

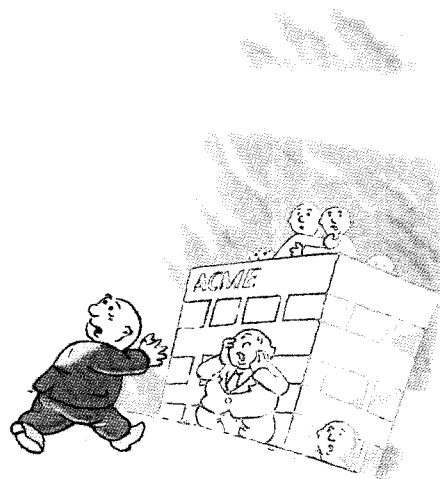
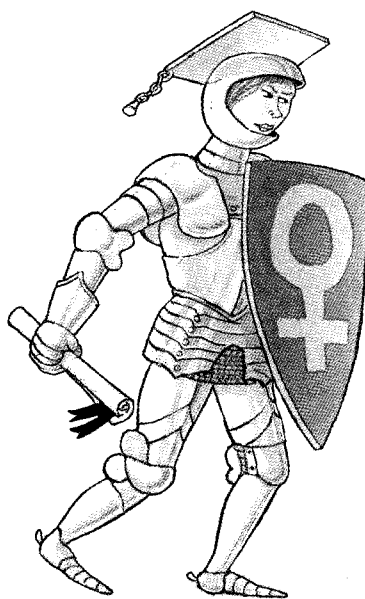
WHEN JANE BOLIN, a political science major with a concentration in women's studies, graduated from Radford University in 1997, she envisioned coming to Washington and joining the feminist cause. Instead, after a brief stint at a political research firm, she has embarked on a very different career path: Bolin is training to be a defensive end for the fledgling Women's Professional Football League in Minneapolis.

Unlike some fields of study, women's studies boasts few famous graduates—perhaps the best known is Rory Kennedy, youngest child of Robert Kennedy, who majored in women's studies at Brown University and is now a documentary filmmaker, producing works such as *Different Moms*, which explored how mentally handicapped parents raise children with normal intelligence.

But few women's studies majors have the comfort of a Kennedy-size fortune; ultimately they will have to earn a living. Even in today's booming economy, humanities majors have a harder time finding permanent employment after college than do business, science, or engineering majors.

Debates over the merits of women's studies usually focus on oddities in the curriculum (courses that explore "theories of sadomasochism," for example) and dubious pedagogical methods (teachers who promote radical feminist ideology). Rarely do they consider the practical issue of employment. Do the skills women's studies majors acquire in seminars translate into jobs once they leave that sheltering cocoon?

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that a total of 681 degrees, excluding doctorates, were conferred in women's studies during the 1995-1996 school year, the most recent for which data are available.



I Have a Degree in Women's Studies, So Why Can't I Pay the Rent?

Christine Stolba looks into what women's studies majors do after college. Her advice: Don't do it unless you have a family fortune

This is a relatively small number of degrees—comparable to the number granted annually in Afro-American studies or botany, for example—and far fewer than the 10,000 plus degrees granted in journalism or education.

But in addition to those receiving formal degrees in women's studies, many students who earn degrees in the humanities either minor in women's studies, or have a "concentration" in women studies, or earn a sep-

arate women's studies certificate.

The National Women's Studies Association compiles no official statistics on the number or fate of women's studies graduates in the U.S. When asked, a representative of the organization offered the cheery but not particularly helpful response that a degree in women's studies is just as useful as any humanities degree. In fact, the group has an aversion to hard data. As a report put out by the association (but

paid for by the federal government) noted, the organization is “wary of aggregate statistics and generalizations that too often erase significant insights or particular groups of people.” Their preferred method of analysis, employed frequently in their literature, is the personal testimonial.

Since the national organization does not collect hard data on how graduates fare in the real world, one would hope that individual women’s studies departments—perhaps spurred by the queries of anxious parents—would make more of an effort to figure out what women’s studies majors do with their degrees. But again, evidence is scanty.

One study of women’s studies graduates—paid for by the U.S. Department of Education—was conducted by Elaine Reuben and Mary Jo Boehm Strauss in 1980. After examining a wide range of programs, they concluded that “career uses, as traditionally understood, were a relatively minor consideration in the original public or self-image of most programs.”

The few employment details Reuben and Strauss did uncover were either advertisements for academic positions—which excluded undergraduates since they required an advanced degree—or listings for “feminist writer/researchers or clerical staff for women’s organizations.” Judging by the information coming from women’s studies programs, women’s studies majors were well qualified for little but the pink-collar ranks of the feminist bureaucracy.

Apparently, not much has changed. When asked to assess the job options available to their students, women’s studies programs flit between vague pronouncements about the well-roundedness of a women’s studies education and suggestions for future em-

ployment that disproportionately favor work in the feminist bureaucracy. Emory University’s women’s studies program recommends that graduates go to law school, graduate school, or get a job at a campus women’s center; Albion College in Michigan boasts that some of its graduates work in the fields of domestic violence and “reproductive choice.” At the State University of New York, New Paltz, some of the 130 women’s studies majors who have graduated from the program since 1979 are “working in women’s health services, battered women’s shelters, rape counseling services, and services for pregnant teenagers.” Similarly, Arizona State University lists its grads as working in rape research, sexual abuse therapy counseling, and on staff at the college’s Commission on the Status of Women.

WOMEN’S STUDIES GRADUATES from the University of Massachusetts, Boston, work as “feminist therapists”—whatever that is—and train as lawyers so that they can “work toward positive social changes for women using law as a tool,” according to departmental literature.

Departments also frequently point to a 1995 study by Barbara Luebke and Mary Ellen Reilly called *Women’s Studies Graduates: The First Generation*. The book consists of a collection of first-person accounts of students who majored in women’s studies in the 1980s, and its methodology is hardly rigorous: The authors asked women’s studies directors to “choose graduates who reflected the diversity of their programs.” Not surprisingly, the majority of the eighty-nine respondents offer panegyrics to the life-altering force of women’s studies.

The survey does reveal that women’s studies majors hold diverse jobs

—as lawyers, bakers, and even flight instructors. But, after wading through tedious testimonials that either dissolve into details of the writer’s personal life (“With men I have become more assertive, even aggressive...[but] I am trying to practice being gentler and softer—partly because I’ve found the earlier approach can backfire”) or rant about women’s oppression (“Here we are 50 percent of the population making none of the decisions about our future... We live in a frightening time”) one is left with the distinct impression that these women’s careers happened in spite of, rather than because of, their women’s studies major. Of the eighty-nine women’s studies majors interviewed, all but eighteen were earning under \$30,000. Eight reported no personal income at all.

Colleen Sandrin, a hospital foundation administrator, tells Luebke and Reilly that “I’m not sure if my women’s studies major affected my professional career.” Instead, she notes that it affected the “basic nature of my being.” That being “find[s] most men weak, an attribute beneficial to my career, but difficult to deal with on a day-to-day basis in my personal life.” Nancy Arnold, a Unitarian Universalist minister who attended Harvard Divinity School after completing her women’s studies major at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, also seems to have received greater psychological benefits than professional ones from her major: “I suffer from chronic low self-esteem and sometimes depression. Women’s studies and the faculty and students helped me to understand ‘my’ failings in a more systemic way. By looking at the cultural cultivation of myself as a woman, I was able to make sense of my life experience.” She now considers herself “woman-identified.”

While the Rev. Arnold is “woman-

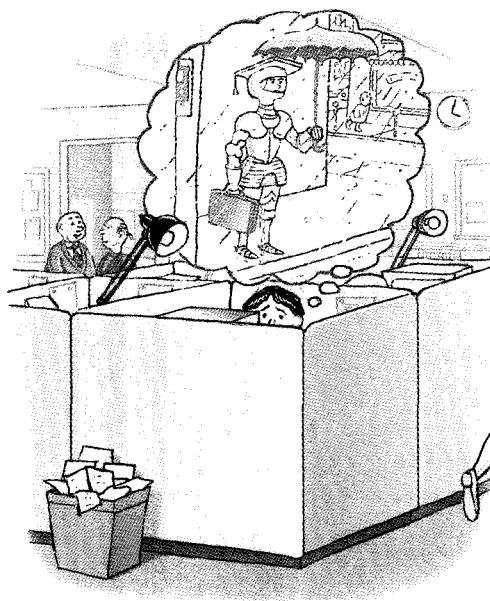
identified," it is clear that a large number of women's studies graduates and their instructors are feminist-identified. In a recent newsletter, the director of the women's studies department at Queens College praised the alliance the department had made with Eleanor Smeal's Feminist Majority Foundation and its college recruiting arm, the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance. Many courses of study recommend "hands-on" work experience in organizations such as Planned Parenthood, the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the Feminist Majority Foundation. The women's studies department at the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, for example, encourages its students to pursue internships with NOW and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and many women's studies departmental websites include helpful links to major feminist organizations.

A call to NOW confirmed that the organization does hire women's studies majors, although a representative refused to provide details about the kind of work new graduates can expect to perform there. While women's studies departments may insist their majors are theoretically qualified to hold any number of challenging jobs, ultimately the jobs they are most prepared for are those in the ever-expanding universe of feminist organizations.

Sarah Luthens, a women's studies graduate from the University of Missouri and now a union organizer, said that her major "directly helped in landing" her a series of jobs. Of course, these jobs were "explicitly feminist" (including a stint as an investigator at the EEOC) and reaffirmed her belief that "we must transform the primary oppressive forces—sexism, racism/anti-Semitism, classism, homophobia,

ageism, physicalism, speciesism, and nationalism." There was one drawback to her education: "As a student I did not realize I needed a strategy for being able to support myself economically," Ms. Luthens says, "and I have suffered the psychic violence of poverty."

Most of the departments that provide details of their graduates proudly note the frequency with which so many of them enter the world of femi-



nist non-profits and lobbying organizations. Indeed, the National Women's Studies Association explicitly states in its literature that "what we teach, and the way we teach it, encourages students to imagine alternatives to present systems of inequality and participate in political transformation." Hence they seek "to replicate in the academic setting the powerful transformative effect of the consciousness-raising techniques of the early women's movement."

The National Women's Studies Association received funding from the U.S. Department of Education in 1992 to assess the pedagogical purpose of women's studies. Here was an opportunity for women's studies leaders to describe their approach to teach-

ing and to correct misrepresentations about the skills their students were acquiring. Alas, they used taxpayer dollars to pose questions such as: "Does women's studies cultivate personal empowerment and social responsibility? How successfully does women's studies support students as they express their feminism on campus?"

When asked to describe what they have learned in their women's studies classes, students offer disturbing answers. A women's studies student at Wellesley College happily proclaims that women's studies "has given me a chance to write papers about things I care about, and it has given me 'ammunition,' for lack of a better word, against those who try and beat me down." Another student writes in garbled prose that women's studies has "given me a bit of more confidence that...books aren't always the key; that sometimes the answers are right inside of you."

Experience-based learning serves as the linchpin of the women's studies curriculum; indeed, the National Women's Studies Association notes with approval that "a neat and clean separation of abstract ideas from personal experience, which is so characteristic of most traditional courses, was missing" among the women's studies majors it surveyed. In addition, the transformative power of the curriculum is extolled. Women's studies major Katharine Rossi, now a part-time store clerk, said that the field makes students "see how various social systems feed into patriarchy and perpetuate it. You get angry that people allow this oppression and then you act to change the systems of power and oppression." One student at Old Dominion University simply "felt like I had a completely new brain" after

completing her women's studies coursework.

Women's studies graduate Stacy Dorian, a law librarian, claims that women's studies (ostensibly a major open to both sexes) "makes you confident in your abilities as a woman and reinforces one's belief that there is something seriously wrong with a world created and dominated by white men." Though she admits she is dissatisfied with her current employment situation, Ms. Dorian finds ample opportunity to use her knowledge of women's studies "to educate fellow workers" about the "policies, jokes, comments that I find to be racist, sexist, ageist, ableist, or homophobic."

James Madison University's women's studies department unwittingly touches on the conundrum of women's studies when it notes on its website that "the challenge for the women's studies graduate is to demonstrate imaginatively to prospective employers the distinctive advantages of an education that includes women's studies." Women's studies majors have to be imaginative for a reason: unlike other majors, their skills are less visible and their liabilities more glaring to a prospective employer.

*M*ANY WOMEN'S STUDIES majors have been trained in ideology and emotion rather than practical skills. While other disciplines within the humanities are equally impractical, they focus on imparting intellectual rigor rather than ideological vigor. Self-actualization and empowerment are not necessarily unworthy aims, but what happens when they are made the whole of an education? One doesn't often hear engineering graduates talking about "empowerment"—but then, engineering graduates are finding jobs hand over fist.

Many women's studies graduates know this instinctively and act accordingly: When applying for positions outside the feminist establishment, they don't always reveal that they majored in women's studies. "I actually have a hard time telling just anyone," graduate Lisa Hall conceded in Luebke and Reilly's study. "I usually say 'liberal arts' and hope for no further comment." Another graduate, profiled in Luebke and Reilly's book, said that "in some ways, I don't think being a major has affected me professionally at all. No one has ever hired me because I was a major!" She noted that during the hiring process at a law firm, "I had to assure them that I didn't 'hate' men."

Megan Mitchell, a graduate student, says that "because of many negative responses I no longer tell everyone I meet about my major." Erica Strohl, a sexual abuse educator and graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, avoids the problem by avoiding jobs "where having women's studies would be viewed as a negative or nonacademic major." Indeed, her resume is an elaborate ruse to downplay her women's studies activities. "I'm sneaky!" she says, noting that she lists her summer internships with feminist lawmakers not by the official's name or the feminist policy issues she worked on, but by listing the building in which she worked, such as "State Office Building." Of the eighty-nine graduates interviewed by Luebke and Reilly, eleven of them—those in graduate school or in a profession—insisted on anonymity. So much for empowerment.

Although the intrepid Jane Bolin enthusiastically discussed her experience in women's studies with potential employers, she found that she was often "pigeonholed as a liberal" for doing so. Happily for Jane, her love of

athletics led to her present employment as a football player.

Remarkably, leaders in women's studies interpret public wariness about women's studies as ignorance—or worse. A women's studies graduate of Kansas State University believes that while it might be common to question the usefulness of a particular college major, doing so with women's studies is "reflective of a narrowness of thought." Judy Bryant, a self-described "teacher/writer/artist," used to take skepticism about her major personally. But then she realized that people were "threatened" by her: "I learned to understand that I am a threat precisely because I ask questions, because I say no, because my primary relationships are with women, because I care and am committed to justice."

In fact, employers' concerns stem from the fact that many of the "skills" women's studies majors acquire have little practical use outside the insular world of professional feminism. Defenders of women's studies will remind critics, as authors Reuben and Strauss put it, that women's studies students are "knowledgeable about the causes and effects of sex discrimination and determined to gain equitable treatment for themselves and others" and hence "seem particularly well-equipped to overcome barriers of sex discrimination in graduate study or in the workplace." The sad fact is that they have to get a job before they will be able to showcase their skills as discrimination detectives. Here's the hard lesson many women's studies programs don't teach: empowerment does not necessarily lead to employment. ♦

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KARLYN
BOWMAN'S

Poll-Pourri



Older and Wiser

IN THE LATE 1980s, two pollsters asked baby boomers to think about their activities during the 1960s. Their responses paint a picture at odds with popular impressions of the period. They also provide some clues about public reactions to stories of possible cocaine use by George W. Bush. Yankelovich Clancy Shulman, in a 1988 poll for *Time* magazine, asked baby boomers whether they used marijuana in the 1960s and 1970s.

Only 8 percent of thirty to forty-four-year-olds said they had used it regularly, and 26 percent said they used it occasionally. When asked about their current use of marijuana, far fewer, 11 percent, admitted to using it. Eighty-five percent said they never did. When baby boomers were asked to think back to the changes that occurred in drug use in the 1960s and 1970s, nearly nine in ten pronounced them mostly bad.

Only 28 percent described their political views as conservative in the 1960s and early 1970s (35 percent remembered being moderates, 31 percent liberals, and 6 percent radicals).

When asked about their current views, a much larger share, 41 percent, called themselves conservatives, 36 percent moderates, 21 percent liberals, and 2 percent radicals. Sixty-four percent said their political views were more conservative than they had been in the past. When asked what explained the changes in their beliefs and values, three-quarters said assuming family responsibilities had had a major effect on them.

Peter D. Hart Research Associates, in a poll for *Rolling Stone*, got more specific. In the 1988 poll, 18 percent of eighteen to thirty-four-year-olds said they had used cocaine. When asked about their current drug use compared to the past, only about 5 percent of the thirty to thirty-nine-year-old age group said it had increased, and about 35 percent said it had decreased. Sixty percent said they didn't use drugs at all.

Another question shows the natural conservatism of age. They were asked, "When we were younger, all of us had images of what we would be like when we grew up. Compared to how you thought you would turn out as an adult, are you...?" Fifty-four percent said they were more conservative than they expected to be, and 27 percent less.

The picture painted by the media of widespread drug use in the 1960s is, if the poll findings can be trusted, a distorted one, but it probably explains to some degree public willingness to look past youthful recklessness in judging candidates. When asked by Fox News and Opinion Dynamics in August: "If you knew that a presidential candidate had only experimented with drugs such as cocaine in his or her twenties or thirties, do you think

that is enough to disqualify the candidate or should it be forgiven?" Seventeen percent said it should be enough to disqualify the person, but 72 percent said it should be forgiven. The results from a mid-August Yankelovich Partners survey for *Time* were similar. Eleven percent said cocaine use by Bush in his twenties should disqualify him, and 84 percent said it should not. Eighty-four percent in an August ABC poll said that if Bush had used cocaine when he was younger, it would make no difference in their vote for president.



Cocktails Before Dinner? Shocking!

IN A 1980 poll for a PBS election special, Gallup probed reactions to characteristics or behaviors in a president. Seventy percent said they would strongly object if a president smoked marijuana, 43 percent if he told ethnic or racial jokes in private, 38 percent if he were not a member of a church, 36 percent if he used tranquilizers occasionally, 33 percent if he used profane language in private, 30 percent if he saw a psychiatrist, and 21 percent if he wore blue jeans to the Oval Office occasionally. Seventeen percent would object strongly if he were divorced, and 14 percent if he had a cocktail before dinner. ♦

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