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UM's First Generation of Women's Studies Students Learn How the Other Half Lives - and a Whole Lot More

A desire to learn about the other half of human history, a simple curiosity, or a need to fulfill a requirement prompts a wide variety of students to take Women's Studies courses. The effect the courses have had on UM's first generation of Women's Studies students is rarely foreseen or expected - but keeps them coming back for more.

Established in 1989, Women's Studies is an 18-hour interdisciplinary concentration of courses available to University of Maine students of all majors. As part of the broader Women in the Curriculum (WIC) program, Women's Studies courses work with other facets of WIC to broaden students' minds to the contributions and perspectives of women. The effect on both concentration majors and regular students has been tremendous.

"It changed my life," said Janet Elvidge, a senior anthropology major. "It's so hard to describe. It changed the way I look at everything - myself, my relationships with other people."

According to Evie Newlyn, director of WIC, it's comments like that that make Women's Studies so crucial to a person's total education and the completion of their knowledge about human history.

"Traditional education is men's studies," she said. "All you have to do is look at the curriculum, syllabi, and the books that are read and you can see that."

"If we don't study women and we only study men, then we're just getting half of history, half of art and half of science. I see Women's Studies as a corrective. The pendulum has been way over there - everything focused on men for a long time. Women's Studies brings it back over here so we can add information about women's accomplishments, perspectives and value systems. Eventually it will settle into the middle with both integrally included."

Ethan Strimling, a junior history major, agreed. "If the University's purpose to some extent is to prepare people for the society, prepare them to promote a more positive existence and get people ready to go out there and make the world a better place, then this should be required."

"If we want to be ready for the 'real world,' then we have to be able to under-

stand each other and communicate, and come from the same sort of grounding. (Women's Studies) is as important, if not more important, than biology, math or interpersonal relationships."

"I think it should be required," said Elvidge. "I feel that you're not whole human beings until you learn about the other half you never really learned about. Women are devalued and distorted and oppressed - until you learn the reality of women, you're not a whole human being. "It's not just history."

While the courses teach students about the other half of the world, some argue the greatest benefit comes from the understanding the students get of themselves and their relation to women.

"(The courses) encourage an honest evaluation of one's self as well as the world," said Newlyn. "There are always several women students who will say things like, 'I want to be an engineer, but can I do that, get married and have children too?' By the end of the term, they're saying, 'I'm going to be an engineer and if I can find a man who can handle that, fine. If not, I'm going to be an engineer anyway.'"

"They come to an understanding that they have choices and that their choices are not limited to a traditional role," she said.

"Women realize how valuable Women's Studies courses are for personal development because one of the key things, in addition to helping the student acquire information and knowledge and ways of looking at the world, is they are empowered. They become aware of all the possibilities and options they have."

Hilary Rackliff, a senior psychology major with a concentration in Women's Studies, said the courses helped her realize her relationship to the world as a woman. "Women's Studies has taught me to value women and see the misogyny within myself. I think everybody needs to do that - there's so much hatred in this world and it's scary."

"I think taking Women's Studies courses is a way to overcome that."

While the courses help women understand their relationship to the world and to other women, Strimling said the courses

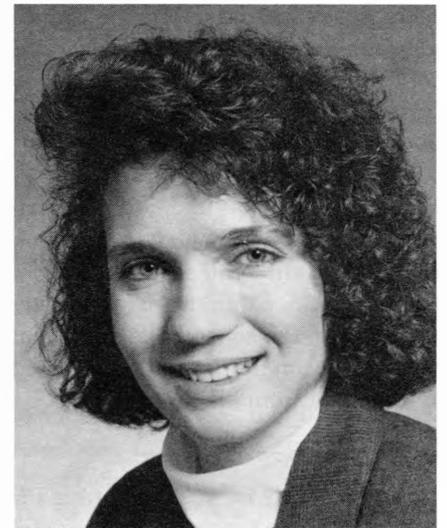
help men just as much.

"As much as I thought I understood, once I got into this course (WST 201) it opened up so many more channels and made it so much clearer," he said.

"There's so much more going on than I ever thought, so much more than I could ever notice or experience, especially because I am a man."

"I hope that men would make some effort (to take the course). It's a very different environment, a very different culture - it's also very helpful. It is hard as a white male to experience that kind of oppression yet it was very helpful in understanding the subtle discriminations that go on," he said.

"I learned for the first time about class and racial issues," said Elvidge. "We learned about all kinds of oppressions that take place in society - not just (oppression against) women."



Teresa Poulin, a University of Maine graduate student in business, has become the second recipient of the Thomas A. McGillicuddy Fellowship. Poulin is currently working as an assistant small business counselor at Eastern Maine Development Corp., Bangor. The Thomas A. McGillicuddy Fellowships, established by UM, EMDC, the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) and the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), enables a graduate student in the College of Business Administration to receive experience while contributing to the efforts of EMDC's Small Business Development Center, one of seven sub-centers in the state.