

STICKS AND STONES

Words hurled against women's studies from the far right cannot hurt us, but a weakened economy requires our vigilance

THE FAR RIGHT HAS BEEN AFTER WOMEN'S STUDIES FOR MORE THAN A DECADE now—Lynne Cheney's *Telling the Truth*, published back in 1995, argued that the field undermined the basis of American education by critiquing traditional Western heritage and ideas. As her title suggested, Cheney, along with other right-wing critics, argued that women's studies was politically motivated rather than fact-based scholarship.

Cheney's mantle was grabbed by conservative rabble-rouser David Horowitz, who, in his most recent anti-academia diatribe, *One-Party Classroom*, lists the "150 worst courses" in American higher education—over 60 of which center on women's, gender and sexuality issues. It appears as though Horowitz's "research" consists of surfing the Web to find course titles, syllabi and concepts that he hopes will sound unfamiliar to the lay public, such as "queer theory," and then ridiculing them as a waste of time and money.

While scholars in women's, gender and sexuality studies will gladly remind the public why their scholarship is so valuable, others feel exhausted responding to routine attempts to discredit them—a tactic feminist scholar and University of Arizona professor Annette Kolodny has characterized as anti-feminist intellectual *harassment*. And, occasionally, right-wing arguments gain a bit of traction in conservative political enclaves: This past February, two Republican legislators in Georgia, backed by the Christian Coalition, suggested that taxpayers should not have to pay the salaries of two Georgia State University professors who have researched sexual matters. But after hearing the accused testify in a hearing, state legislators learned that Kirk Elifson is a former Army captain whose research on gay male prostitutes helps prevent the spread of HIV, and Mindy Stompler studies the way oral sex has become all-too-casually accepted among young teens. Even the Republican committee chair who oversaw the hearing deemed their research "legitimate."

Despite their efforts, right-wing critics have failed to discredit the flourishing field of women's studies, and its offerings have become on some campuses a core requirement for undergraduate students. "Our academic mission has been respected, and we've been encouraged to grow significantly from our 'humble' beginnings," says Claire Moses, professor of women's studies and former chair of the department at the University of Maryland. Some of the more established women's studies "programs" are turning into even stronger "departments," Moses points out, with independent budgets and their own faculty.

Of concern to everyone in academia right now, however, is the faltering economy. Especially at public universities, which depend on state funding, there have been across-the-board reductions in the face of decreasing budgets. The humanities and social sciences, under which women's studies often resides, could be particularly vulnerable, says Moses, because the sciences tend to get larger grants. It may be time for women's studies to advertise the work that *does* bring in major grants and contributes to national questions like why there are still few girls and women in technology and engineering. Women's studies also is interdisciplinary, which can make it appealing to schools because it draws from established faculty, but in difficult times may be an easier target for faculty cutbacks.

Thus, we must stay vigilant and keep fighting for our fair share of resources. We've proved our worth as an academic field, and as our graduates go forth into the world they will continue to show that women's studies produces valuable "products" indeed. ■

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