Taking it Virtual: A Model for Successful Co-Curricular Student Experiences in Women and Gender Studies During COVID-19

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The COVID-19 Global Pandemic brought unexpected challenges to the curricular and co-curricular offerings of the program. In March 2020, all courses were immediately transitioned to virtual, online experiences—none had previously been offered in a virtual format, programming ceased and plans were quickly scrambled together to create graduation celebrations though commencement was officially “postponed.” As spring transitioned into summer, and university officials made decisions about the fall 2020 semester, faculty and staff of the program began to entirely rethink program offerings, including courses, co-curricular programming, course recruitment, and strategies for continuing to offer a safe space. We argue that it is precisely the program’s unique structure that was pivotal in the successful transition and COVID response.

Description of the Campus Activities Practice: The Structure: A Three-Pronged Stool—Research, Teaching, and Activism

The Women and Gender Studies Program (WGST) at George Mason University (Mason moving
It’s a model that is appealing in theory, a bit more complicated in practice, but absolutely, unequivocally ideal.

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As part of the co-curricular integrated model, Mason’s WGST hosts a variety of programs that are part of nationwide initiatives and ones that are local to the university. Most years since its founding 30 years ago, WGST has hosted a Take Back the Night March in collaboration with the Student Support and Advocacy Center (which houses prevention and intervention specialists and programming focused on sexual and interpersonal violence), Student Government, and a variety of student organizations and sororities who work on issues of gender-based violence. As part of Women’s History Month, WGST hosts a variety of events and panels that focus on a variety of issues related to gender, sexuality, religion, literature the arts, human rights, and alternate academic careers for students who are studying women and gender studies. One of its signature events is the Sojourner Truth Lecture, hosted in February or March, to bridge Black Heritage Month and Women’s History Month. Over the 20 years, the event has been in existence, this lecture has honored scholars and activists including but not limited to Patricia Hill Collins, Anita Hill, Janet Mock, Dorothy Roberts, Keenga-Yahmatta Taylor, and Sybrina Fulton. In recent years, WGST has also honored local social justice nonprofit organizations with Sojourner Truth awards. The Sojourner Truth Lecture is the quintessential example of the power of interdisciplinary, cross-unit collaboration.

In addition to the many events, the WGST program has created and implemented two paid student
development opportunities for students—the center mentor and program adviser teams. The center mentor team is responsible for staffing and maintenance of the WGST center, conducting course and other program-related class presentations, marketing, and serving as ambassadors for the program at tabling events at orientation, recruitment events, and during “welcome week.” The program adviser team coordinates from start to finish our many events as well as social media campaigns including ensuring the success of Take Back the Night and all Women’s History Month events. Both teams have a lead student who works closely with the associate director to manage tasks, provide feedback, and hire students for these positions. They are also responsible for writing work schedules and coordinating professional development opportunities for their respective teams. Many of these positions are funded by federal work-study and students have the option to move between teams during their undergraduate experiences. When appropriate, graduate students also serve on these teams.

**Where’s the place for Women and Gender Studies in Student Affairs?**

**AS NOTED PREVIOUSLY,** Mason’s WGST program’s structure is unique and as a result, there is virtually no scholarship that focuses on this specific model that integrates an academic and a student affairs unit into one entity. That being said, the higher education literature that informs this co-curricular, integrated practice comes from scholarship on women’s centers’ best practices and collaborations with academic programs. Furthermore, the continued demand from student affairs divisions to have more co-curricular opportunities for students illustrates the continued importance of programs like Mason’s for the future of higher education.

Despite the fact that for decades women’s centers face funding restrictions and scrutiny from administrators, they have always and continue to function as an inclusive, thriving space for students of many marginalized identities (Saucier, 2019). Furthermore, due to historical backlash on the inclusivity of the word “feminist,” women’s centers, more so than other multicultural centers continue to have to justify the need for these spaces while also communicating intersectional approaches that are inclusive of all races, gender identities, and sexualities (Kupo & Castellon, 2018; Nicolazzo & Harris, 2014). Budget and staffing continue to be the primary challenges facing women’s centers as many women’s centers have only part-time, temporary staff with miniscule funding to support student development initiatives (Kasper, 2004). These issues are ones that Mason’s program has also faced over the years. When the program began it functioned with a part-time director who still had duties in her local academic unit and an associate director who was dually funded by the college and student affairs. In 1997, the program was awarded a full-time program coordinator position, funded by the college, to staff the center and to serve as the administrative point of contact. In 2013, the college awarded the program a faculty line for the new director. This was an important shift in that it guaranteed that the director would be housed in women and gender studies and no longer have responsibilities to other units. Since then the program has been awarded multiple faculty lines and is hiring a full-time student affairs professional for the center’s activities. As Kasper (2004), points out, women’s centers continue to rely on collaborations and support from women’s studies programs to be successful. Arguably, these continued collaborations illustrate the need for more programs to be designed in the footprint of our program. When women’s centers have to rely heavily on academic collaborations, they are arguably more likely to be successful if they are wedded with one, to begin with. When they are fully integrated, successes in one “realm” can translate to other “realms” as well.

**COVID-19 Transitions**

**AS WAS THE CASE FOR MOST UNITS,** WGST was taken off-guard by COVID-19 and the sudden decision to send students home and conduct the second half of the semester virtually. The program worked to support faculty who were transitioning their classes online. In this particular case, though the university has a robust distance learning presence, Women and Gender Studies had never offered a single online class. Thus, supporting faculty and students was the top priority. Second, because much of the programming had been completed by the end of March, Women’s History Month, faculty and staff focused much attention on identifying and creating opportunities for meaningful transition events that recognized students and faculty accomplishments in the absence of any in-person commencement events. Summer arrived which gave faculty and staff more time to research best practices and coordinate fall efforts. Many of the faculty participated in university-supported online course development workshops. As the program recruited for fall classes, we continued to rely on the traditional strategies we had been using for years: posting course flyers on our social
media channels and emailing them to our student listservs. We focused our programming attention on our signature fall programs, which included the Fall for the Book Festival, Chapter Next, a sexual violence prevention program, Take Back the Night, and World AIDS Day.

COVID-19 Success and Failures (what Worked and what didn’t)

In 2019, more than 150 students attended Chapter Next, in 2020, “COVID,” virtual Chapter Next saw a significant decrease in attendance and only 40 students. In 2019, 50 students participated in Take Back the Night, but in 2020, the event had to be canceled due to low registration numbers. As the fall semester wore on and faculty and staff realized that once again the majority of classes would be delivered online we developed an innovative strategy for course recruitment. Instructional faculty were asked to make videos in which they talked about the content of their upcoming spring classes and encouraged students to enroll. This strategy was quite successful and will be continued even after classes return to in-person instruction. This strategy is less laborious for student staff who previously had to familiarize themselves with courses they may have not taken themselves. But most importantly, prospective students get an expert opinion about courses from the faculty teaching them. Additionally, these videos can be reused semester after semester when the courses are offered again, thus reducing both student staff and faculty labor. In both 2020–2021 “COVID” semesters, we have had record enrollment in our WMST 100 course and some of our graduate offerings.

COVID-19 Analysis: The why and the how: Program Structures that Produced Successes (and Failures)

As with most things, there were some tremendous successes and some less than ideal outcomes. Here we analyze the differences: In sum, the events that were the most successful were those whose purposes and goals most aligned with our academic mission. For example, as faculty (and students) gained proficiency in virtual, online classes, events such as Fall for the Book, which is typically a scholarly lecture to an in-person audience, were retooled as an online lecture with “live” question and answer using the same tools that instructional faculty used when they reimagined their courses in a virtual space. A lecture to a class is not much different in structure if not content, than a lecture to a public audience. With the enhanced tools available on platforms like Zoom, the presenter can still share their slides, moderators can appear simultaneously onscreen, and questions can be asked through the “chat” or “Q and A” functions in zoom. If the presenter has incorporated an interactive component to their lecture, break out rooms can be used just as they are in classroom discussions. As the data indicate, we saw tremendous success in transitioning events like Fall for the Book to an online space. Though we did not have this experience as a host, as attendees who have participated in conferences that have been reimagined from in-person to online, we anticipate that results would be similar.

In contrast, for programs for which purpose and goals are primarily interactive and require materials, not simply conversation, we have been far less successful. Many of these events focus on sexual and intimate partner violence and serve as educational and activist spaces for students who are survivors and/or want to support other survivors. While we tried to recreate these spaces online, students either felt more vulnerable being in a digital space or were experiencing Zoom fatigue from their courses and other extracurricular events. One success of virtual Chapter Next was the opportunity to rewrite Mason’s Pledge to End Sexual Violence. This was accomplished by using the breakout session function in Zoom. In terms of the center providing “safe space,” the program faced significant challenges. In fall 2020, staff kept the center open two days a week but very few students used the space. Campus-wide nearly 75% of students are completely virtual, so it’s not too much of a surprise that a small space like the women and gender studies center didn’t have the same “traffic.” Furthermore, the center is a space where students come to meet new like-minded people, which is certainly discouraged during this pandemic.

Conclusion

Women and gender studies programs were initially conceived as interdisciplinary academic programs that supported research, curriculum, and
pedagogical practices rooted in feminism and feminist approaches. Women and gender centers emerged as on-campus consciousness-raising spaces where students, faculty, and staff could gather to support one another, facilitate training and workshops, and provide resources for women experiencing sexual violence, assault, and harassment. The program we describe marries these two “units” in a seamless manner. The outcome? Nearly unlimited opportunities for curricular, co-curricular, and collaborative opportunities that allow a small unit to have high impact. In March 2020, the program had to pivot in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Our analysis here reveals that events that most mirrored classes benefited from applying the same kinds of tools we used to transition classes online to these online programming spaces. Those that did not were less successful. Moving forward one of the challenges for programs that integrate academics and student affairs is to identify strategies for creating and implementing traditional in-person, hands-on events to virtual platforms.

One of the challenges that units like Women and Gender Studies face is to innovate and implement interactive, materials-based programs in a virtual space and identify strategies for continuing the long tradition of women and gender studies centers as “safe.” Though we hope that COVID-19 is truly a “once in a century” event, with challenges that include a rise in natural disasters, including forest fires and hurricanes, and well as civil unrest, programs like Women and Gender Studies have a vested interest in developing engaging, innovative online programming that can be deployed quickly when the next disaster arises. Additionally, and more common place, innovating and implementing effective and engaging online programming will allow programs like Women and Gender Studies to “play” in the virtual spaces in ways that go well beyond classroom and into the domain of student affairs. At the end of the day, it was our integrated, academic, and student affairs model that allowed for maximum success.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS
Corwin is a current faculty member and Hattery is a former one at Mason if that matters.

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