

## Campus Women's Centers for the Twenty-First Century: Structural Issues and Trends

Issue Brief 03

June 2012

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In May 2010, the Women's Centers Committee published its first issue brief, which described the process of drafting a collective statement of philosophy for women's centers and provided the statement itself. A second issue brief on evaluation and assessment was published in November 2011. This third issue brief looks at structural issues and trends for campus women's centers.

### Introduction

Gender demographics of students at U.S. colleges and universities are changing. By 1980 women had overtaken men as the majority of undergraduates, and by 2006 women were earning more degrees than men at every level except professional (where their representation almost equaled men's) (Touchton, Musil, & Campbell, 2008). For some, these factors alone prompt questions about whether campus women's centers are still relevant. In addition, recent political, economic, and social conditions have heightened scrutiny of higher education and the continuing need for units like women's centers.

Campus women's centers were founded in large numbers in the 1970s and 1980s to address gender inequities, including unequal access to higher education. Now that women outnumber men on most college campuses, is access still an issue? For whom? And what of other gender inequities? Vlasnik (2011) notes that gender inequity is still a concern despite women's growing numbers, and she offers these cautions:

First, we must identify which women and men we are discussing and attend to how intersecting identities change access and equity in higher education; second, the 'quantity' of women in higher education is a different discussion than the 'quality' of their experiences, and; third, the many histories of women's access to higher education are critical to understanding their current status, opportunities, and challenges. (p. 24)

Access continues to be an issue for subsets of women including women of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) women, women with disabilities, women veterans, immigrant women, and international women (Boyd et

al., 2009, p. 390), as well as women in STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medical) fields. The Ohio Women's Centers Committee Statement of Philosophy notes that women's centers "share a commitment to historically underserved individuals and groups" (Vlasnik, 2010, p. 5).

Many of the other inequities that led to the establishment of women's centers decades ago also remain. Women's centers continue to "advocate for equity and change in the seemingly intractable area of traditional sex and gender roles" (Boyd et al., 2009, p. 390) that contribute to ongoing, serious campus problems such as sexual harassment and assault, peer harassment, chilly classroom climate, underrepresentation in certain disciplines, and other barriers to student success that disproportionately affect women and that shape their experiences following graduation through the continuing gender wage gap, life/work balance challenges, and underrepresentation of women in leadership and in certain professions.

Recent research by Sax (2008) has found that women enter college with higher levels of self-reported stress and lower ratings of their physical and emotional health than those of men. This gender gap remains significant over the college years. Women's centers continue to play an important role in "support[ing] women in achieving their educational goals, encouraging them to think more broadly about fields of study and leadership positions, and advancing women in higher education" (Boyd et al., 2009, p. 390).

Despite evidence of continuing inequities, some in higher education believe that gender equity has been achieved. This belief presents challenges for women's centers attempting to engage students and other members of the campus community with ongoing women's and gender issues. In her study of 75 campus women's centers, Kasper (2004) notes obstacles mentioned by women's center directors in running their centers, including "the notion that special attention to women's issues isn't 'necessary' anymore," negative attitudes toward feminism, and general apathy toward women's issues (p. 498). "Programs and pedagogies that engage directly with questions of gender and sexuality may be located at the edges of the curriculum [and, by implication, co-curriculum], implicitly marginalizing the issues and people they address" (Campbell, 2012, p. 1). This marginalization further challenges women's centers.

An additional concern for women's centers—and certainly not a new issue—is lack of funds. Over twenty years ago Clevenger (1988) found that, regardless of institutional demographic categories, lack of funding was the most significant constraint on the operation of women's centers. Marine's (2011) research confirms that this is an ongoing, serious challenge.

In the context of changing student demographics, the belief that gender equity has been achieved, continued marginalization of gender-related work, and serious economic

challenges facing colleges and universities, women's centers must be strategic to thrive in the future. This issue brief discusses structural issues and trends for campus women's centers and offers considerations for positioning women's centers to continue their important work in the years ahead.

### **Structural issues for campus women's centers**

**Types of women's centers.** Several types of women's centers exist on college campuses. Davie (2002) differentiates between women's resource centers that focus primarily on promoting change through direct service to empower women and women's research centers that work for change through production of scholarship about women. More specifically, women's centers can take the form of:

- Community activist/action centers. Often staffed by volunteers, including students, or by part-time staff, such centers provide places to meet, find support, organize, and take action for social change.
- Student services/resource centers. Often led by a master's-level professional director, though increasingly led by doctoral-level directors, these student-focused centers are typically located in student affairs divisions. They are generally strong on programs and services, and less focused on influencing or setting institutional policy.
- Synthesis centers. Often led by professional directors with doctorates or by faculty, these centers are more likely to be housed in academic affairs divisions and to serve a broad constituency. They also play a role in curriculum and policy transformation as well as offer programs and services.
- Research centers. Staffed primarily by faculty, these centers focus on research and publication of scholarly reports on gender issues.

The word "center" has symbolic value in naming women as the "center" of inquiry and action. However, campus sites for work on women's and gender issues are not always called women's centers. At some institutions, offices of women's services (or programs) do the work of women's centers. At others, a staff member within a multicultural, equity, counseling, or other unit is assigned to provide services and programming related to women's issues. While the term women's center is used throughout this issue brief, the authors intend for this brief to be applicable to and useful for all configurations.

The type of women's center an institution establishes is shaped by "the specific institutional context, the attendant political milieu, and the relative weight/importance of student, faculty and staff needs and concerns" (Marine, 2011, p. 19). Ohio's campus women's centers reflect all four of the models described above, but most are either student services/resource centers or synthesis centers serving faculty/staff as well as students.

The remainder of this issue brief will focus on these two types of centers. It is important to note that the women faculty and staff who advocated for creation of women's centers in the 1970s and 1980s are retiring and younger women are taking their place. The entrance of young, increasingly doctoral-level professionals into the field is reshaping women's centers' missions, processes, and outcomes as well as organizational locations, an issue explored in the next section.

**Organizational locations and reporting lines.** The Ohio Women's Centers Statement of Philosophy notes that "women's centers reflect the unique needs of their institutions and communities" (Vlasnik, 2010, p. 5). The women's centers' literature clearly documents that centers vary widely across institutional types, needs, and histories.

Institutional context, politics, and the relative importance of student, faculty, and staff needs and concerns also shape the organizational locations and reporting lines of women's centers. Kasper (2004) found that approximately 40% of women's centers report to student affairs and approximately 20% report to academic affairs, with the remainder reporting to a variety of other campus divisions or units (p. 494). Of Ohio's 21 stand-alone women's centers, 50% report to student affairs, 35% report to academic affairs, and 15% report to other campus divisions or units. Since a center's organizational location helps determine its constituents, mission, and activities, it is important to be strategic about organizational location and reporting line when centers are being established or when organizational changes are being considered.

Decisions about reporting line should take into account a center's mission and constituent base as well as how the reporting line will be perceived. For instance, if the women's center exists to serve women students, a reporting line through student affairs may make sense. If, on the other hand, the center serves faculty and staff as well as students, reporting to an entity that has responsibility for all of these constituencies (e.g., academic affairs/provost or an office of equity/diversity/inclusion) may be a more sensible option. A center's organizational location and reporting line within a division (e.g., health/wellness unit, student leadership unit, or diversity unit) can also impact the focus of a center's work.

Finally, placement within the reporting line hierarchy is important. In general, the closer one is to senior decision makers, the better. Of the 124 campus women's centers featured in Clevenger's (1988) study, "respondents who were separated from the office of president by two or more hierarchical levels (particularly four or more levels) were more likely to express that their center was constrained by lack of institutional commitment" (p. 5). This affects not only the staff's ability to advocate for change but the public's perceptions of the center's effectiveness as a change agent. If constituents perceive that their women's center has little power to effect institutional change, they may be less likely to bring campus-wide issues (e.g., harassment or gender bias in policies and practices) to the attention of the center. Center staff cannot act on what

they do not know about, problematic policies and practices persist, and the center continues to be perceived as ineffective in influencing institutional change.

**Organizational alliances.** Working to build alliances and coalitions across campus and in the local community is often the way women's centers accomplish their work, though alliance building is not without challenges (e.g., turf issues, competition for scarce resources, status differences between academic and non-academic programs, misunderstandings about what women's centers do). Alliances allow for resource sharing, helping the typically small staffs of women's centers accomplish more with less. Allies also provide support in difficult times. Women's centers often find value in building partnerships with academic programs (e.g., women's/gender/sexuality studies programs), institutional commissions on women, and campus diversity/inclusion offices. When such units work together as equals to address an issue, the results are often exponentially larger than if the women's center addressed an issue alone. Building alliances helps not just across campus but also in the community, which enhances women's centers' relevance to the institutional mission (Marine, 2011). Doing women's center work within the framework of the university mission, as noted by Marine, "is not something that a women's center can afford to be casual about" (p. 24). Alliances make particular sense for women's centers in an era of shrinking resources and significant institutional change.

**Space issues.** Women's centers are more likely than offices of women's programs/services to be allocated gathering space that is separate from staff offices. Such space highlights the value of dedicated areas for group work and community-building.

Some women's centers are located in stand-alone houses; others in suites within administrative, academic, or residential buildings. Each type of location has merits and disadvantages. A house often provides more space but may be an older building in need of repair. A house also typically seems more "homey," but may be perceived as a place where support is plentiful but education is not. Women's centers located within administrative, academic, or residential buildings are often cramped but more likely to be modernized as part of building renovations. They may also be perceived as less "homey" but more educational in function.

Some women's centers are located in basements, on the fringes of campuses, or in spaces that are hard to find or difficult to access. Where a center is located and how much and what kind of space it has been allocated say a lot about how the center, and its constituents, are valued by the institution. It is important for decision makers to think strategically when considering space issues, particularly when women's centers are being established or when location changes are being considered.

### Trends for campus women's centers

**(Re)naming women's centers.** In discussing the trend in the late 1990s of women's studies programs being renamed gender studies, Yee (1997) states,

The act of naming has a particular strategic value for women's studies and other historically marginalized areas such as ethnic studies. It encourages participation by certain populations of students and attention in scholarship and teaching to the very systems of inequality that make the issue of access a critical one in the lives of students and scholars who have stood at the margins of university life and scholarly discourse. (p. 48)

As women's centers strive to accomplish their missions during times of dwindling resources and institutional changes, one frequently considered strategy is renaming. Reasons for name changes are varied and range from reflecting new alliances and organizational structures to reconsiderations of services and constituents. Regardless of the motivation, the act of naming has significant implications for women's centers as well as women's studies programs and must be carefully considered.

Some name choices are motivated by practical as much as ideological issues. For instance, a women's center whose primary mission involves support of feminist scholarship, sponsorship of educational programming, and distribution of information and referrals may choose to call itself a women's resource center, emphasizing its role as a campus resource. Similarly, some campus organizations use the term office rather than center in their names. In many cases, such offices arose from recommendations of commissions or task forces charged with studying the climate and conditions of women on campus. The term office reflects their administrative roots and original emphases on addressing inequities in work and learning environments for women faculty, staff, and students.

In recent years, the rise of gender studies as an academic discipline and methodological approach has influenced many women's studies programs to rename themselves gender studies or at least include gender in their designations. In some cases, the changes are motivated by the desire to be more inclusive of the field's expanding scholarship, to create space for "those interested in researching and teaching gender who do not identify as feminists and/or reject feminist theory and methodology as a framework" (Yee, 1997, p. 49). In other cases, "some feminist faculty have used 'gender' studies as a political strategy in order to establish a body of feminist-oriented courses, much like feminist scholars did thirty years ago when they proposed the term 'women' rather than 'feminist' in order to establish feminist studies" (Yee, 1997, p. 50). Given the historically close connections between women's studies programs and campus women's centers, it is not surprising that many women's centers are considering similar name changes.

While renaming women's centers to women's and gender centers (or gender centers) is sometimes prompted by problems (e.g., poor event attendance, lack of funding or administrative support, negative attitudes toward feminism), changes may also be a response to evolving definitions of feminism and emergent forms of feminist activism. For instance, feminist concerns increasingly include transgender politics and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) issues. Similarly, many women's centers are launching campaigns focused on economic justice, media activism, and global feminism. These issues have broad appeal and promote diverse campus and community alliances. Including gender in a center's name is one way to highlight the center's commitment to such issues and attract a broader constituency. There may be clear benefits to including gender in women's centers' names, but there are also potential drawbacks. In her consideration of women's studies programs being renamed gender studies, Yee (1997) points out that, although both disciplines "focus on gender and identity as socially constructed categories and both foster interdisciplinary scholarship," gender studies "may or may not focus on women" and may reject the use of feminist theories and methodologies (p. 49). Yee concludes,

The 'women' in women's studies, then, functions in part as a symbol of the continued existence of unequal power and access to resources in society. Moreover, women's studies programs and departments, as physical and intellectual sites for feminist critical inquiry and political action,...[ensure] the presence of a feminist perspective as a cohesive body of theory, method, and practice that is not always present in gender studies. (p. 61)

Women's centers perform a similar role as women's studies programs in their campus communities. They serve as a centralized location for information and programming on a multitude of women's issues and feminist concerns. Therefore, center administrators may want to consider Yee's concerns. If women's centers convert to gender centers, they could face similar scenarios. In their sincere desire to mark their inclusiveness with the use of the word gender, centers could conceivably be requested to provide programming and resources that actually exclude women's experiences and/or feminist perspectives.

As quickly becomes apparent, there are many important factors to consider when naming or renaming a women's center. Centers may want to fully consider the implications and strategic value of naming and not be swayed by political or budgetary pressures. There is real strategic value in a name. Chosen carefully, a center's name indicates its affiliations, mission, services, and constituents and reflects its continued efforts to remain relevant, inclusive, and vital to the communities it serves.

**Internationalization, technology, and leadership.** Davie's three emerging programmatic themes for women's centers – internationalization, technology, and leadership – proposed in 2002 remain viable as "sites for energetic activity" (p. 448) for

the next decade. As increasing numbers of international women students come to the U.S. to study, women's centers have opportunities to help U.S. students engage with global women's and gender issues as well as to support international women students. Services for women veterans are also increasing as more women enter the armed forces. Women's centers are engaging students through social media and harnessing social media to help women find their voices. Women's centers are helping to shape individuals' and institutions' understanding of leadership for the twenty-first century through feminist approaches that are inclusive and collaborative in nature.

**Inclusivity and intersectionality.** Feminism, foundational to women's center work, has become more inclusive, intersectional, and social justice-oriented. Many women's centers today understand that "supporting the success of women-identified students involves working with individuals of all gender identities to raise awareness about and contribute to cultural change related to gender issues more broadly, addressing concerns that affect all members of a campus community" (Boyd et al., 2009, p. 390). Marine (2011) highlights "the importance of inviting others into the work remaining to be done around gender equity," including men and transgender individuals, and the need for authentic engagement with "other forms of anti-oppression [and social justice] work" (p. 26). There is now more focus within women's centers on explicitly anti-racist/anti-oppression work and the broader category of gender and its fluidity. Such work requires a supportive, collaborative relationship with multicultural and LGBTQ centers and diversity affairs offices. Women's centers' social justice efforts can benefit from partnerships with programs that focus on community service and service learning.

### Implications

In times of institutional crisis and change, "obtaining and sustaining funding and resources sufficient to fully actualize the missions of [women's centers] remains one of the most significant challenges facing [centers]" (Boyd et al., 2009, p. 391). This issue brief offers considerations for positioning campus women's centers to continue their important work in the years to come.

The authors intend this brief to be used as an aid in decision making about the organizational dimensions and resources of women's centers. Readers are encouraged to share the brief with allies and also with administrators to help with institutional decision making and resource allocation. Readers may also find the brief useful for raising campus awareness about the work of women's centers and their continuing role in addressing gender inequity.

If women's centers are to thrive in these challenging times, they must understand their institution's current and projected context and politics as well as the current and future needs and concerns of their constituents (broadly defined). To secure their place in the changing landscape of higher education, women's centers must articulate their

continued value to the institution through a clear mission, objectives, and activities that align with current and future institutional priorities. They need to forge strategic alliances across campus and in the community and advocate for organizational structures, locations, and names that best reflect their evolving work and contributions to their institution's mission. If successful in this, women's centers can look to a bright future within higher education.

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*The authors are grateful to colleagues who reviewed drafts of this brief: Marci McCaulay and Amber L. Vlasnik.*

### **Citation**

Goettsch, J., Linden, A., Vanzant, C., & Waugh, P. (2012, June). *Campus women's centers for the twenty-first century: Structural issues and trends* (Issue Brief No. 03). Retrieved from Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education: <http://www.soche.org/for-members/councils-and-committees/womens-centers-committee/> and Greater Cincinnati Consortium of Colleges and Universities: <http://www.gcccu.org/committees/womens-studies.cfm>