader and Mary Loeffelholz teamed up with Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Associate Professor of Sociology, Boston College, to offer the course in its second incarnation. A new literary scholar for the team, Robin Lydenberg, Professor of English, Boston College, joined Frader and Hesse-Biber in fall 1994; and Christina Gilmartin, Assistant Professor of History, Northeastern University, replaced Frader in spring 1996.

In fall 1993, Erica Harth, Professor of Humanities and Women's Studies in the Department of Romance and Comparative Literature, Brandeis University; Elizabeth Honig, Assistant Professor of Art History, Tufts University; and Anne McCants, Assistant Professor of History, MIT, led the seminar *Boundaries of Domesticity in Early Modern Europe*. This course explored the relation of women to the changing map of the public and the private in France, Holland, and England over the course of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, examining how and by

whom the map came to be drawn and what historical developments contributed to its changing boundaries. Participants considered how an ideal of the "domestic" arose, what it stood for and what it opposed, and some of the variations on its definition in three different national settings during three centuries.

Gender, Sexuality, and Culture in the United States and Latin America was taught in spring 1994 by Bradley Epps, Assistant Professor of Romance Languages, Harvard University, and Lynn Stephen, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Northeastern University. Participants explored the construction, deconstruction, and resistance of sexual subjects in the United States and Latin America using a variety of sources, including ethnography, film, testimony, narrative fiction, and autobiography. The course emphasized the diversity of sexual beings within and across specific cultures. Topics addressed included classical constructions of sexuality in psychology and anthropology; recent "deconstructive" readings of Latin American women; indigenous perspectives on sex, work, and class under capitalism, socialism, and totalitarianism; and state constructions of the family and women's resistance.

Also offered in spring 1994 was Narratives of Gender and Kinship Change in Periods of Emergent Capitalism taught by Christine Ward Gailey, Professor of Anthropology, Northeastern University, and Ruth Perry, Professor of Literature, MIT. The course was offered again in fall 1995 after being revised. The course explored literary and anthropological constructions of kin networks during periods of dramatic social change, using the case study of eighteenth-century England as if it were a "developing country," in the context of other examples of modernization such as nineteenth-century Tonga and twentieth-century Kenya. The class studied the effects on women of industrialization, including the impact of print culture. The linguistic, social, and psychological effects of narrativizing experience were profitably examined by both sociologists and anthropologists, while the literary critics in the class tried to understand how Samuel Richardson's eighteenth-century novel *Clarissa* (1747-48) was and was not an ethnography. The isolated woman portrayed in this fiction, whose hyperverbalized consciousness has been interpreted by literary critics as embattled individualism—or autonomous eroticism, or a critique of commodified social relations—was in turn read by the anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists in the class as a member of her generational cohort, a food producer, a link in a female lineage, the reproducer of the next generation, and so on.

In the final week of this course, Shamim Meer, a graduate student from MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning, presented her final paper, which was an analysis of the place of gender and the role of women in industrializing economies in the service of planning policy for land

redistribution among rural women in South Africa. It was May 1994, and the landslide victory of the African National Congress had just been announced. This woman, a longtime feminist activist from Johannesburg, was about to return to her country to work with the ANC on policy to ensure women's access to land for subsistence food production. Her conclusions in this class and participants' contributions—coming largely from literary criticism and social anthropology—were extremely exciting for being not merely academic. What possible bearing could Richardson's *Clarissa* have on rural women's right to land in South Africa?

Shamim Meer explained that under the present South African legal system only married women could own land. They couldn't pass on land to their unmarried daughters if and when their husbands predeceased them, at which point their land reverted to tribal ownership, which was, in effect, ownership by tribal chiefs. These modern legalisms were embedded in the kinship systems of traditional cultures that protected, rather than curtailed, women's access to subsistence agriculture. The class had studied the impact of commercial agriculture—cash-cropping—on developing economies and in particular on women. Their research had included analyzing the progress and meaning of the Enclosure Acts in eighteenth-century England. In the discussion that followed, it became clear to everyone that the most effective way to safeguard rural South African women's access to land would entail some system of use rights. Ideally, any land redistribution would replicate the inalienable-use rights of lineage wives and their children in many traditional African societies. So long as a woman could grow food on commonly owned land, no one would starve. In no other university classroom can one examine such issues in these gendered terms, benefiting from the kind of information and expertise that were so abundantly available in that last seminar.

The newest course offered, Gender, Representation, and Social Control, was developed by Nicole Rafter, Professor of Criminal Justice, Northeastern University; Lisa Cuklanz, Assistant Professor of Communication, Boston College; Pamela Allara, Assistant Professor in Fine Arts (art history), Brandeis University; and Mary Campbell, Associate Professor of English Literature, Brandeis University. Rafter and Cuklanz taught the seminar in spring 1995, and Allara joined them to teach it again in spring 1996. This seminar focused on how social control and representations of violence play a part in the social construction of gender. Students examined representations in a variety of media, including essays, film, painting, photography, short stories, and television. Drawing from methods of art history, literary criticism, rhetorical analysis, social history, and sociology, participants examined issues such as the body, the holy, law, pornography, rape, and war.

Titles of future Consortium courses will likely include the following: Telling Lives: Genre and Gender in Women's Life Narratives (biography,

autobiography, and oral history); Cultural Production: Women in Popular Art and Popular Theater; Appearance and Reality in the American 1950s; Feminism and Poverty; and Gender and Colonialism.

### Taking Stock: What Have We Learned?

For the most part, the Consortium has been warmly welcomed by graduate programs and departments. Prospective graduate students and faculty have found the possibility of interdisciplinary and interinstitutional collaborations appealing. Resistance has appeared in various forms: students warned against taking Consortium offerings rather than home departmental courses; other students advised that they have finished their course work and shouldn't distract themselves with additional offerings that might delay the completion of their degree; still others told that departmental requirements cannot be filled by Consortium courses. Sometimes students have overcome such resistance with persistence and the help of Consortium staff and other faculty members. For example, some of Harvard's departments do not give graduate credit for courses taught in other departments at Harvard, let alone by non-Harvard faculty. Thus although graduate credit for Consortium courses can sometimes be arranged through individual Harvard advisers offering independent studies or "reading and research," at an institutional level Harvard still resists granting credit across the board to any courses involving non-Harvard faculty.

Consortium courses have been fascinating to develop, to teach, and to take. Faculty teams testify enthusiastically to the intellectual excitement of developing these courses—both the initial planning sequence and the subsequent weekly staff meetings. The work has also been, inevitably, more time-consuming and more intellectually challenging than putting together an ordinary course. In addition to problems of interdisciplinarity, for example, instructors teaching together for the first time have had to cope with unavoidable differences of teaching style.

Students have also been enthusiastic, although many have objected to the oversized seminars. (The Consortium currently admits twenty students for a seminar with two instructors and twenty-five for a seminar with three instructors.) Some have felt that our courses have been too ambitious. Several of the faculty have noted that if and when they teach a course again, they will selectively shorten the reading list. Herculean reading lists are not, of course, an uncommon problem in women's studies courses, since such courses must address so many issues not addressed in other classes.

Predictably, in a course enrolled by graduate students with disparate academic backgrounds taught by faculty trained in a variety of disciplines,

confusions arise about the meanings of terms and the academic conventions of others' fields. We found to our dismay that where the effort to translate between fields was kept rigorously alive by the teaching faculty, so that disciplinary assumptions were continuously being interrogated, students, especially less advanced ones, were liable to get lost. Students in the feminist methodology class expected this kind of epistemological disorientation, so there was a good fit between the intellectual explorations of the faculty and the capacity of students to follow them. The other courses have functioned brilliantly as occasions for faculty development but more equivocally as graduate education.

Because of these complexities—and perhaps because of the times in which we live—students have asked for less rather than more "feminist pedagogy." They want clarity, and coherent, measurable information; they want signposts attached to their tasks; they want to be told whether they are going and by what means and why. At least for some students, it is apparent that two of our original goals—interdisciplinarity and feminist decentralization of authority—are in tension with each other, at least in the classroom.

Other specifically feminist values have also been tested by our process. As mentioned earlier, reviewing courses proved a delicate business, because serious, disinterested course evaluation is so rare in the academy and nonjudgmental constructive feedback is so rare anywhere. On one occasion a team of instructors asked to participate in the student-admissions process. Previously a small committee of the board had selected students on the basis of institutional representation, disciplinary mix, academic backgrounds, and reasons for wishing to take the course. In this case, the instructors asked to be involved in selecting students because they wanted to ensure a particular mix of ethnic background and sexual orientation in their class. While the board could not agree to this request on principle, we again had recourse to face-to-face dialogue with the instructors. We agreed to show them the student applications and to let them discuss with the selection committee any differences that arose in their choices. Predictably, none did.

Finally, although we continue to cling to our chosen consensual process for making decisions, this has been, as anyone can tell you who has tried to run an organization nonhierarchically, an extremely time-consuming project. Board meetings take as many as three hours every three weeks. Board members and especially cochairs confer with one another and with the coordinator in between: thinking, talking, drafting, and editing memoranda to keep things going. Every minute devoted to work on the board represents volunteer labor from feminist scholars already seriously overworked at their home institutions. But although most board members walk into those late-afternoon meetings exhausted from already-packed days, we emerge paradoxically refreshed by our time to-

gether. This can only be because we talk about intellectual questions that really matter to us, devising policies to implement our idealistic visions of intellectual life.

Clearly, creating the administrative policies and procedures for a multi-institution consortium could be a nightmare without the talents of a coordinator who both takes initiative and works closely with the board to smooth the administrative snarls. The Consortium coordinator has created systems for gathering information (names, disciplines, fields, and contact information on faculty and graduate students from all the participating institutions); has standardized procedures for admission, registration, enrollment, grade reporting, and credit transfers (which involve different arrangements with each institution); gathers course materials and classroom equipment; publicizes courses; organizes workshops and events; facilitates the ongoing work of the board—drafting agendas, keeping minutes, following up on decisions made; and interacts with and reports back to the Radcliffe administrators who control funding. But if a paid coordinator relieves the volunteer board members of many of the details, along with the relief comes, inescapably, less-than-welcome bureaucratization. Forms are now handed out at workshops; written agendas guide board meetings—at which there is less time for chat about personal lives as critical decisions need to be made. Communication now seems more official—a piece of letterhead in the mail rather than a phone call from an old friend. Openness, cordiality, and inclusion continue to be guiding principles, but they have been balanced by both internal and external pressures for efficiency, productivity, and definition.

This essay is being written to help us take stock of the project at its present stage of development, as well as to share our visions and realities with others who might be interested in a similar venture in their own metropolitan area. Our efforts to reclaim and recycle university structures, to reconfigure Boston faculty for a new feminist institution, to put our teaching where our research is, to work constructively as a community to further develop the field of women's studies, to combine our academic know-how and put into practice what we have been advocating in our individual departments all these years—in short, to put our theories into practice—have worked out in some unexpected ways.

The vision that we had at the beginning of the process has enabled us to sustain our growth and development through several stages. Friendship has been a vital component of the process: the Consortium went forward because each of us put our allegiance to each other and to the goal of our feminist collaboration above the usual disciplinary and institutional loyalties that fuel academic work. Radcliffe's participation was also key: the institutional home and financial support that Radcliffe provided enabled member institutions to work together peaceably and to avoid divisive

from Radcliffe brought with it the challenge of devising an arrangement that placed governance and intellectual decision making with the Board of Directors (representing the women's studies faculties at participating institutions) while locating fiduciary responsibility with the College. Linda Wilson's leadership and openness to new institutional structures together with the determination and vision of Consortium faculty and colleagues and the flexibility of the coordinator made this unusual division of responsibility possible.

The institution-building process described here flows from particular local conditions; nonetheless, it shows how necessary to its success are flexibility, adaptability, and personal trust, together with a clear educational vision. To create new intellectual relationships from the building blocks of existing institutions must always involve paradox. If new models are to be devised that go beyond the boundaries of existing institutions and disciplines, they must be continually in process and evolving.

At the moment of this writing, the Board of Directors has gone through a complete rotation cycle. The founding members have all rotated off the board, and new members from each of the contributing institutions have come on; all the while Consortium work has continued steadily. It may be too soon to say so, but it looks as if a new feminist institution has indeed come into being.

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