Women's Studies Scholarship:

A STATEMENT BY THE
NATIONAL WOMEN'S
STUDIES ASSOCIATION
FIELD LEADERSHIP
WORKING GROUP
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Introduction and Statement of Purpose

This work builds on a 1999 National Women’s Studies Association publication, *Defining Women's Studies Scholarship: A Statement of the National Women’s Studies Association Task Force on Faculty Roles and Rewards* (Pryse 1999). Much has changed in the field since 1999, including strong growth at the graduate level, with more than 46 doctoral programs and 40 master’s programs nationally. The doctoral programs not only hire, promote, and tenure faculty—while educating future faculty members—but they also produce much of the field’s newest scholarship. Therefore the time is right to take a new look at tenure and promotion in women’s and gender studies, particularly since practices for evaluating women’s and gender studies scholars may not fully reflect changes in the field nationally and locally.
This project also grows out of recent work by the National Women’s Studies Association on civic engagement. The resulting white paper, *Women’s Studies as Civic Engagement: Research and Recommendations*, pointed to the need for a new field statement on tenure and promotion in women’s and gender studies because effective civic engagement pedagogies, while frequently identified as a central goal in higher education, too often fail to count in the academic reward system (Orr 2011). Consequently we want to address the gap between stated institutional values and tenure and promotion practices.

Epistemological questions about “what counts” as a feminist issue or as feminist scholarship are central to women’s and gender studies and therefore to its research, teaching, and service. In framing this paper the working group considered the question of “what counts” from at least two perspectives. First, definitions of the field of women’s and gender studies are by no means settled. In fact, ongoing debates are central to how women’s and gender studies scholars understand their scholarship, teaching, and service. Such debates are even reflected in the field’s name, which now includes “women’s and gender studies,” “women’s, gender, and sexuality studies,” “gender studies,” and “feminist studies.” In this paper, however, we will use the term “women’s and gender studies.”

Second, questions about “what counts” within the academic reward system are frequently out of step with stated institutional goals, whether in women’s and gender studies programs/departments or in the larger institution (e.g., stated values of “interdisciplinarity” or “transnational thinking” are not adequately reflected in the norms of “excellence” requisite for tenure and promotion). Moreover, too often terms like “rigor” and “excellence” mask narrowly conceived evaluative measures tied to systems of power that have and continue to exclude white women and people of color from the tenured or full professor ranks. As an American Association of University Women report notes, “Some academics appear to be biased against women’s studies…discounting publications in women’s studies journals in their assessment of scholarly productivity” (2004).

At the same time, we recognize that faculty trained as interdisciplinary scholars in women’s and gender studies are typically being evaluated for tenure and promotion by scholars trained in traditional disciplines. These differences in training can yield different expectations around tenure and promotion that committees must take into account in order to insure fair and equitable standards for candidates. In addition, candidates who hold joint appointments often experience different and sometimes contradictory standards for tenure and promotion. Institutions have a responsibility to set clear expectations for candidates with joint appointments.
Audience for This Document

This document is intended for use by:

- Tenure-track faculty in women’s and gender studies departments
- Feminist scholars in related fields
- Faculty who serve on tenure and promotion committees and evaluate the work of women’s and gender studies candidates, and faculty who serve as external reviewers
- Women’s and gender studies department chairs, and
- College and university deans and vice presidents who serve as administrative levels of tenure review.

We recognize that women’s and gender studies faculty gain tenure and promotion in a wide range of institutional settings—from community and liberal arts colleges to research universities. As such, this document offers a broad, field-level view of how to understand and assess research, teaching, and service in women’s and gender studies that can be used in conjunction with specific institutional requirements.

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What Is Women’s and Gender Studies?
An Overview of the Field

Women’s and gender studies is both an interdisciplinary field in its own right and one that maintains connections to other interdisciplinary fields and to traditional disciplines. Effectively evaluating candidates for tenure and promotion in women’s and gender studies requires that evaluators understand the field as heterogeneous and account for the consequent variability of women’s and gender studies scholarly forms, methods, and contributions. Approaches to knowledge production and transformation in women’s and gender studies are highly divergent. Thus in providing an overview of the field, our aim is to offer context and background for assessment, rather than a directive or mandate for the field. We outline below four key concepts central to women’s and gender studies scholarship, teaching, and service.

- The Politics of Knowledge Production
- Social Justice
- Intersectionality
- Transnational Analysis
THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

As an intellectual project committed to challenging and transforming dominant systems of power and privilege, women’s and gender studies recognizes that knowledge is not neutral; it takes multiple forms and emerges from diverse locations. In drawing from, building on, questioning, and transforming conventional disciplinary approaches, women’s and gender studies takes disciplinary, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and even antidiscliplinary forms. It develops new modes of inquiry and engagement, asks new questions, creates new knowledge, and imagines new futures while also unearthing forgotten or subjugated ways of knowing. Additionally, women’s and gender studies examines how knowers, and systems of knowledge, are situated: reflexivity about the impact of social location, power asymmetries, and cultural contexts on the knowledge process are thus central issues. This epistemological, theoretical, and methodological enterprise includes critical awareness of inclusions and exclusions in knowledge production. With their focus on power asymmetries, women’s and gender studies faculty can be perceived as disloyal or transgressive to institutional norms, perceptions that have the potential to negatively affect their prospects for tenure and promotion.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IMPERATIVE

Women’s and gender studies has its roots in the civil rights, women’s, and student movements of the 1960s and 70s. As such, it analyzes the social construction and material realities of power relations and traces the workings of systems of oppression and privilege, historically and contemporarily. The field studies cultures, movements, and strategies of resistance and with an eye toward realizing social justice, its practitioners conduct research and design curricula that address the persistence and tenacity of inequalities as well as their changing forms. Women’s and gender studies faculty may collaborate with community partners and organizations—local, national, and global—in transformational action research and advocacy. Therefore, assessment measures should account for collaboration in ways that do not devalue such profiles on the grounds that they signal less rigorous work or lower levels of “productivity.” Indeed, collaborative work is often more challenging than solitary scholarship, and this labor should be recognized in such assessments. This recognition requires developing innovative assessment techniques. Contributions to promoting social justice may take multiple forms, including participatory action research as well as artistic and creative expressions, such as film, performance, and digital media.
INTERSECTIONALITY

Women’s and gender studies rests on the understanding that because systems of inequality, from the structural to the experiential, are interdependent (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism), gender norms, social systems, and inequalities cannot be adequately analyzed, or transformed, in isolation. Intersectionality is a pivotal and original contribution of our field. Intersectionality is deployed in multiple ways as a theoretical perspective, mode of inquiry, methodological tool, and approach to social justice that renders visible how systems of inequality function in overlapping ways; intersectional approaches also seek to transform these matrices of power. Intersectionality has generated important scholarship, teaching, and engagement in women’s and gender studies and throughout the academy.

TRANSNATIONAL ANALYSIS

Transnational analysis in women’s and gender studies examines power, privilege, and differences within and across boundaries and through processes ranging from the intimate to the global. It considers the continuum of unequal global systems and their inter-relationships with structures, cultures, and psyches, including colonialism, imperialism, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism. Analyses intervene in hierarchical paradigms and resist binaries of local/global or domestic/international. Note that the transnational is not conceived as indicating a location “over there” but rather is approached as an analytic that enables practitioners to comprehend the impact of global processes across spaces, over time, in distinct locales, and in the intimacy of homes and bodies. Transnational analysis decenters “the center” wherever it may be, and it explores the way that the center is always multiply constituted in and through its relationship to “the periphery.”
Assessing Women's and Gender Studies Scholarship, Teaching, and Service

1. Widen the scope. Assessment is itself a system of power in higher education, one that too often results in maintaining the status quo, both in terms of institutional demographics and in terms of disciplinary logics. Widening the scope of what “counts” as models of research, teaching, and service, and accounting for a more expansive sense of where such work should take place and how, is therefore often needed. A key question is, “do our criteria and measures match up with our stated goals and expectations?”

- Account for plural forms of research, teaching, and service that occur in multiple locations, and not just the traditional forms.

- Recognize that, given the field’s overtly political approach to knowledge and power, women’s and gender studies scholars often face resistance in the classroom, in assessment of their research, and in perceptions of their service contributions. For example, teaching evaluations may reflect students’ discomfort with challenges to their preexisting modes of thinking about the world around them, especially if the candidate teaches required courses. Consider alternative evaluations of teaching.

- Women’s and gender studies candidates are often busy with the work of institution-building: large women’s and gender studies departments with multiple tenure lines and fully-fledged degree programs, from the undergraduate to the doctorate, are not the norm nationwide. Despite their importance for the field and for local institutions, faculty contributions to institutionalizing women’s and gender studies are often undervalued when it comes time for promotion and tenure review, both for full-time women’s and gender studies faculty and all the more so for jointly-appointed and affiliated faculty.

- Recognizing divergent and diverse contributions should not be approached as a “watering down” of rigor or as “making exceptions to excellence”—this kind of devaluation is not only divisive but often reinforces the very norms and inequities that an institution seeks to change.

A key question is, “do our criteria and measures match up with our stated goals and expectations?”
2. Account for institutional and departmental obstacles and inequities.

- Institutionalized obstacles, such as pay inequities, asymmetrical workloads, and gendered-racialized service expectations (i.e., who does the institutional ‘housekeeping’ or ‘reproductive labor,’ that is, the often unrewarded work required to sustain people and institutions) should also be accounted for in evaluation of a candidate’s contributions. For example, as John W. Curtis notes in an American Association of University Professors report, *Persistent Inequality: Gender and Academic Employment*: “The culmination of a faculty career, full professor status, remains an elusive goal for women….At only 28 percent of all full professor appointments, women are still outnumbered more than two to one at the most senior rank” (2011). Citing Misra et al (2014), Curtis also documents that “disproportionate time spent in teaching and service was a significant obstacle for women associate professors to attaining full professor rank.”

- Women’s and gender studies was established, in part, to transgress institutional norms in higher education, but as the field has become institutionalized over time it has developed its own norms that often mirror those of the broader institution. In order to remain true to its founding principles, women’s and gender studies must continually engage in self-reflexivity.

- Women’s and gender studies has long understood the false divides among the traditional categories of scholarship, teaching, and service. However, assessment measures for promotion and tenure often approach these as separate activities. This continuum needs to be more adequately accounted for in assessing candidates. For example, teaching and community engagement may be intertwined and also generate new ways of approaching scholarship.

- Moreover, the discipline recognizes that activism with women and other groups inside and outside of academic institutions produces knowledge and contributes to the development of women’s and gender studies scholarship. However, assessment measures for tenure and promotion tend to be individualist in nature, meaning that collaborative research, teaching, and service engagement may be undervalued.

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3. **Find ways to recognize and value a wider range of contributions in various forms.** Many in higher education recognize that the traditional scholarly monograph no longer should maintain its central place in tenure and promotion consideration (Ahlberg, 2010). Since feminist scholarly work takes many forms, we want to echo that view, and suggest the following characteristics of women’s and gender studies scholarship:

- Scholarship may embrace multiple genres, languages, and collaborations within and beyond the academy and can include forms such as artistic expression, public performance, lab-based teamwork, collaborative editorial work, and archival research.

- In addition to traditional publishing outlets such as academic presses and journals, scholarship may be produced in such forums as online journals, blogs, op-eds, policy reports, peer-reviewed publications, performances, community action projects, grant applications, consulting, lectures, conference presentations, curriculum transformation projects, field-defining statements, social media, and alliance work.

- Committees should consider scholarly impact reflected in an editor’s solicitation of a candidate’s work, invited conference sessions, or inclusion of a scholar’s work on syllabi, for example.

Looking ahead, we hope that these guidelines and recommendations serve a twofold purpose. First, we expect them to aid women’s and gender studies candidates for tenure and promotion. Perhaps more important, we expect this document to contribute to ongoing conversations and calls for change in institutional tenure and promotion practices.

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Recommendations for the Department, Candidates, and External Evaluator

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEPARTMENT

Department chairs should provide the following to candidates for tenure and promotion:

☐ Explanation about local practices
☐ Clear criteria and expectations for candidates
☐ Regular evaluation (annually, at a minimum)
☐ Clear articulation of procedures, processes, and culture at your institution
   in order to guide candidates in the tenure and promotion process.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TENURE AND PROMOTION CANDIDATES

Individual candidates for tenure and promotion should take the following steps:

☐ Ask questions about and understand local practices
   and how they apply to your career
☐ Be proactive with regard to dates and deadlines
☐ Take responsibility for creating your support systems
☐ Attend tenure and promotion workshops offered on your campus

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXTERNAL EVALUATORS

Letter writers should keep the following guidelines in mind when evaluating women’s and gender studies candidates for tenure and promotion:

☐ Construct your evaluation in terms of criteria provided by the candidate’s
   institution and not your own
☐ When useful apply insights from your own discipline but do not rely on
   them as the primary standards for evaluating the candidate
☐ Take time to write a thorough, thoughtful assessment of the candidate
   and be sure to capture what is original or significant in the candidate’s
   research and teaching
☐ Place the candidate’s work in the broader field of women’s and
   gender studies
Women's Studies Scholarship:
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ADMINISTRATOR’S GUIDE TO
TENURE AND PROMOTION IN
WOMEN’S AND GENDER STUDIES
Administrator’s Guide to Tenure and Promotion Reviews in Women’s and Gender Studies

Women’s and gender studies is a relatively young field; the early programs were established in the 1970s. The field has matured significantly in the past fifteen years, marked particularly by the growth of graduate programs. There are now 46 doctoral programs and 40 master’s programs offered in the U.S. Because the field is interdisciplinary, as well as young and growing, evaluation of candidates for tenure and promotion in women’s and gender studies entails particular complexities. For example, current junior faculty in women’s and gender studies are now likely to have earned their doctorates in this interdisciplinary field, unlike their senior colleagues, most of whom have earned doctorates in disciplines. Committees and administrators must take into account these differing expectations, to ensure fair and equitable standards for candidates. This statement is intended to provide a broad, field-level guide, for administrators—deans and provosts—who are responsible for promotion reviews.

WHAT IS WOMEN’S AND GENDER STUDIES?

Women’s and gender studies is fundamentally about the study of power and societal inequalities. The intellectual scope of the field includes a focus on themes such as women’s lives, queer theories, transgender theories and identities, feminisms of women of color, border studies, transnational feminisms: all are explored with a variety of methodologies and inter/disciplinary perspectives. Four concepts are central to women’s and gender studies scholarship, teaching, and service.

Women’s and gender studies is fundamentally about the study of power and societal inequalities.
Politics of Knowledge Production: Women’s and gender studies recognizes that knowledge is not neutral. In questioning and transforming conventional disciplinary approaches, women’s and gender studies takes disciplinary, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, forms. It develops new modes of inquiry and engagement, asks new questions, creates new knowledge. Women’s and gender studies examines how knowers and systems of knowledge are situated: reflexivity about the impact of social location, power asymmetries, and cultural contexts on the knowledge process are central to the field. Critical awareness of inclusions and exclusions in knowledge production is foundational.

Intersectionality: The multiple systems of inequality, organized around gender, race, socioeconomic position, heterosexism, and other dimensions of inequality, are fundamentally interdependent. Recognition of this interdependence among systems of inequality and power renders visible how systems of inequality function, and enables transformation of these matrices of power.

Transnational Analysis: Transnational analysis in women’s and gender studies considers the continuum of unequal global systems and their impact on structures, cultures, and individuals, resisting binaries such as local/global or U.S./international. “Transnational” is an analytic that enables comprehension of the impact of global processes both across spaces and in distinct locales. This destabilizes “centers” and explores how centers are always multiply constituted through relationships to “peripheries.”

Social Justice: Women’s and gender studies, with its roots in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, analyzes the social construction and material realities of power and traces the workings of systems of oppression and privilege. The field studies the persistence and tenacity of inequalities, as well as strategies of resistance. With the goal always of furthering social justice, women’s and gender studies faculty often collaborate with community partners—local, national, and global—in transformational action research.

As an intellectual project committed to challenging and transforming dominant systems of power and privilege, women’s and gender studies recognizes that knowledge is not neutral; it takes multiple forms and emerges from diverse locations.
ASSESSING WOMEN’S AND GENDER STUDIES SCHOLARSHIP, TEACHING, AND SERVICE

Broaden the scope

☐ Account for plural forms of research, teaching, and service that occur in multiple locations.

☐ Recognize that collaborative work is often more challenging than solitary scholarly production.

☐ Recognize the multiple forms of scholarship, from traditional written products to artistic and creative expressions such as film, performance, digital media, collaborative editorial work, archival research. Increasingly, scholarship is produced in online journals, blogs, op-eds, policy reports, social media, community action projects. This expansion of domains of scholarship is not specific to women’s and gender studies, but is central to the field.

☐ Recognize that many women’s and gender studies faculty are also involved in institution-building: building alliances with other departments, enlisting affiliated faculty, proposing new courses and curricula, managing cross-listed courses, generating fuller comprehension of the field among key institutional stakeholders. This needs to be included in promotion reviews.
Recognize and account for institutional and departmental obstacles and inequities

- Institutional obstacles such as pay inequities, asymmetrical workloads, and service expectations that are often gendered and racialized should be explicitly accounted for in evaluating candidates. Disproportionate amount of time spent in teaching and service has been identified as a significant obstacle for the promotion from Associate to Full Professor, among women faculty.

- One important category of such obstacles is the biases students may bring to their evaluation of their instructors. Women’s and gender studies scholars often face resistance in the classroom; teaching evaluations may reflect students’ discomfort with challenges to their thinking. Multiple forms of evaluation, including peer evaluations and classroom observations, help to put student resistance in context.

- Scholarship, teaching, and service have traditionally been viewed as distinct. In recent years connections among these three arenas are more fully recognized. Women’s and gender studies faculty are particularly likely to work across these arenas, which should be viewed as overlapping and mutually constructive.

- Collaborations with communities and groups outside of academic institutions are viewed as producing knowledge and contributing to the development of women’s and gender studies scholarship. These collaborations need to be recognized as the scholarship they are.

Recognize that many women’s and gender studies faculty are also involved in institution-building.
Effectively evaluating candidates for tenure and promotion in women’s and gender studies requires that evaluators understand the field as heterogeneous and account for the consequent variability of women’s and gender studies scholarly forms, methods, and contributions.