Gender and Women’s Studies at GCC: A Brief History

Gender and Women’s Studies (GWS) at Greenfield Community College is an always evolving and progressive area of study that focuses on equity and the advancement of civil rights. Programs like the one at GCC are essential to one’s life journey and to the curriculum, especially in times where inequality, injustice, and threats to gender-specific freedoms are at the center of worldwide attention. Despite the substantial need for Gender and Women’s Studies programs, not all are fully supported. We, of the Gender and Women’s Studies Committee, are not only about offering GWS, but getting students excited about enrollment and involved in this important area of study.

Gender and Women’s Studies, a Liberal Arts Option, a focused way to complete an Associate in Arts degree at GCC, is an interdisciplinary area of study with courses in a variety of subject areas. GWS is not limited to women; it is an important and inclusive program that focuses on all gender identities. By choosing to enroll in GWS, students embark on a range of courses that not only strengthen core development but also enhance awareness of equity. GWS also provides a major framework for us to better understand history, our future, and each other, so we can accept one another, instead of judging and harming; we need to know that all humans matter.

As we explore the past few decades of GWS, it is important to begin with some history on how this program began at GCC. In the late 1970’s, the course Woman as Hero was offered.
In 1980, as Dr. Anne Wiley notes in her 2002 article, “Sustaining and Disbanding the Women’s Studies Committee at Greenfield Community College,” Virginia Low proposed and designed the courses Women in Literature I and Women in Literature II (Eng 247 & 248). Wiley further states that soon thereafter five women began GCC’s Women’s Studies program: Catherine Finnegan, Joanne Hayes, Mary Ellen Kelly, Phyllis Nahman, and Anne Wiley. These women were not only faculty at GCC, but they volunteered their time to launch this program.

As the Women’s Studies program slowly progressed at GCC, community involvement, readings, writings, outside speakers, and curriculum development provided interest and a constant learning path. With excitement, the founding group applied for and received a Ford Foundation Curriculum Grant in 1993. GCC was chosen out of several colleges nationally to receive it, and the Women’s Studies option began in the 1995-1996 academic year. In 1996, the American Association of Colleges and (AACU) selected GCC to receive grant money to integrate science and math courses into the Women’s Studies program. In addition, the Women in Transition (WIT) program and the Women’s Resource Center (WRC) were developed to help women attend GCC and accomplish their goals. Currently, the WRC offers a quiet space for tutoring and study groups, and a coordinator is available to provide help and support for outreach programs.

Gender and Women’s Studies courses have been a part of GCC for over 40 years, and Women’s Studies or Gender and Women’s Studies have been a Liberal Arts Degree Option for over 25 years. In the last two decades, the committee has focused on adding and adapting courses to current events and integrating them into the program under an updated (2010) title, Gender and Women Studies (LGW). Often, changes are made due to student enrollment, budget constraints, as well as the interest and availability of faculty to offer specific courses. GWS115
(formerly WST 115) is a required course, the foundation of the program, and students can choose from a number of GWS electives, such as the Sociology of Human Sexuality, Queer Literature, and Gender and the Environment. See Appendix: Progressive Course Chart, as well as the Gender and Women’s Studies webpage, www.gcc.mass.edu/academics/programs/Gender-and-womens-studies/.

One way that GWS has been able to keep student interest high is to hold events and host guest speakers that center around the curriculum and are relevant to current topics students are interested in. Events organized or supported by GWS include the following:

- Vagina Monologues
- Guest speaker Michael Kimmel
- One Billion Rising Dance
- Clothesline Project
- Guest speaker Nikki Giovanni
- Annual NELCWIT Fundraiser
- Photo exhibition on the Women’s March in Washington, D.C., by Mary Ellen Kelly

In addition to working on the above listed events, the faculty of the GWS program routinely meet to discuss articles and teaching strategies, supporting one another as they do this type of work.

Not only does the program have an impact on students, but it also has an impact on faculty, all of whom share dedication to the field of GWS and have specific areas of expertise. GWS faculty care deeply about the courses they teach. In interviews, faculty members shared that they came to this field by different paths. Longtime faculty and supporters, such as Dr. Anne Wiley and Professor Joanne Hayes, became passionate about teaching Women’s Studies/GWS because of personal history, and their curiosity and the waves of feminism were certainly influences. Professor Christine Jones-Monahan became passionate because of college
experiences and her military experience where she saw a great deal of inequality with respect to gender. Professor Linda McCarthy, who, along with Anne Wiley, often chairs the committee, has a love for Sociology and majored in Gender and Women’s Studies in college. Professor Wendy Barnes focuses on Queer Literature. In addition to the faculty noted above, more recent committee members include Claire Lobdell and Cindy Snow, and various staff and faculty have rotated in at different points, including Alyssa Arnell, Amanda Hyde, and Kate Walker.

GWS faculty share that high points in their work include students who want to be in class and are excited, the opportunity to help change students’ perspective on the world and view people around them through a different lens, and the support GWS members have for each other. They add that excitement and passion shared between faculty and students make each class interesting. Of course, they also note some challenges, such as students who are not interested and the risk of losing funding for courses. Faculty hope students take away from their classes a better understanding of people and the world, as well as an understanding that every person has an impact on daily life. Faculty also hope their students will continue with their beliefs and activism, focus on social justice, and recognize privileged from not privileged and the inequalities in the world.

In August of 2020, GWS offered an orientation session video in which students and faculty shared the benefits of GWS and the topics and approaches within it. The video shows that GCC students who enter and complete the GWS option are not only an inspiration to faculty and other students, they also are impacted by this field of study. Elisha, an alumna of GWS stated, “There’s something about the professors, especially in Gender and Women’s Studies, and the Social Sciences . . . that is so unique . . . more well-rounded, more in tune with the state of the world. I not only think the world should be a better place, but I have the tools to do that (work).”
Another student, Gillian, stated, “It was transformative… I had gone in not really believing in myself, and by the time I left I felt like I could really take on the world.” Of course, it is not just GWS courses that expose students to important topics such as race and gender. Courses in GCC’S core curriculum give students a glimpse into subject matter that can lead them to think critically and explore the world around them. Hannah, another student in the video, explains this nicely: “I had an introduction to race and gender and all these intersectionality issues through my English 101 class, which was amazing.” This English course is taught by a GWS Professor.

Longtime Psychology professor and supporter of the GWS program Dr. Josh Becker accompanied the GWS faculty and students on the information session. Dr. Becker expands on student success when he refers to his work with students: “I’m with them on a journey of their own learning.” In addition to the committed GWS faculty, a great deal of support comes from outside the walls of the standard subject matter. In the video information session, GWS professor Linda McCarthy explains her philosophy and hopes regarding what students take from a GWS course. She states, “I think sociology is transformative, and I think it’s integral to Gender and Women’s Studies; it gives students a perspective more than anything, a way to think about the world.” Her progressive and forward-thinking views are key to this important area of study.

We of the GWS committee hope the program will receive consistent funding, and administrative and community support, to attract further student interest and assure the longevity of this program. Gender and Women’s Studies is an important field of study that provides students with an impactful education and a critical thinking lens; it can also help instill in students a passion for social justice. Gender and Women’s Studies helps the community around us to be more inclusive. It helps us to be engaged with all human beings, to strive for greater diversity, and work toward equity.
**Appendix: Progressive Course Chart**

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<td>ENG 247*</td>
<td>ENG 247</td>
<td>EDU 139*</td>
<td>ENG 228</td>
<td>2010-2011:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Woman as Hero</td>
<td>Women in Literature I</td>
<td>Women in Education</td>
<td>Queer Literature</td>
<td>Concentration changed to Gender and Women’s Studies</td>
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<td><strong>From 2009 - 2018, students pursuing the LGW option could select a course from a number of Women’s Studies Social and Cultural Diversity Electives (EDU 103, EDU 205, ENG 241, ENG 228, GGY 101, HUM 153, HUM 155, PHI 206, PSY 214), which UMASS accepted as part of their Diversity requirements. When UMASS changed that practice, most of the LGW Social and Cultural Diversity Electives were removed from the LGW option, though they continued to be offered as courses at GCC. ENG 228 remained as an LGW elective.</strong></td>
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*No Longer offered or inactive**
 Works Cited

“Gender and Women’s Studies Info Session.” *YouTube*, uploaded by grenfieldcc, 4 May 2021. 
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