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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

Crossing Borders, Transforming Knowledge: Celebrating 25 Years of the Women and Politics Program at Rutgers University

Introduction

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This issue's Critical Perspectives section highlights the intellectual contributions of the Women and Politics program at Rutgers University to the study of gender and politics. The program recently celebrated its 25th anniversary. Women and Politics was designated as a Ph.D. field in political science at Rutgers in the mid-1980s. In 1986, we admitted our first cohort of graduate students and offered, for the first time, the core required course taken by all majors and minors in the field of Women and Politics.

The Rutgers Women and Politics program focuses on rethinking and reanalyzing traditional scholarship on governing institutions, political processes, and theories of politics through the prism of gender. The analytic concerns and theoretical questions at the heart of the Women and Politics field cut across the subject matter of the various traditional fields of political science. Investigating the central problems of democratic theory and practice, the Women and Politics program examines the exclusion of women from the practices of citizenship and from equal participation in political decision-making processes. The program also explores the institutionalization of androcentric conceptions within the discipline of political science and the entrenchment of gendered practices of citizenship and leadership within contemporary politics. Central to the field's analysis of politics from a gendered perspective is a recognition of the importance of the mutually constitutive relationships and interplay among race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender.

The essays in this section highlight two defining features of the Women and Politics program. The first is the conscious positioning of the program on the border between Political Science and

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interdisciplinary feminist scholarship, with a focus on producing work that creatively negotiates between, contributes to, and expands both bodies of literature. Ph.D. students in Women and Politics are trained in both Political Science and Women's and Gender Studies (and sometimes other cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary areas of study) and are continually encouraged to consider how interdisciplinary frameworks and approaches can inform and contribute to their research and to our collective understanding of politics.

The second defining feature is the positioning of the program on the perhaps even more controversial border between theory and practice. Ph.D. students are urged to interrogate and work across this boundary in their research and teaching. Many participate in projects at the Center for American Women and Politics, the Center for Women's Global Leadership, or other centers and institutes on campus that have a more applied focus; this hands-on involvement further provokes a critical examination of the connections and disjunctures between academic theory and political practice. In producing scholarship, students are encouraged to think about the practical as well as the academic implications of their own research.

Faculty and students in the Women and Politics program are passionately committed to transforming, not merely reproducing, political science and the way that politics is conceptualized and studied. Rutgers Ph.D.s take pride not only in being well trained in disciplinary literature and methodologically equipped to do research, but also in pushing the disciplinary envelope — even when the mainstream of the discipline is unresponsive or even resistant to such pushing.

The essays that follow highlight some of the imaginative and creative scholarship that has been produced by Rutgers Ph.D.s trained in Women and Politics during the program's first quarter century. Each contributing scholar in her own research has worked across traditional disciplinary/field boundaries (often not just Political Science and Women's and Gender Studies, but also racial and ethnic studies, sexuality studies, and the law) and centrally engaged questions that have practical as well as academic implications. The contributors to this symposium all consider the ways that combining disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives and/or interrogating the division between theory and practice have influenced their own intellectual trajectories.

Several of the essays highlight how interdisciplinary feminist scholarship provided a critical lens and important insights that allowed

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scholars to examine key concepts and areas of study in transformative ways. Claire Snyder-Hall kicks off this symposium with an essay that chronicles how interdisciplinary perspectives and an activist commitment influenced her intellectual work as she built bridges between feminist scholarship and mainstream debates in areas as diverse as civic republicanism, military policy, and sexuality studies. Nikol Alexander-Floyd reflects upon the meaning of interdisciplinarity and its potential role in the development of a new political science, demonstrating how an interdisciplinary Black feminist frame of reference has enriched her examination of gender and Black politics. Concerned with the way conservative women's activism was overlooked in feminist scholarship, Ronnee Schreiber describes how centering conservative women in her research led her to reassess conventional understandings of identity, representation, and conservative movement politics. Cristina Beltrán explains how her exposure to interdisciplinary feminist and queer theory provoked her development of a nonfoundationalist account of Latino identity; she also challenges women and politics scholars to engage more seriously with Latino studies in order to benefit from the insights of scholars in that field.

The final three essays focus more centrally on the relationship between theory and practice. Based on her research in political economy, Kate Bedford argues that the frame of equal harmonious partnership between more-caring men and harder-working women, widely embraced by transnational institutions, has had a number of negative policy consequences. She also examines activism within academia, urging readers to push for greater valuation of teaching and to resist the increasing corporatization of the university. Rose Corrigan describes how her activist work as a service provider in the area of sexual assault and domestic violence influenced her academic research and calls for scholars to take seriously the criticisms of feminism offered by rape care advocates and others involved in local women's organizations. Examining implementation of a women's human-rights law passed in San Francisco in 1998, Debra J. Liebowitz illustrates the gaps that can occur between theoretical articulations and political practice when those who conceive and implement policies do not share a common understanding of gender and gender analysis.

This set of essays spotlights and celebrates some of the important intellectual contributions made by scholars trained in Women and Politics at Rutgers during the past quarter century. I hope they will

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also provoke readers to consider anew the challenges and rewards of engaging in boundary-crossing research and inspire more scholars to pursue projects that help broaden and transform our conceptions of politics and the political.

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Reflections of a Politically Engaged Scholar

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I was delighted to be invited to participate in this symposium in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Women and Politics program at Rutgers because, to put it bluntly, I do not believe I could do the work that I do within the discipline of political science — interdisciplinary and normative research informed by feminist scholarship, democratic theory, and sexuality studies with an eye to practice — if not for the program, which played a key role in legitimizing feminist scholarship within the discipline of political science. When I entered the Rutgers Ph.D. program in 1988, as part of the third cohort, it was an exciting time. We were very much aware of being among the first students in the country able to make feminist scholarship a central part of our doctoral studies in political science, particularly those of us pursuing political theory. My entry into graduate school came on the heels of four years of political activism in the feminist, peace, and social justice movements, so the question of practice was pressing to me at the time and has always hovered around my academic work. The Women and Politics program was a perfect home for me because of the way in which it linked the theoretical and empirical questions of academic political science with the politically engaged concerns of women's and gender studies and

I would like to thank Susan Carroll for creating the Women and Politics program, teaching me, mentoring me, and working with me on this essay. I would also like to thank Linda Zerilli for the central role she played in my intellectual development, during my time at Rutgers.

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