Established in 1977, the National Women's Studies Association has as one of its primary objectives promoting and supporting the production and dissemination of knowledge about women and gender through teaching, learning, research and service in academic and other settings.

Our commitments are to: illuminate the ways in which women’s studies are vital to education; to demonstrate the contributions of feminist scholarship that is comparative, global, intersectional and interdisciplinary to understandings of the arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences; and to promote synergistic relationships between scholarship, teaching and civic engagement in understandings of culture and society.

This report is a product of data compiled by the National Women’s Studies Association from June 19th to August 21st 2020. The data collection project was initiated because of the impact of the pandemic and economic crisis on WGSS programs around the country and the efforts by faculty and students to address the urgent situation. Responses were voluntary and self-selective. This report is not a research project or a scientific study. Rather it tells the story of the pandemic from the point of view of faculty and students who responded to our call for information. Our intention is to uplift the voices of NWSA members and offer a snapshot of some of the important trends and organizing by faculty at institutions around the country.

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Special thanks to Lisa Levenstein and Destiny Julia Spruill for feedback and assistance in producing this report.
During the spring and summer of 2020, NWSA collected data from across the country in an effort to understand how the field of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies is impacted by the climate of austerity caused by the COVID-19 public health crisis. Seventy-two WGSS programs and centers provided information about furloughs, budget cuts, student funding cuts, and institutional support for care work, among other issues.

What has emerged is a picture of the devastating impact on higher education. Although these trends are nationwide and affect nearly all sectors of the university, WGSS programs and centers, woman-identifying and BIPOC faculty and staff, and public institutions are disproportionately affected.
Impact on higher education:
The data shows that the current public health crisis, economic climate, and political moment has intensified the shift toward a neoliberal framework for higher education, where worth is measured in terms of productivity, certain forms of labor are devalued or unrecognized, and the financial bottom line becomes the most important factor in decision making. Although universities were never exempt from capitalist imperatives, there has been an acceleration of the damaging trends toward precarity, heightened work expectations, and treating students as customers. The questions of whose labor is valuable and whose is expendable and what labor counts as productive is central to how WGSS and other interdisciplinary programs are faring.

In response to the drop in enrollments and student room and board payments due to COVID-19, colleges and universities across the country have announced significant budget cuts. Faculty at several institutions participating in this data collection project reported that institutional retirement contributions made to employee pensions have been eliminated for a period of time or drastically reduced. Faculty at St. Louis University, for example, reported a one-year suspension of university matching contributions to retirement accounts.

Another response has been furloughs. The University of Cincinnati mandated furloughs for over 300 staff employees (including college-level administrators) who make over $58,000. In other cases university service workers, who are disproportionately Black and Brown, have been the first to be furloughed, laid off, or fired. These service workers prepare food, clean buildings, and generally keep colleges and universities running. When campuses close, their services are no longer needed. Because they are paid less than many other university workers and have fewer economic resources, they have a harder time coping with job losses.

The question of whose labor is valuable and whose is expendable and what labor counts as productive is central to how WGSS and other interdisciplinary programs are faring.
Many institutions have implemented hiring freezes, which have resulted in greater work demands for remaining faculty. This is compounded by additional labor stemming from converting courses to hybrid or online. The WGS Program at Iowa State University lost a faculty line and graduate assistant and its merit and staff raises were cancelled for 2021. Many other institutions have temporarily reduced salaries for faculty and programs have been forced to drastically reduce their programming.

In addition, because of the historic gendered division of labor, woman-identifying faculty and staff also carry a larger burden of the labor of social reproduction at home, which has intensified with the closure of schools and daycares, leaving many parents in a lurch. The labor of social reproduction includes meal preparation, cleaning, helping children with remote learning, caring for the sick, caring for babies and young children, and assisting other loved ones as systems of support have become less available. This care work extends into the professional sphere as well. Many woman-identifying, LGBTQ+, BIPOC, and WGSS and other interdisciplinary studies faculty provide guidance and ongoing support for LGBTQ+ and Black and Brown students disproportionately harmed by the pandemic and austerity measures. This labor is an essential part of our mission as educators.

Yet universities refuse to recognize how this kind of labor helps sustain our students and the institution as a whole. The general devaluation of care work as a gendered, racialized, and classed category of labor has led to an erasure or lack of institutional prioritization of this work. Some institutions have offered flexibility in work schedules or have extended the tenure and promotion clock, but no programs or centers who participated in this data collection project reported paid work leave or comprehensive plans to address the uptick in unpaid labor of social reproduction of staff or faculty.
A Data Brief from NWSA

Impact on WGSS:

The data also illuminates the particular concerns for, and disproportionate impact on, the fields of women’s, gender, sexuality, and feminist studies. Austerity measures, couched as necessary evils during a global pandemic, are part of a larger decades-long effort to cripple WGSS programs as well as Ethnic, African American/Africana, Latinx, and Indigenous Studies. Budget cuts to these programs and centers were often threatened prior to COVID-19, as many higher-up administrators fail to recognize the work of these fields as valuable despite the wide-scale contributions these fields make in all facets of university life.

Many WGSS programs are encountering administrative pressure to dismantle their autonomous stand-alone program status and merge with other departments or programs.

When initiated by administrators, cuts to interdisciplinary programs are usually a cost-saving measure that leads to fewer resources and less support staff. The economic impact of COVID provides the opportune circumstances for administrators to forge ahead with these mergers. For example, Purdue University consolidated WGSS, African American Studies & Research Center, American Studies, Asian American Studies, Global Studies, Critical Disabilities Studies and the Native American & Indigenous Studies program into a Division of Race, Gender, & Intersectionality with one director for all seven programs. After faculty, staff and students protested and petitioned, the Provost agreed to provide one year of funding to cover administrative expenses.

The current political and economic climate has increased pressure for WGSS PhD programs to participate in academic rankings to legitimize their academic value and to justify their funding needs. Universities often equate “importance” and “value” to traditional ranking systems. WGSS program directors and faculty argue that their programs are un-rankable because the metrics used by traditional disciplines cannot be superimposed on WGSS or other interdisciplinary fields. These fields may have fewer specialized journals, find traditional presses less welcoming, or have greater demands for service work. Despite evidence that these ranking systems are not useful and perpetuate social hierarchies, refusals by faculty to participate in such a system is increasingly being used against WGSS programs as budgetary imperatives loom large.

Budget cuts have forced WGSS programs and departments to make difficult choices about staffing, programming and student support. For example, Oregon State—
implemented a temporary salary reduction for professional and academic faculty. The Women & Gender Center will reduce programming in anticipation of a 10-15% cut to their budget as a result of a decline in student enrollment.

WGSS Faculty are Playing a Crucial Role in Organizing:
Faculty and staff who work in WGSS programs and centers are on the front lines of organizing in response to the crisis. This is not surprising. The long fight for access to and expansion of higher education includes protests for racial and gender equity and inclusion. Collective struggle and student organizing in the 1960s and 1970s led to the formation of WGS, Ethnic, African-American/Africana, Asian-American, Latinx, and Indigenous studies programs. That commitment to social justice continues to inform the work of students, faculty, and staff of interdisciplinary programs as they organize to keep their programs funded in 2020 and to create more just policies and practices. This organizing is offering some indication about possible alternatives and strategies of resistance.

WGSS faculty and NWSA institutional members have joined with other employees in higher education institutions across the country to draw attention to the impact of the pandemic and economic crisis on higher education: how austerity measures disproportionately harm those who already have the least, the multiple obstacles and lack of support for students, and the unreasonable work demands on faculty. They see these issues are interconnected rather than isolated. Graduate students and contingent faculty have heightened organizing efforts in an attempt to ensure health safety and economic security during the pandemic. Graduate students across the country have initiated strikes, work slowdowns and entered into bargaining agreements with their institutions. For example, the University of Illinois Graduate Employees Organization (UIC GEO) fought and won health care for the summer months, mental health counseling and guaranteed availability of hand sanitizer on campus.
In addition to striking and organizing around issues of labor and austerity, many members of the U.S. academy participated in the U.S. #ScholarStrike organized by Anthea Butler and Kevin Gannon. This two day strike called on faculty across the country to withhold their labor in solidarity with communities disproportionately harmed by state violence and policing, and “raise awareness of and prompt action against racism, policing, mass incarceration and other symptoms of racism’s toll in America.” Inspired by professional and collegiate athletes who recently went on strike in solidarity with victims and survivors of police violence, this strike paralleled #ScholarStrikeCanada which was organized, “to protest anti-Black, racist and colonial police brutality in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere.” Scholars across the globe see the issue of state violence and the violence perpetuated by austerity as intertwined both on and off university campuses. In a historical moment when the White House issues an Executive Order that seeks to undermine the fundamental core of teaching and learning in our fields of study, faculty are reasserting the value of a liberal arts education and the importance of anti-racist education as part of the core mission of higher education.

They have demanded that colleges and universities recognize, value, and provide support for the unpaid labor of social reproduction that enables them to carry out their work as paid employees. NWSA members have started a Care Work Collective FAQ as a means to organize around the issue.
In addition, during the summer over 80 faculty members at Indiana University Bloomington formed the Indiana University Bloomington Care Caucus (IUBCC). IUBCC organized efforts on and off campus in the surrounding community and generated a 15-page statement to university officials detailing immediate, mid-range, and longer-range recommendations to address the pandemic and promote structural change.

NWSA positions itself in solidarity with all women’s, gender, sexuality, and feminist studies programs and centers across the U.S. and beyond who are facing unprecedented circumstances politically and economically. We are inspired by the examples of resistance and urge faculty, staff, administrators, and students to participate in crafting a new vision that relies on collective engagement to ensure equity and justice.