

The Birth and Growth of "Friends of Women's Studies" at the University of Cincinnati

Laura S. Struminger

Every day, from September through May, for the past six years I have greeted my colleagues in the Center for Women's Studies with a question: "How many Friends do we have?" I wasn't paranoid; I was checking and rechecking and checking once again on the health of a young organization—"Friends of Women's Studies." The following essay is an attempt to explain how Friends came about, how it functions, and what it has accomplished. It is meant, in part, as a response to the many women's studies directors who have phoned and written to ask, "How can I start a Friends group?" It is also meant as a tribute to the wonderful women with whom I have worked who shared my dream and turned it into a reality.

I arrived at the University of Cincinnati in July of 1979 to assume the directorship of the Women's Studies Program, which was then five years old. The university's crowded campus had given rise to many programs for its 36,000 students, but many had also languished because of lack of funds and energy. The Center for Women's Studies had achieved a small niche—an office in an out-of-the-way building, a part-time assistant, and a secretary. But despite enthusiastic faculty, a potpourri of wonderful programs, and a regular newsletter, the program had little visibility on campus and very little in the larger community. I was determined to bring women's studies to a much larger audience. I believed then, as I still do, that women's studies courses, lectures, symposia, and publications are too good to keep to ourselves.

Laura S. Struminger is a social historian of France who has written extensively about working women in the last century, about the attempt to model the behavior of poor girls and boys along gender-differentiated lines, and about the visions of an egalitarian society held by nineteenth-century feminists. She has recently completed a biography of Flora Tristan and is currently working on women's role in the revolutions of 1848. Struminger has also contributed to the understanding of Cincinnati women's history by organizing the publication of three volumes of essays highlighting their activities. She writes, "When I first drafted this article several months ago, I did not know that I would leave the directorship of the Center for Women's Studies to become acting vice provost for academic planning in August, 1985. To my delight the Center and the Friends are thriving. I have moved over to the volunteer ranks in the Friends of Women's Studies and I am still a women's studies faculty member."

In the spring of 1980, I brought together a handful of faculty and a somewhat larger group of community women to begin an open-ended dialogue on the significance of women's studies on campus and in the community. That dialogue continues and has expanded over the years to include thousands of participants and to address every significant issue facing women today. The immediate outcome of this extended discourse was the creation of Friends of Women's Studies, an organization devoted to supporting the Center. The longer term outcome has been the personal and communal growth of women's studies faculty and Friends. A description and analysis of three recent events will illustrate the current dimensions of this dialogue.

"The Economic Consequences of Divorce" (March 7, 1985)

This program took place at a downtown hotel and attracted about 500 participants. The \$5,000 budget was shared by Friends of Women's Studies, several campus and community groups, and the Center for Women's Studies. Registration was free. The Center adopted this program as the sixth in its series of "Women and Public Policy" symposia, designed to focus attention on those women's concerns on which policy makers can have an impact. Previous programs had studied social security, child care, pay equity, job stress, and the economic impact of mili-

tary spending. "The Consequences of Divorce," like our previous sessions, attracted professionals as well as those personally concerned with the issues under discussion.

In agreeing to sponsor this program, I accepted the responsibility of forming the planning committee—which included a prominent attorney and women's rights advocate, the director of a local program called "Strengthening Families after Divorce," the assistant dean of the College of Law, the past president of the Young Women Lawyers group (all of whom were already Friends), and the Center's graduate assistant—and of contributing women's studies funds, staff time, and expertise on program planning. Lengthy deliberations followed, reflecting the needs of each constituent group, and a program was finally designed to meet the overlapping needs of the legal community, social service workers, and women going through, or contemplating, divorce. The keynote speaker, Lenore Weitzman, author of *The Marriage Contract*, was chosen unanimously. Both judges of our local domestic relations courts, a senior referee, the chair of the domestic relations committee of the Cincinnati Bar Association, a psychologist, and a sociologist formed a panel of questioners to respond to her talk. Workshops focusing on specific problems like the mediation of child custody, the division of property, the allocation of alimony and child support, and financial planning concluded the program.

The Domestic Relations Court of Hamilton County closed for the day of the symposium so that all of its personnel could participate in the program. An extensive mail campaign to targeted community leaders, lawyers, social workers, and Friends of Women's Studies produced a large and relatively informed audience that was enthusiastic about the speakers and the workshops. Some members of the audience expressed surprise at learning that their experiences were the norm and not atypical "horror stories." Others echoed the hopes of planners: "Perhaps the judges will gain some comprehension [of] the financial-struggle women really have."

Publicity in local newspapers raised consciousness far beyond the 500 people who actually attended the sessions. As a result of the conference, a local civic group has decided to create a task force to push for divorce equity in Hamilton County; the chair of the committee is a Friend of Women's Studies.

"Emeritae: Women Leaders of the University of Cincinnati" (March 9-23, 1985)

The planning of this program resulted from a conversation between a faculty member and a Friend about the lack of women's portraits in university hallways, board rooms, and other meeting places. Their suggestion that the Center for Women's Studies "do something about it" was based on the perception that students and faculty need more women role models. I quickly decided to devote time, energy, and money to this project, a particularly appropriate one for the program's tenth anniversary year. The creation of a team to work on the project took some more time because it involved the cooperation of a graphic artist on the faculty, a graduate of the College of Design, Art, Architecture and Planning (both of them Friends of Women's Studies), an English and women's studies

graduate student, and considerable administrative support from the Center for Women's Studies. The goal was to create an exhibit of portraits of women leaders of the University of Cincinnati that would hang in the University Art Gallery, and a catalogue that would reach those who could not attend the exhibit.

Identifying women for the exhibit was time consuming. A survey of all the university's holdings of women's portraits turned up several whose subjects could not be identified by our research team, and several serious lacunae. A hunt for photographs of outstanding women that could be used in the show continued for eight months and yielded few additions. We finally decided to hold the show with thirty-one portraits—eighteen oils, twelve photographs (enlarged to poster size), and one bust. The archives of the university, as well as the public relations office, were combed for information, and production of the catalogue began. The enormous expense of producing a glossy catalogue was offset by the cooperation of the Cincinnati Historical Society, which agreed to include the entire catalogue as a chapter in an anthology of Cincinnati's women's history that was jointly published by the Historical Society and the Center for Women's Studies. This publishing arrangement also, not insignificantly, added greatly to the number of people who would receive copies of the catalogue—in all, 6,000 were printed and distributed. About 1,500 people attended the exhibit, others saw it featured in local media, and still others saw it applauded in the May 15, 1985, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Women's studies faculty appreciated the effort that made them aware of their strong women predecessors at the university. One wrote: "Melrose Pitman, especially, struck me as someone whose interests somewhat parallel mine: dance, New Mexico, organic gardening methods, spiritually attracted to the East. I shall seek out her poetry." Another shared a copy of the catalogue with nursing faculty colleagues: "We have experienced a sense of renewal and pride as we reviewed the accomplishments of our forerunners. We have traditions of excellence to extend!"

"Women's Studies Presents" (April 13, 1985)

This annual spring program has two goals: acquainting Friends with women's studies faculty and course offerings, and honoring distinguished women graduates of the University of Cincinnati. The program has been successfully offered four times in conjunction with the University of Cincinnati Office of Alumni Affairs, which helps to organize the luncheon and underwrites the cost of publicity. Planning for the event is the responsibility of the Friends board, which advertises a competition for awards for distinguished alumnae and chooses the recipients on the basis of their professional accomplishments and their demonstrated commitment to the advancement of women. The workshops are led by women's studies faculty, who have enjoyed the opportunity of sharing some of their course materials with Friends. Topics have included "Sexism in the Classroom"; "Images of Women in Literature: Some New Perspectives"; "Psychology Discovers Women"; "A New Song: Rediscovering

Women's Music"; "Women in India: A Real Minority"; "Sex Roles in Culture: Realities of Change"; "Sappho and the Poetry of Women in Ancient Greece"; "Let's Talk about Nonverbal Communication"; "Gender, Popular Culture, and Soap Operas in Latin America"; "Political Power in the Health Care Arena." Faculty and Friends have shared their enthusiasm for "Women's Studies Presents" with the families and friends of the award winners; publicity about the award winners in local newspapers has carried a positive image of women's studies to the larger community.

These brief descriptions of recent programs illustrate how the relationship between Friends and faculty has enriched each group as well as the university and the greater community of which we are a part. None of the programs described above would have been possible without the active cooperation of Friends and faculty. For example, the idea for a symposium on the economics of divorce was first suggested by a woman lawyer, a Friend of Women's Studies, who was familiar with previous programs and was confident that the Center for Women's Studies was the best organization to bring this information to the public, especially to the leadership of the Domestic Relations Committee of the Cincinnati Bar Association. Other Friends of Women's Studies played active roles in "finding" money to cover conference costs. Still others used their community networks to publicize it. Subsequently, women's studies faculty and Friends participated in sessions that provided helpful evaluations for next year's planners. The "Emeritae" program called in a different group of Friends—artists and photographers and researchers and designers—who gave their time and energy to produce a magnificent moment for all of us. Finally, our annual "Women's Studies Presents" is the event that brings together new Friends and old, faculty and staff, and swelling ranks of distinguished alumnae. While you are reading this article, groups of women are gathering to read nominations for these awards; women's studies faculty have already been chosen to lead workshops; publicity for the event is under way.

Some of the support of Friends and faculty is quantifiable: the 470 Friends paid \$7,700 dues in 1984-85, and have raised an endowment now totaling \$205,000; the forty-eight faculty teach 2,500 students annually in seventy-two different courses and participate in myriad programs, workshops, and committees. But this is only part of the ongoing interaction. Friends' dues support research mini-grants in women's studies that are frequently won by faculty and their graduate students; likewise Friends take courses and attend seminars enriched by this very research. The endowment has made possible the creation of the position of visiting professor in women's studies, whose incumbents have been an annual catalyst to intellectual stimulation of faculty, students, and Friends.

Less measurable benefits of the extension of our women's studies programming to include a vigorous community support group are often expressed by faculty and Friends. The former tend to appreciate the security for the program ("a safety net") provided by the Friends as

well as the personal feeling of support for women's studies scholarship, which is frequently devalued by traditional colleagues. As one faculty member put it recently, "Knowing there is community support just makes me feel good!" Friends, on the other hand, tend to appreciate the intellectual stimulation of women's studies courses and exposure to faculty. One explained, "The synergism that evolves from integrating women's studies into other disciplines makes university life seem open, concerned, and growing." Another remarked that women's studies has given her feminist feelings intellectual grounding and, therefore, support. Some faculty recognize the power of Friends to raise the consciousness of the university administration, and some Friends feel that their support of women's studies has given focus to their concern about women's issues and put them in touch with other isolated, like-minded women.

The comments of faculty and Friends attest to the reciprocal nature of their relationship. Women's studies faculty frequently work in isolation from their traditional colleagues and are more or less battered by the academic system. Feminists in the community are, likewise, isolated from sources of validation for their feelings and ideas. But these two groups are in a good position to support each other. The Center for Women's Studies has made it possible for scholars, students, and community activists to meet on common concerns and to work together for lasting changes.

Though today it is hard to imagine our Center without Friends of Women's Studies, I had no blueprint for the organization when I arrived at the University of Cincinnati. The group evolved as have many other aspects of women's studies programs, experientially, with constant reevaluation and refinement of objectives, with a good deal of participation from faculty and students. Although extraordinary energy was needed to keep the organization going, the Friends provided important sustenance for the Center's staff and faculty every step of the way.

Six years ago, the Center for Women's Studies at the University of Cincinnati was a growing program, attracting new courses, more students, and keen faculty interest, yet the university was in a period of stasis and faced serious problems of declining revenues. Women's studies needed funding for speakers, travel grants, scholarships, and faculty development, and it was increasingly clear that the money would not be found inside the university. Looking at the national presidential hopefuls left me pessimistic about funding opportunities from federal sources (a prediction that proved woefully accurate). The Ohio Program on the Humanities was generous, but could not meet all our needs. A survey of the other successful units on my campus pointed out the existence of "friends" groups—Friends of the Library, Friends of the College Conservatory of Music—and I thought . . . why not Friends of Women's Studies?

I launched a trial balloon in a talk I gave to a women's civic organization. I asked those present if they would like to help create a community support group for the Center for Women's Studies. To my surprise and delight, there was a positive response from graduates of women's col-

leges who were familiar with women's studies developments at their alma maters. Careful planning went into the first meeting, which took place, strategically, at the home of the university president. Effort was expended to insure a socially and racially diverse group of all ages. The occasion was highlighted by the presentation of women's studies scholarships to seven women science majors, made possible by a one-time grant from the provost's office. The guests were asked to sign the Friends



logo, designed by a feminist graphic artist to represent a circle of diverse people, and to join Friends by contributing a minimum of \$10. We pledged that the first \$1,000 we collected would be returned to the community in the form of scholarships for returning women students.

Within a few months we had the funds and announced our scholarship. Applications poured in, and a committee of faculty and Friends chose ten winners, awarding them equal stipends of \$100. This event started the fruitful dialogue between faculty and Friends and reconfirmed my impression that there was a multi-faceted need for community involvement in the Center for Women's Studies. A short time after the publicity faded, the university announced the creation of an \$18,000 fund for scholarships for nontraditional students. We were temporarily euphoric.

Friends membership grew slowly to seventy-five the first year. A group of ten to fifteen women began to meet once a month in members' homes to plan events, to discuss ways to attract more members, and to continue to explore the meaning of women's studies. We collectively planned and celebrated the triumph of our early programs—the first "Women's Studies Presents," the second "Public

Policy Symposium," a major program on women and the arts called, "From Cloisters to Cosmos." And we all talked about membership. Bringing new people to each event and getting them to join us was our constant goal.

During the third year, with membership approaching 250 and many successful programs completed, the leaders of the group were ready to draw up by-laws and form a board. This marked the beginning of the important process of weaning the Friends from my constant support and personal direction: they had reached a point where they were ready to assume leadership roles in the new organization. The Friends board meets regularly six times a year to plan programs, allocate its annual dues income, and discuss future goals and directions. This year it has initiated a special course for Friends called "New Ideas About Women."

Several of the projects initiated by Friends have led to a healthy testing of feminist commitment. For example, a 1983 project to produce a calendar honoring local women led to a stormy discussion of the most appropriate role models for young women today. The board discussed tokenism and representation, women entrepreneurs and business ethics, individual differences and bias. One particularly difficult debate arose over the inclusion of a black woman doctor who was recommended by a board member as an outstanding role model. Indeed the doctor seemed perfect—an early graduate of the College of Medicine who still maintained family practice in a low-income neighborhood. I was ready to have her be our January cover when several board members who were active in Planned Parenthood revealed that this doctor was an outspoken opponent of freedom of choice and had used her position on medical boards to sabotage Planned Parenthood. The ensuing discussion was heated, and the vote to replace the doctor was not unanimous, but the board survived the debate, strengthened by an open airing of priorities and a respect for the decision of the group.

These debates on the board paralleled debates among women's studies faculty, who were rarely unanimous in their approval of actions taken by the Center. For example, the amount of time I spent on Friends was viewed by some faculty as "elitism." They wondered why I was not doing more for faculty. These issues were debated openly in faculty committees and led to a respect for differences while reaffirming our basic commitments to improving the education of women. The ultimate reason for the success of the Center for Women's Studies is that we all feel we are doing something positive for women at the university and in the larger community. We do not feel that we all have to do the same thing at the same pace.

There have been many proofs of our success, ranging from continuous support from the university's administration to co-sponsorship of our activities by major cultural, civic, labor, and philanthropic institutions in the city. I think that this is so because energetic people energize others; creativity is contagious; sharing ideas leads to more and better ideas. This wisdom helps us fight to educate our daughters and sons so that they may join us in our quest for our past, in giving meaning to our present, and in leaving meaningful choices for those who follow.