

“Are we Getting it Right? The State of Women’s Studies Departments”

Debate at the University of Virginia

Amy Richards, debating the affirmative.

Jennifer Roback Morse, Ph.D. debating the negative.

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Prepared Opening Remarks by Jennifer Roback Morse, Ph.D.

Our topic today is whether Women’s Studies Departments in general are “getting it right.” Is there any legitimate reason why the taxpayers should support an academic department devoted to the study of feminism and women? Has feminism improved the lives of women?

I will argue that there is no legitimate reason why the taxpayers of Virginia should support academic departments devoted solely to women and feminism. The feminist movement has not made people happy, but has contributed to unnecessary and unbelievable conflict between men and women.

A Room of Its Own? Does the study of women require its own academic department?

Should the taxpayers support academic departments devoted solely to the study of women and the promotion of the feminist ideology? As an academic matter, it is completely unnecessary. Serious scholars currently located in Women’s Studies Departments could become parts of other departments such as English, psychology, anthropology or sociology. In fact, many of them already have joint appointments in other departments. The faculty research in the Women’s Studies Departments doing should be able to survive the scrutiny of other scholars in their primary discipline. If it can not, there is certainly no reason to support it within a separate department.

Women students do not need special support in today’s academic world. The fields in which women continue to be under represented are fields in which women are already being heavily recruited and courted. Many schools and companies have outreach programs specifically designed to attract more women into science and engineering.¹ Yet despite these outreach efforts, the fields remain stubbornly male.

Besides, who among us is willing to sacrifice their own natural interests in order to “win one for the girls?” I spent my academic career in economics, a male-dominated field. I found myself attracted to the more humanistic parts of the discipline. I would have had to distort my own intellect and interests to force myself into the extreme male mold that would have been required to succeed in the more mathematical areas of economics. I was unwilling to do that for myself. I can not in good conscience encourage other people to cram themselves into academic slots that don’t really fit them.

Overall, women outnumber men among undergraduates. For undergraduates of the

¹Warren Farrell, **Why Men Earn More**, (New York: Amacon, 2005) pp. 25-27.

traditional college age, under 25, a clear female majority emerged a decade ago. The male share of undergraduates dropped from 49% in 1995-96 to 46% in 2003-04. Among undergraduates who are aged 25 and older, women outnumber men almost 2 to 1. The largest gender gap is among African-American undergraduates, where males make up a mere 40% of the under 25 aged students.² This is hardly evidence of an oppressed minority who needs a continual hand-up from the establishment.

In fact, the gender imbalance in higher education is now a social problem for women themselves. Educated women, particularly African American women, are having a hard time finding suitable marriage partners. There are simply not enough educated men to go around. As a result, some educated women are giving up on marriage completely, and choosing single motherhood, with all its accompanying problems and risks, simply by default.

Do we need a Men's Studies or Life Studies Department?

Therefore, we do not need Women's Studies Departments to give women students additional encouragement and support. If anything, we need a Men's Studies Department that would ask why men are retreating from higher education. We should have a Men's Center on campus to encourage men to invest in themselves, for their own benefit and the benefit of the wider society.

There are other interesting topics that for the Men's Studies Department to study. For instance, why do men commit suicide so much more often than women? Men in general commit suicide at four times the rate that women do.³ Married men are only half as likely as bachelors and about one-third as likely as divorced men to take their own lives. In other words, getting married cuts a man's suicide risk in half. Getting divorced triples his probability of suicide.⁴ And a man whose wife dies is about ten times more likely to commit suicide than a wife whose husband dies.⁵

A Men's Studies Department might ask why do children do better with single fathers than with single mothers? Even when income is held constant, children who live with their fathers full-time had higher self-esteem and less anxiety, depression and fewer problem behaviors than children who were with their mothers full-time. Children in father custody have the advantage of maintaining a more positive relationship with the mother, than do children in mother custody. The greater income of the father is not the source of the benefit to the children, but an additional

²[American Council on Education](#), July 11, 2006 report, [Gender Equity in Higher Education: 2006](#).

³[Http://www.nimh.nih.gov/suicideprevention/suicidefaq.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/suicideprevention/suicidefaq.cfm)

⁴Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, **The Case for Marriage**, (NY: Doubleday, 2000) pp. 52.

⁵Warren Farrell, **The Myth of Male Power**, (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1993) pg 165.

benefit.⁶

And while we're on the subject of divorce, scholars of Mens' Studies might ask whether it is really true that divorced men have "abandoned" their families, when two-thirds to three-quarters of divorces are initiated by women.⁷ The vast majority of these divorces do not involve anything remotely like domestic violence.⁸ Students more interested in activism than in scholarship might want to fight the injustice so frequently perpetrated by divorce courts, which enforce non-custodial fathers' obligations to pay financial support much more strenuously than their rights to visit their children.⁹ Governmental agencies take a dim view of fathers who fail to

⁶Warren Farrell, **Father and Child Reunion**, (NY: Putnam, 2001) pg. 42. K. Alison Clarke-Stewart and Craig Hayward, (1996) "Advantages of Father Custody and Contact for the Psychological Well-Being of School-Age Children," **Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology**, 17: 239-270.

⁷ Sanford L. Braver and Diane O'Connell, **Divorced Dads, Shattering the Myths**, (NY: Putnam Books, 1998), pp. 124-135.

⁸Margaret F. Brinig and Douglas W. Allen, "These Boots are Made for Walking: Why Wives file for Divorce," **American Law and Economics Review**, Vol. 2, (2000) 126, examine the reasons offered for divorce in Virginia, one of the few states that allows people to offer cruelty as a grounds for fault divorce. Only 6% of those filing for divorce cited cruelty as a reason.

Another study asked couples to list problems in their marriage. Violence wasn't even a category. However, only 20% listed "gets angry easily" as a problem behavior for husbands, only 4% listed "has had sex with someone else," and only 6% of husbands were described as "drinks or uses drugs." Of the couples in this study, 12.5% ultimately divorced. This shows that the potential indicators of "high conflict" marriages were not a factor in the vast majority of marriages, and probably not even a factor in most of the marriages that ended in divorce. Paul R. Amato and Stacy J. Rogers, "A Longitudinal Study of Marital Problems and Subsequent Divorce," **Journal of Marriage and the Family**, 59 No. 3. (August 1997) 612-624. Another survey of 256 people who had been divorced at one time or another asked "what was the principle reason you got a divorce?" Sixteen percent reported drug or alcohol problems as the principle reason, while only 5% reported abuse as the principle reason. Fully 47% listed "basic personality differences or incompatibility" as the principle reason for their divorce, while 17% listed marital infidelity and 10% reported disputes about money or children. **Statistical Handbook on the American Family**, Bruce A. Chadwick and Tim B. Heaton, editors (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1992), Table C3-6, pg. 98.

⁹Sanford L. Braver, Ph.D., with Diane O'Connell, **Divorced Dads: Shattering the Myths**, (New York: Putnam, 1998), pp. 28-34, 168-70. Judith A. Seltzer also finds that compliance with child support awards are higher among men who have regular contact with their children. "Consequences of Marital Dissolution for Children," **Annual Review of Sociology**, 20: 235-266, esp. pp. 245-7; and "Father by Law: Effects of Joint Legal Custody on Nonresident Fathers' Involvement with Children," **Demography**, 35, No. 2, (May 1998), 135-146.

pay. But these same agencies are indifferent when women actively interfere with their children's rights to have relationships with their father.

Men's Studies scholars should investigate why little boys are so much more emotionally vulnerable than little girls. For instance, a study examining the impact of maternal depression on the cognitive development of children, found no affect on girls.¹⁰ But the boys of depressed mothers scored a full standard deviation lower on standardized intelligence tests than boys whose mothers were not depressed. Developmental differences between girls and boys are so commonly found that child development experts more or less take them for granted. In this particular study of maternal depression, the researchers suggest, "because infant boys as a group are already developmentally delayed compared with girls, their abilities to regulate their attention and emotions and find order in the world are particularly in need of help from a sensitive healthy caregiver."

Why are men over-represented in the "death professions?" Of the deaths that occur in the workplace, 92% occur to men.¹¹ Jobs like timber cutters and fishers, pilots and navigators, roofers, cab drivers, truck drivers and construction laborers have among the highest risks of death. These have traditionally been male-dominated occupations.

We might also ask ourselves why those women who do work in dangerous occupations are so much less likely to die at work than are men. For instance, of the deaths in Iraq, less than 2.6% have been female, at a time when women comprised 10% of the forces deployed in Iraq. In other words, women who serve in Iraq will get equal pay with men, with only about one-fourth the chance of being killed compared with men.¹²

In addition to a Men's Studies Department to balance the Women's Studies Department, we should also have a Department of Life Studies to balance the pro-abortion ideology of Women's Studies Departments. The interdisciplinary Life Studies department would prepare young women and men for careers of activism and service within the pro-life movement. Women could receive the professional training they need to run a crisis pregnancy center, or raise funds for pro-life foundations, or manage medical clinics that deliver babies free of charge.

The Life Studies program might also have classes crossed-listed in embryology, to explain what the "blob of tissue," really is. That the "product of conception," is a human life, not from the time of "quickening" as medieval thinkers believed, not from the time of implantation in the womb, but from the moment of conception.

The Life Studies program could offer courses that explain what pro-life leaders actually believe, as opposed to the caricatures of their views so often presented in other classes. Students might learn about Norma McCorvey, who was the original Jane Roe of *Roe v. Wade*, how she

¹⁰"The Impact of Postnatal Depression on Boys' Intellectual Development," Deborah Sharp, Dale F. Hay, et.al. **Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry**, 36 No. 8 (1995), pp1315-1336, quote on page1334.

¹¹Farrell, **Why Men Earn More**, (New York: Amacon, 2005) pg. 27, note 20. Citing Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table A-7.

¹²Farrell, **Why Men Earn More**, pg. 30. Notes 28-29.

felt exploited by her pro-abortion attorneys, and why she eventually had a change of heart and converted to Catholicism. One has to admit in all candor that students are not likely to hear this kind of information in any other classes on campus.

Has feminism made people happy?

But enough about other academic departments. What about feminism itself? Has feminism made people happy? Feminists disagree amongst themselves on many crucial issues. Instead of trying to unravel those Byzantine threads, I will analyze the form of feminism that has filtered down in the mainstream culture. Feminism means roughly this: women and men are the same, except women are better. So my question is this: has the systematic denial of genuine gender differences made people happy?

On the contrary, this has been a disaster for men and women alike. Differences between the sexes appear at birth. As we mature, everything that has to do with sex or reproduction affects men and women differently. Men and women react to the sex act itself differently. Women frequently are more eager to get married and start families earlier than men are. If a couple has trouble conceiving, the man and woman experience infertility very differently. If they do have a child, they react to the woman's pregnancy differently, they treat the baby differently, and the baby treats them differently. As their child grows up, mothers and fathers have different approaches to parenting.

If a couple can not admit these most basic differences, they are headed for conflict and grief. They will expect the other person to feel what they feel, see things as they do, and then feel cheated when they don't. The demand for equal sharing of household chores runs afoul this same problem: men and women are sensitive to different needs within the household.

This is why sociologists have so often found that gender equality ideology is correlated with marital dissatisfaction among wives. Women who cling to the feminist ideology continually feel cheated. By contrast, wives who feel appreciated by their husbands for her contributions, report higher levels of marital satisfaction. This is even true among wives who do the lion's share of the housework. Recent findings suggest that women are happiest when they feel their husbands are emotionally engaged with them, regardless of the division of household chores. The feminist attempt to overlook or explain away systematic differences between men and women

has made people miserable.¹³

Feminism has taken the personal relationship that is the most important to most people, namely marriage, and injected poison into it. As the relationship between mothers and fathers, marriage is also the most basic unit of social cooperation. When marriage breaks down, the substitutes for it are crude and ineffective and intrusive.

No university needs a department devoted solely to the study of women and the promotion of this socially destructive ideology. The intellectual life of the university will go along just fine without a Women's Studies Department. The taxpayers should stop paying for the promotion of feminism.

¹³ The suggestion that feminist ideology correlates with marital dissatisfaction among women has been in the literature at least since 1993. Diane N. Lye and Timothy J. Biblarz, "The Effect of Attitudes Toward Family Life and Gender Roles on Marital Satisfaction," **Journal of Family Issues**, Vol. 14, no. 2 (June 1993) 157-188. According to Margaret F. Brinig and Steven L. Nock, "The most stable marriages are those in which the work inequality was recognized by *both spouses* (both partners agreed that the division of labor was unfair to the wife). This suggests that husband's appreciation of the gift his wife makes by her disproportionate efforts may be more important than achieving strict equality ." "I only want trust: Norms, Trust and Autonomy," **Journal of Socio-Economics**, 2003, citing also their earlier work, Brinig, M.F., "Divorce and division of labor," In: Rowthorn, R., Dnes, A.W. (Eds.), **Marriage and Divorce: An Economic Perspective**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003). Most recently, W. Bradford Wilcox and Steven L. Nock found that women are happiest with their marriages when they perceive that their husbands are emotionally engaged with them, and they consider the division of household labor to be fair. These wives do the lion's share of the child care and housework, but their perceptions of fairness include appreciation of their husbands' financial and physical contributions to the household. "What's Love Got to Do With It? Equality, Equity, Commitment and Women's Marital Quality," *Social Forces*, Vol. 84, No. 3, March 2006, pp. 1321-1345.

Five minute closing statement.

In 1991, I was a tenured professor of economics at George Mason University. I received a phone call from a dear friend of mine, Jonathan R.T. Hughes, who was one of the Great Men of Economic History. He had received our adoption announcement for the arrival of our two and a half year old son from Romania. He had also heard through the grapevine that I was pregnant. And, as I knew, Jonathan Hughes had terminal cancer.

So he called me up to congratulate me on our new arrival and to coo over the photo I had sent him. Then he said, “when you get to be my age, you realize that being a parent was the one thing in life that was really worth doing.” Mind you, Jon had a distinguished teaching and publishing career. But that was how he saw his own life from his death bed. He went on, “Enjoy your kids while they are young. The university will still be there after they have grown up.”

I wanted to take his advice, but I was afraid to quit my job. I’ll never get another tenured position, I told myself. Yet the tug, the pull of the children was unmistakable. And our son had genuine needs. He’d had plenty of institutional care in his orphanage in Romania. He needed a Mommy. That would be me.

My husband had moved to the DC area for the sake of my teaching job at Mason. He is a nuts and bolts engineer. There was nothing really for him in DC. He had worked with the same contracting firm for ten years. By 1996, he deeply wanted to move to California to join a laser company and get in on the high tech boom. I was finally ready to let go.

I took a leap of faith and went with my husband. When we left the DC area, I did not have another job lined up. I made a decision that the family would be my first priority, and I would fit my work in around the edges of my full-time job. As it happened, part time research and writing positions fell into my lap. I had all the work I wanted.

During those years, our family had any number of problems to deal with. Death and dying, mental illness and physical illness, all came into our immediate world. The fact that I had made myself available to my children meant that we had some “slack” in our family system to deal with these problems as they arose. As a bonus, I got the opportunity to do many other wonderful things I didn’t have time for when I was working full-time. I could actually plan vacations and outings for our family. I could help at the kids’ schools, and bring casseroles to sick friends. I got to have friends, dear women friends, really for the first time since high school. We were foster parents for three years, to a total of eight children.

And you know what? Jonathan Hughes was right: the university is still here. Here I am. University life hasn’t changed all that much. It is almost as if I never left.

The women’s movement needs to abandon its old tired Leftist and Radical roots. We need a new women’s movement. We are living long enough that we can “have it all,” just not all at once. Young women today feel they must build their careers before they can start their families. But if we do that, our peak fertility years are behind us. Many of us miss the chance for marriage and family altogether. The new women’s movement would ask employers and universities to accommodate us when we return to the public sphere after decades of nurturing the private sphere. The new women’s movement would seek career paths designed to work for us, instead of trying to compete on career paths designed for men’s needs as husbands and fathers.

The new women’s movement could be based on respect for and appreciation of the distinct strengths men and women each bring to a marriage. Instead of demanding equality

between the inherently unequal, we could set a higher standard for cooperation and complementarity. Instead of enshrining the most extreme form of radical individualism into marriage, we could work to make marriage more durable, for the mutual benefit of the spouses, for their children and the wider society. That is my vision for what the women's movement should have been, and could yet become.