

EIGHT

TASK FORCE ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN AT SUNY POTSDAM: A
PERSPECTIVE ON A DECADE OF FEMINIST PRACTICES**Liliana Trevizan¹**

Abstract: This paper argues that the *Task Force on the Status of Women at SUNY Potsdam* stands as a model of best practices for institutions of Higher Education that want to improve campus climate, and respond appropriately to demographic. The results of the work female faculty have done there are noteworthy, and a decade later its effects continue to bring positive rewards to faculty, students, and the institution as a whole.

In memory of Anne Righton Malone

When we pause to reflect on the involvement of faculty with the *Task Force on the Status of Women at SUNY Potsdam in 2001*² we find, almost a decade later, that even today this work stands out among the best practices to improve campus climate. Those institutions of Higher Education that want to improve campus climate, and respond appropriately to demographic changes, would appreciate this model of reform and revisions brought about by a group of dedicated academics. In essence, these faculty were able to influence practices in their college by presenting a plan of action that the administration developed and implemented. Female faculty organized around the inequity of opportunities based on gender and the lack of support of female faculty in the institution. They opened up a conversation with the President of the university aimed to educate him on gender issues, and found in him an ally to improve campus climate. These faculty members were able to convince the administration that repeated offenses and unequal treatment to female faculty should be addressed before they brought unplanned and uncomfortable consequences to their campus.

SUNY Potsdam is a small liberal arts public college located in Northern New York, and one of the comprehensive campuses of the SUNY system of NYS. In 2011, the effects of the *Task Force* continue to bring positive rewards to faculty, students, and the institution as a whole. Without pretending to be exhaustive, the purpose of this piece is, to show the significance of the changes the *Task Force* brought about to our College, to

describe the process through which we achieved such positive outcomes, and to explore a few of the rough areas that may frame the next conversations on feminist practices in an academic setting. To introduce the matter, we need to remind ourselves that our practice has contributed to make SUNY Potsdam a better place for all, regardless. As bell hooks (2003) would state, no matter what the shortcomings, “(we) made our voices heard, we made our presence felt. And much has changed” (p. 183).

In 1999 34% of faculty members at SUNY Potsdam was female, counting only seven full professors among them, and now in 2009, 42% of faculty is female³ with a headcount of 24 (35%) now being at the Full professor rank,⁴ while at the Assistant level is at a 50% to 50% ratio.⁵ In 1999 there was not a single academic department led by a woman and now, a decade later, 55 % of department Chairs are female.⁶ Only three departments had departmental bylaws in 1999, and now all of them do, while many include guidelines for tenure and promotion. In 2002 the college hired a Provost who is actively engaged in feminist scholarship, and there are also female colleagues in meaningful and part-time jobs in administration, as on the most important committees, and in the Faculty Senate. These changes are significant, substantial, and undeniable. Not only has SUNY Potsdam campus climate changed for the better, but also the way that those changes have affected our curriculum, our programs, and our pedagogies has brought about numerous rewards to the institution in the last decade.

In May of 2000 we sent a letter to John Fallon III, then President of the College, requesting him to appoint a Commission on the Status of Women, and we suggested that it should be modeled on the University of Buffalo. We also recommended that it be charged with producing a document that would evaluate the working condition of female faculty, and also present the administration with a list of suggestions to improve the campus climate for women and to insure a more equitable treatment at SUNY Potsdam.

Since we had been working on climate issues for a decade under the umbrella of a Women’s Caucus, we had already deliberated and collected anecdotal evidence about the most pressing issues on campus. Now we ranked our concerns in order of perceived importance, the first ones being: consistency in tenure-promotion standard procedures, mentoring for female junior faculty, the absence of female department Chairs, and a serious review of pay-equity issues.

Other issues mentioned in that letter were merit pay, recognition and awards, and the need for workplace flexibility regarding family life needs, none of which will be addressed here. The letter was signed by thirty tenured faculty

members, since we suggested our untenured faculty not to sign it. This proved to be an effective strategy and a successful decision, but also one that brought some tension among us and made us lose a certain degree of credibility from a few junior faculty members at the time. I believe we may have regained in that terrain later on.

We had worked systematically educating the College Administration on women's and gender issues for five years; from April of 1994 when the first "Plenary of Women" had invited the administration to a public forum to discuss our issues, to December 1999 when an article on *MIT Report on The Status of Women*⁷ published by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* inspired us and opened the door to a formal presentation to the administration. We held conversations with the Provost, with the director of Human Resources and with the President; and I will refer later in the paper to other strategic sessions we prepared for the President. Needless to say, the MIT Report provided us with the framework by which we were going to operate if we wanted a similar success story on our own campus. We were to start from the standpoint of accepting that "gender bias in the 90's is not your mother's sex discrimination – it operates in a 'stealth like way' and unintentional as it may be, though, it can have devastating effects on women's careers" (p.1). By the time the President received us with the signed letter in his office, he had learned already about the issues and accepted graciously our request for clerical support, and gave us open access to relevant institutional data. Our letter was specific about the Task Force composition, and timeline, as well as about asking for assurance that our work would be considered valuable service to the College, even if the nature of the report results were controversial. By that time we had already gathered much of the information in some areas, but had to work hard to complete a report in others; the revision of salary inequities was most difficult because of the many factors to consider and the contradictions we found in several models we consulted. Realizing the significance of our task, we worked diligently and produced what we called a Preliminary Report on the Status of Women in SUNY Potsdam.

The Preliminary Report representing "one year's work by the members of the Task Force on the Status on Women" was presented to President Fallon in August of 2001. We requested, gathered, and obtained pertinent data regarding gender issues on campus, then spent months analyzing and also producing some additional data where there was none available, (e.g. in the year 2000 and during previous years no one single academic department was headed by a female faculty in the entire college). The questions posed to the Task Force then were: Do female colleagues want to be Chairs of Academic Departments? Is the current system not allowing for them to become Chairs?

Is this an issue of inadequate compensation that affects all faculty, male and female?”⁸

After a year of work, the Task Force finished what was the first part of its job and presented the President of the College with several recommendations. Perhaps the most obvious was that the campus needed to take gender issues more seriously, and to be able to commit to a plan of improving the general climate for women on campus. The Task Force recommended to President Fallon that the College undertake serious research to produce adequate data on gender issues. The Task Force recommended that an independent third party, a specialized analyst in the area, render a specific study. Specific recommendations in each area were proposed to the President in order to assess the status of women on our campus. The *Preliminary Report* included a preamble, an introduction, and a separate report for each of the seven charges, a list of all recommendations, and an action agenda.

We continued to work in concordance with AAUW sponsoring three public debates after the Task Force Report of 2001, and those well planned and widely attended events were significant vehicles to disseminate our work. Perhaps much of our impact resulted from the empowering position of knowing we had an informed document to back our claims, and also the fact that we knew we were now conversant with the administration, to which we were able to comment on hiring practices, recognition methods, student evaluations and more. This legitimization we achieved was remarkable if we consider that we are UUP members in a unionized state system of Higher Education. *Improving the Campus Climate for Women faculty and professionals, a Four-College Forum on the status of Women held at St. Lawrence University (2002)*⁹ was perhaps the most successful one; then a Forum on the Status of Women in Academia (Fall 2004)¹⁰, and one on Family Friendly Workplace Policies¹¹ in Potsdam in 2005. All the events were extremely well attended and had local press coverage thanks to the protective umbrella that co-sponsoring with the local branch of AAUW gave us, since we were then able to publicize and plan events with less restrictions and receive attention from the local community. The connection to AAUW not only gave us visibility in the region, but also provided concrete support by accepting our invitation to come to speak to the administration of the four colleges in the area (we organized visits of the NYS LAF colleges representative and LAF to the office of the colleges' presidents and vice-presidents). By the same token, we invited women's studies colleagues from other institutions that were able to help us educate the administration, and the President in particular, regarding the seriousness of gender inequity in Higher Education.¹² These conversations in the area colleges resulted in

noticeable changes in the four colleges, such as having the first female faculty member was appointed head of an engineering department at Clarkson University, women's studies classes offered at SUNY Canton, revisions made to the colleges' sexual harassment policies, and the local award system at SUNY Potsdam revised. These events all counted along with the support of a female Provost who was hired in 2002, and for whose hiring we believe our influence was important. In fact, Provost Madden has publicly said that reading the Preliminary Report was significant for her to accept the job offer. The report offered her a guidance as to what the women's view of the institution's needs was at the time.¹³

The Task Force worked continuously until 2006. At that time, we were producing a Report, and checking each of the recommendations in our original document. Regrettably, that report was never finished as we experienced the death of our dear colleague Anne Malone, co-chair of the Task Force; then other circumstances led me and other colleagues away from the project. Also, the inauguration of a new President in 2007 and the 2008 announcement of a plan for a teaching load reduction lent a positive tone to the campus climate; which in turn led us to see less of a need for our work to continue. Regrettably, from 2009 until now the extraordinary hardship of the economic situation of the State of New York and its University System these last years has made those promises impossible to concretize, and has demoralized our campus.

Having given a brief description of the work we did, I hope now that the following specifics would help to explain the success that in my view qualifies the Task Force on the Status of Women at SUNY Potsdam as an example of best practice in an academic setting.

There was a core group of feminist colleagues that provided institutional continuity for more than a decade, while the Women's and Gender Studies Program developed and grew academically, giving women's and gender issues more acceptance within the local culture, and offering a legitimate space for feminist faculty pursuits. The lasting and fruitful coalition with the local AAUW¹⁴ allowed us to work together with colleagues from the four colleges in the area, to establish contact and gather support in the town and the state. Thus, our issues were conversant with the larger community. In addition, we were fortunate to be able to count on colleagues from SUNY who gave us support and shared their own experiences with us.¹⁵

The recommendations we focused on were those few that required mostly political good will from the administration and that gave the college a big return in changing the image of the institution. We were not only willing to sit at the table and negotiate specifics with the President, and later talk with

the Provost, the Deans and HR—we set about proactively informing them, and offered a genuine opportunity to endorse changes on their own agenda. In the end, a proposal that was clearly fueled by grass-root feminist practices was flexible enough to welcome shared ownership of it. We gave credit to a President that allowed himself to be educated, and who also understood the value that this particular investment was to report to the institution, and to the Deans that acted promptly to do what they could. We of course understood that the hire of our Provost was both, influenced by the cultural changes we had just attained, and a catalyst for more change yet to come.

Finally, we can't forget the seriousness of purpose and the attention to details that gave legitimacy to our work: the lunches paid for by the Office of the President, the written document with copies distributed to departments from his office, the initial letter of appointment, the regular formal reports to Faculty Senate, the timely and well prepared press releases, the legitimate space that a few of us had gained in the local community as members of the board of AAUW, as well as the close contact we had with the NYS representatives of that organization, and also, the fact that we understood the Task Force as part of our day job.

Most of our recommendations have been now addressed by the administration, and the campus is today no longer the place it once was. The climate has changed considerably. Data now show more women at the Full professor and Associate levels, new awards have been created, practices have changed, description of jobs have changed, and, although not totally resolved, salary equity has been improved. Our current Provost has brought more positive changes, such as a state-of-the-arts family-friendly policy and other initiatives in which newly tenured female faculty members also played an important role.

This said, a few of our recommendations remain unresolved and still need addressing. For instance, the tenure and promotion procedures have received attention, and having new departmental bylaws have helped the process, in addition to the cultural change, so problems have not been as many and as evident as they were before. Nevertheless, the overall problem of inconsistent messages between individual departments guidelines and Deans expectations still confuses, scares, and sometimes traps unaware junior faculty. There is a need for procedures to be consistent.

Mentoring for junior faculty has also been revised and a system has been established at the Office of the Deans level; the system is established at a level too close to the faculty, when we had advised it to be housed at the Provost level. In various instances the process is not taken seriously enough,

since there is not follow-up other than a letter. The rest is left completely to the individual mentor, and it has failed to work effectively in several cases. The Task Force had recommended a system that would be flexible enough so people could opt-out if wanted, but that would be monitored, regarded, and respected so untenured faculty would trust that they would benefit from it. In our view, it was most important that the program be housed in the office of the Provost, thus the candidate would benefit from an administrative layer of distance between their performance and the mentor. The most careful process must include that the mentor assignment should consider issues of race, age, and gender. The Program that the Office of the Provost has for First Year faculty members is a good mentorship vehicle, but not enough for the necessary follow-up for the six years until tenure.

The need for a more comprehensive review of salary equities, and a revision of the formula used to calculate it, still remain. Our experience suggests that close-up interviews with those most affected individuals would gather information on their level of satisfaction with the changes that took place addressing, at least partially the issue of salary disparity.

To have a Task Force that every ten years revises and compares notes regarding issues of difference on campus is a healthy practice that should be adopted if an institution wants to keep track of their own practices. The need for feminists to be vigilant is the best guarantee that changes will continue to happen and be applied.

However, regardless of the number of issues that still need to be addressed at SUNY Potsdam concerning specific gender issues, the campus climate is radically different ten years later, and the culture of the campus shows the change.

Knowing that, let's now focus on anticipating the next questions that will arise once the most basic gender issues have been addressed in our institution. It's a major challenge from a feminist perspective to analyze the quality of the changes we helped to bring forward. Beyond the mere change in data, we need to ask ourselves if we can honestly say that our institution is now a better institution overall, that offers better educational opportunities to our students, and it is also a better workplace than it was before.

Since the answer is twofold, we can see how much positive changes have created more and better educational opportunities for our students. A diverse faculty achieving tenure has been able to offer new courses, create new programs, teach more Learning Communities, do more interdisciplinary work, and demonstrate innovation in curriculum and pedagogy. The College now can also count on a strong majority of the faculty for servicing the needs

of the institution. Students, the College, the system, and the community have all benefited ostensibly. These are all elements that can show the measure of our success.

One of the most noticeable changes the Task Force brought to SUNY Potsdam and one that definitively transformed the workplace was the increase in number of women accessing the role of Department Chair. The change here was extraordinary and impacted the College and the local community, who had been informed of the situation by a headline in the local newspaper about Arts and Sciences not having one single department headed by a woman.¹⁶ Less than a year later, the School had appointed eight women as Chairs, and visits to Arts and Sciences Council and the Councils of Chairs are a clear demonstration that the culture of the place had changed. We can take those numbers and read the success of the work we did. Nevertheless, one should also be interested in finding out in what ways even the most evident gains exhibit the contradictory nature of feminist work in academia. At the time we initiated our work we saw the all male structure that didn't favor female faculty progress. Ten years after having gender parity at that level, we can see that there are many other factors that make the position unfavorable to the advance of women and minorities. Departments seem to resist change, and while several colleagues --- men and women --- have tried to create the basis for a more inclusive environment, some have fit comfortably into the rigidity of the position as well. This shows that change in academia is not only a question about access, which perhaps we would not have understood or admitted ten years ago.

How do we measure success? ¹⁷ I would argue that a feminist perspective would reinforce the facts that created tangible changes; and as we had said before, our recommendations had all been implemented, in one way or another; that is success, in particular because our agenda came from a grass-root movement within the institution that did all the work and pushed the university to be better for its own good; we believe that those changes have indeed benefited all members of our community, not only women. Recognizing the enormity of our achievement, a feminist position also forces us to ask the next questions, and do the follow-up to the activist work that opened more spaces for women in the institution. Though many female faculty members at SUNY Potsdam now have access to move-up in their professional careers, have access to decision making spaces, receive compensation in teaching load and money, and have an input in implementing ideas, it is apparent that the follow-up work must not focus on gains of specific individuals. All of that is important, but we should also ask, and perhaps focus on, how much positive changes have occurred at the level

of academics, and if they have led to changes to the curricular core mission of the institution.

We do not intend to disregard the obvious fact that female faculty members are now more visible role models, so our students can see women in more prominent jobs, which is all the more important in a public institution of Higher Education that serves a high percentage of first-generation students. If what we wanted was to create a more inclusive workplace, we can be satisfied with our work. I do trust also that a larger number of female tenured faculty has made it possible for the place to appear perhaps more welcoming to faculty of color or of a diverse background.¹⁸ In that sense, now that women are in institutional positions that may allow them to voice their values, we can expect them to introduce a level of change that would aim to transform the institution. Real change will mean not only fostering a positive campus climate for those that work in it, but also providing abundant opportunities for students to immerse themselves in the ideals of inclusiveness, innovation, participation, interdisciplinary work, global and local connections, as well as a commitment to service and social justice.

When we solve the concerns about access and representation of women in the workplace it is necessary to account for how we measure success in the field. These questions should trigger further development in understanding women in academia. At this stage, we can only attest to certain level of discomfort with the outcomes of this process, and put forward a few observations regarding the role of women as department Chairs. One of them would be that women have appeared to act more in isolation than their male counterparts; in effect, most new Chairs have seemingly approached their job in an individual manner, and we have not observed the development of a network. Perhaps this has resulted from having little experience or lack of training on how to delegate or seek help from colleagues and at the same time exercise leadership and authority. A more collaborative leadership would foster more interdepartmental work, and would devote less time and efforts directed to consolidate and strengthen the uniqueness of each individual department. The newly created minors may be an indication of interdisciplinary work in the last decade, and is clear that they reflect more niches in a discipline rather than intersections of academic interest, with the exception of the new Service Learning program that is a collaborative effort led by a female Chair of department. Consistent with this observation about departments keeping the focus on uniqueness rather than on intersectionality, we can also mention that most Chairs seem to show a pragmatic alignment with the Deans in a more traditional understanding of the departments' academic mission, while they have shown active resistance to the academic innovation that at SUNY Potsdam has come from the Office of the Provost. The scarcity of resources experienced as a result of the worst

economic crisis that the state of New York has seen in the last decades has without a doubt brought more stress to the position of department Chair than ever before; the institution must know that those women in leadership positions are acting as the best keepers of their departments' health and viability in a future that seem uncertain. It is apparent that the level of budget cuts and uncertainty that is now rampant in the SUNY system- in particular regarding the future funding of comprehensive colleges such as ours – is a tremendous challenge that can only be faced by presenting a cohesive and unified work supportive of an effective administration.

The question about leadership style has also been demystified now that we have 18 female department Chairs. Although most our colleagues have chosen to be more inclusive and collaborative in style, some of them act not much different than previous Chairs; they seem in need to probe that a job well done has come to completion without help, and prone to consult only the Dean they feel compelled to please. These are all routine practices that we have already criticized in many of the most authoritarian male Chairs. Is it that the departmental structure itself is conservative in nature and there is almost nothing that anyone can do to make it more porous and receptive to change? In effect, departmental structures impede the flow of effective and illuminating dialogue in Higher Education, they keep enforcing the walls, pushing us to focus always on the same questions instead of motivating us to ask different questions or to ask questions from different, alternative perspectives. According to Michael Berubé (2006)“Whenever universities fail to promote reasonable debate or to honor the injunction that every proposition is open to every kind of reasonable challenge, they are not serving the cause of intellectual independence” (p. 295). The questions of today and the visions of tomorrow are only to be found where intersection occurs, and that is outside the boundaries of departments.

Although one of the Task Force members became department Chair, one of them left the College promptly after our work was completed. And while our work had been successful, one of the consequences for the faculty members that engaged in this work was that, at least for a while, some of our colleagues thought that an alignment of the Task Force members with the administration was bound to happen. This was even reflected in comments by our local Union leaders at the time and reflected in a few very personal comments at the Women and Gender Studies meetings. The reason for this was that once the Preliminary Report was made public and accepted by the upper administration, we became involved in the particulars of making the changes a reality. Implementing the numerous changes did not require meetings of 15 people in one office anymore, but we had to divide the work, and were required to present, our recommendations in a public and

professional manner. We held numerous meetings with the director of Human Resources or the Affirmative Action officer, the Institutional Research director, and more. Perhaps because as co-chairs we became the de facto representatives of the group and because we were busy and tired-off, we may have not done the necessary work to foster continuity of our endeavors and some distance was created among us and the new generation of feminist colleagues, who were now looking forward to fix the issues that had been left pending on our list of 12 problems to present to the administration. When our work began, prior to knowing how the administration was going to perceive our advocacy, we wanted to protect colleagues who were untenured at the time from any possible retaliation, and we decided official members of the Task Force had to be tenured faculty members. . Many organizational and administrative changes had to become a reality and we did what was necessary, including difficult follow-up meetings with Deans and Chairs. Those meetings were backed-up by an administration that realized the necessity of the changes and had publicly committed to them. Later on, a proactive new Provost that made our agenda part of her own also embraced them. However, some of those meetings also may have influenced particular offices to personalize the push for change in the two of us co-chairs. We both then received several angry and disrespectful e-mails but we did not disclose them, nor did we go to file a claim at the time. We felt proud of our response. .

Those were two years of intense work for us, We were also in the last steps of the approval of the Women's and Gender Studies major proposal; numerous colleagues worked hard in the many drafts, and also in meetings facing resistance from powerful committees on campus. The concrete revisions of language day in and out, fell directly on us; we worked well together and we were happy doing it, but we were tired and overworked. By the time the WGS Major was approved in Albany¹⁹ many of the most enthusiastic core-faculty of the program had become Chairs of their own departments; and Anne Malone had been elected Chair of the Faculty Senate, position that she held until September of 2007, when she passed away. Though it might have appeared that we were navigating the experience with ease, it was indeed challenging at times, in particular when we felt isolated from our peers. More often than not, the level of competition was such that even when more spaces were available for women to move up in the institutional roles, the vying for leadership spaces was even harder than it was before.

As it happens, after some initial tension, we were also able to work amicably with a Union that only started speaking of gender issues at the state level, two or three years after we did our work locally,²⁰but that Union now is locally led by a female colleague, and several feminist colleagues are or have

been actively involved. Even taking into account the personal and professional costs that were endured, I must admit that we also gained respect among colleagues. This became apparent during the search for a new College President that took place in 2006 and we were consulted by formal committees as well as by colleagues in different groups, and women issues were part of the conversation with candidates. The new President entered our campus knowingly accepting that it had a vibrant faculty, and that it included many vocal women and men. The measure of our success is evidenced in the fact that all the thirteen recommendations presented in the Preliminary Report were addressed, and this resulted in tangible changes in the institution. The cultural transformation is concrete at all levels of the College. Those areas that continue to be problematic even after much improvement, such as the guidelines for tenure and promotion, we hope will be addressed again soon, and now we can also trust that the problems are less likely to issue from gender bias.

Are there gender issues to contend with at the institutional level in SUNY Potsdam today? Though we still have issues to contend with, most of them now have other markers. We now face as a group new conflicts in this new scenario. Emerging scholarship has been done recently about the topic of bullying in academia,²¹ but at the time we were unprepared to be bullied by a female colleague. Also, a decade ago, we could not have imagined how the scenario would change after having more women in leadership roles. According to Mickey Meece (2009, May 30) “we are supposed to be the nurturers and the supporters” (p. 1/7). It is difficult to say whether bullying takes place because a female Chair may perceive the presence of other women to be intimidating, because they perceive women that have exercised a level of leadership outside the department as competition, or if at some level the institutional culture forces female chairs to act in this fashion. Corliss Olson believes that “workplace bullying in Higher Education occurs, unchecked, because it is promoted by workplace structures, policies and procedures, [... that] include hierarchy and power differentials, supervisors who lack relevant training, and an unresponsive grievance process” She goes on to note that “the institution dismisses problems as personality conflicts they are powerless to resolve. Worst of all, they are unwilling to name the problem” (AFT p.5)

What we know is that bullying is never pleasant and our institution had fallen into the category of institutions that let bullying happen when long-term appointments went unchecked for decades.²² Almost a decade later, will we women repeat those patterns of behavior and exclusionary practices that we once criticized in male, long-standing department Chairs. Is it that having no rotation of people in charge, no new ideas in play, no trying a

different set of strengths becomes acceptable for an academic department when the chairperson is a woman? Having room for dissent is always good for a department, regardless of who is in charge. When we worked with the Task Force, we were not able to anticipate any of these concerns, in part because the complete absence of female faculty members in the position of department chairs at the time tainted our analysis to expect that women were to bring a complete change to the position itself.

There are many inconsistencies in the job description for department heads at public institutions,; and to the extent to which these mid-management positions are political it is extremely difficult to imagine how it would be possible to bring more accountability to the position. I refuse to accept the notion that in the end, the future of departments depends only and exclusively on the politics of the times, and that the change introduced by bringing women to the position would not really open opportunities for a more inclusive work in academia. This holds true even if academic departments, being the most conservative spaces in academia represent the last shield of a system that did not conceive of higher education institutions as places in which a systematic and bold exploration of unexpected intersections of the human experience would take place.

It is not that there is no longer a place for the traditional work of departments, it is obvious that our students need to study the traditions and paths that brought our knowledge to where it is today; it is not that the rigid compartment of disciplines representing specific perspectives does not narrow the focus on the subject of study and produces a deep understanding of it. The point here is not to negate the need for the senior faculty to exercise a professorial overview of how authoritative texts are replaced by new ones, or how the standards of tenure and promotion remain highly regarded by all. A fresh approach suggests that rather than trying to hold on to past practices, the academic department can be a fruitful place of change and innovation where periodical revision of curriculum allows for the past to be really examined and appreciated by confronting critics. Also, in this approach the department is a place that embraces the serious exploration of new challenges.

Departments must facilitate interdisciplinary work if they want to remain academically viable. It is not only that a world of instant communications facilitated by ever changing technology urges academia to be always up to date, and classrooms to respond to expectations created by social media. It is above all, that by observing the intricate connections of a phenomenon we find more complex answers or we can pose more adequate questions to the disciplines, and in turn our students will receive an education that will make them aware of ever changing scenarios of inquiry. At SUNY Potsdam, as in

most other places, Women's and Gender Studies has been one of the most vibrant spaces for nurturing interdisciplinary connections and many campus wide initiatives have seen the light because of those academic conversations that foster professional connections of faculty from different departments. More than 30 courses focused on gender created in the last two decades reflect demographic changes but are also a testimony to the acute eye for innovation that resides in those programs; there is no doubt that the interdisciplinary programs in general - and not only women's and gender studies - continue to bring change to academic institutions. It is there where colleagues explore new pedagogies —through, for instance open classrooms and team-teaching—, and where new trends in the disciplines flourish, allowing for renovations of departmental offerings to take place, to the benefit of students, faculty, and disciplinary studies.

Eager as we were to open access to the position of department Chair to women, when we were working on the Task Force I don't believe we saw it as it is, enthusiastic as we were about opening doors to those that had been denied access because of their gender identity. We may have equated women in the position of Chairs with the welcoming of new trends in the disciplines, diversification of faculty lines, collaboration among departments, support for interdisciplinary work and innovative teaching practices as we had seen them happen with WGS. To be fair, much change was brought to departments, and there are outstanding examples of some work developed in the last six years that reflect the new perspectives. This said, we underestimated the extent to which departments, embedded in the politics of an institution, must negotiate the multiple and intersecting departmental interests at play Chairs must report to Deans and have little or no access to direct contact to the upper levels of administration. Most of their negotiations then happen with their deans, and probably given the fact that women are still perceived as new to the position, the process of legitimization leaves little room for disagreement. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in most cases the new chair sees more the need to establish a good working relationship with a seasoned dean, than to actually respond to the needs or strengths of the department. It is possible to argue that perhaps Deans may not know all the facts of every single department, or they may need to resort to generalizations in order to do their job well; then the role of educating the Dean regarding their department's mission falls on Chairs, and it becomes a most significant part of their job. There are instances when perceptions of productivity and purpose clash with a particular dean's expectations, and in these cases it is necessary for a savvy chair to walk a tight rope to protect the interest of our students. One can understand how the need to vie for scarce resources would challenge the newcomers, regardless

of their gender, and would place female Chairs at a disadvantage, in a long standing history of very little collaboration among departments.

All of the above, plus the perception that women may be less welcoming to criticism coming from other female colleagues than they are at tending to conservative senior faculty claims, contributes to the layers of complexity in the gender issues that operate in higher education. Paula J. Caplan (1992) advises we must also be “aware that the closer a woman gets to the top, the more people she is likely to encounter that are uncomfortable, or downright hostile, about her success” (p. 159).

It is perhaps difficult for feminists to find ourselves making some of the same assumptions traditionally made about women that now have positions that we have not been able to attain, such as believing that they got there “because they tell the men at the top what they want to hear or that they make no efforts on behalf of anyone other than members of the dominant groups”(Caplan, 159). It is unfair to both those that now are in positions of authority, as well to those of us who remain in the fieldwork of women’s issues on campus, that the system would push our interest against each other, and use us to keep more institutional change at bay.

Until now, women in academia have been until now forced to see only a few women as exemplary role-models, treated as tokens, much as it continues to be the case with diverse faculty at our own institution; but at SUNY Potsdam, perhaps more rapidly than at other sister comprehensive colleges of SUNY, women are now unavoidable, and they are sustaining a presence that is arguable significant. In this regard, one can argue that the work of the Task Force on the Status of Women has been successful also because we can measure the change in percentages, and the change is significant; we can see a visible change in the perceived potential for women to move-up the ladder at all levels; from being hired, to being tenured, to becoming department chairs, to being promoted and receiving awards. Women have also been appointed to several mid-level administrative positions in the last six years. More importantly, all female chairs of departments are now institutionally perceived as doing as good a job as any of the previous chairs; there have not been any serious disappointments, nor there have been any visible mishaps prompting criticism. The Dean of Arts and Sciences has reportedly commented the positive change that female presence has made to the composition of the Arts and Sciences Council and the way we do business at the College.²³

How persistent will their presence remain and how much impact in the curriculum will they make? All of that is a pending lesson that needs to be observed, nurtured, helped, and watched carefully. Jane Roland Martin

(2000) notes how “so long as feminist scholars are not just estranged from women in the outside world but divided from other women in the academy, the prospects of transformation will remain dim. One of our first moves must therefore be to reconnect with one another”(p. 161). Much has been done, and we must be proud of the change that is visible, nevertheless, there are many more questions that a new generation of feminists must pose now in institutions such as ours.²⁴ Annette Kolodny (1998) stresses that “we need new models of leadership for the new century and new models of shared governance. We need to reinvent consensus decision-making so that its inherent limitations – the tendency to suppress dissent and to level all contradictions – can be minimized”(p. 51). One can see that the work my colleagues and I did with the Task Force has brought changes to SUNY Potsdam, but the process is slow, gradual, and complex as Kolodny (1998) admits when she warns that we also “ need to understand that the kind of leadership that can affect truly collaborative decision-making – involving faculty, staff, administrators, and governing boards – requires skills in which few academics have yet been trained ”(p. 51).

In the end, the beauty of the work we have done in our generation, is that our feminist best practices have allowed for more women to become individuals, and individuals come to the workplace with their own set of values, their unique expertise, their ambitions, their political agendas. So, once gender issues stop being a common denominator, then each individual should be able to develop their own path, and pursue their own interest as they please, and as they can.

Because of our earlier work in building the Women’s Studies Program, we knew that we wanted to represent the interest of all female faculty members across the board, as if we were all the same. Regardless of our differences, we were certain that the changes would benefit all of us. As Kathryn Corbett and Kathleen Preston (1998) assure, “if we think that this is easy, we fall into the misrepresentation that is at the heart of our oppression, that women are all alike” (p. 132). Our work in the Task Force on the Status of Women at SUNY Potsdam certainly has allowed more women to think of a career for themselves, and a few have already moved up to administrative positions in other institutions; our students now have role models that are less on the fringe of the institution than they were a decade ago. Perhaps, as bell hooks (2003) reminds us, many of us, “...tend to see the presence of conflict as threatening to the continuance of critical exchange and as an indication that community is not possible when there is difference,” (p. 135) and we must learn how to accept the fact that the more inclusive an institution becomes, the more different perspectives and viewpoints will be allowed to circulate through halls. This is a challenge to all members of academia, but it becomes

more so to women, since we are recently coming out of the marginalized spaces that pledged commonality among a community of individuals without much possibility of agency. The situation has changed in small liberal arts colleges of public institutions such as ours, and still there is much more to be learned. Another positive element that we didn't plan, was that the commonality of females in more institutional roles created a space where the presence of a female Provost²⁵ appears less threatening to the status quo, so that administrative position can also be relatively more effective.²⁶

The work of the Task Force on the Status of Women opened the possibility for women to see themselves as more of an intrinsic component of SUNY Potsdam; an institution that educates mostly first generation students for whom experiencing inclusiveness will mark their social mobility more than any content we could teach them. Martha C. Nussbaum (1997) points out that to teach first generations is a highly complex task that "requires learning about racial, ethnic, and religious difference [and] about the history and experience of women [as well] gaining a reflective understanding of human sexuality. And it requires learning how to situate one's own tradition within a highly plural and interdependent world"(p. 298). Thus, even if in a few cases we may be unsatisfied with the politics of the process, we think that most colleagues now see themselves as part of a stream changing the institution for the better. This stream is now more inclusive, and diverse, and sees education as an exercise on democracy and social justice that motivates students to graduate with 'the ability to think critically, to examine themselves, and to respect the humanity and diversity of others" (Nussbaum p. 300). Inadvertently perhaps, the political in the workplace has become very personal for few of us. The great reward for us members of the Task Force has been the long lasting alliances with a larger community we formed while doing this work, and, at the end point of the experience, the satisfaction of finding oneself whole, with a professional persona consistent with one's own scholarship, and our feminist commitment to service and social justice.²⁷

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¹ Liliana Trevizan, Ph.D., is a Professor in the Modern Languages Department at SUNY Potsdam.

² John Fallon III, President of the College in September of 2000 appointed a Task Force on the Status of Women at SUNY Potsdam and a 55 page *Preliminary Report* was presented to the President on October 11, 2001. A copy of that Report can be found at the Crumb Library in SUNY Potsdam.

Members of the *Task Force* were Nelly Case, Holly Chambers, Nancy Dodge-Reyome, Marilyn Fayette, Anjali Misra, Ramona Ralston, Nancy Rehse, Mary Shepperds, Pat Whelehan, and Anne Righton Malone and Liliana Trevizan, who co-chaired the committee.

³ According the US Department of Education the number of full-time women faculty in public institutions has increased by 87% since 1989-90, most of it in PhD granting and AA institutions, while the BA+ institutions – of which we are part – show a net increase of 28.4%. (See *NEA Higher Education Advocate*, Vol 26, No. 4 (Spring 2009): 5-6

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⁴ *Wagadu's* Reader A pointed out for the record that the growth in faculty is 23.5% or 2.1% per year for female faculty. The full professor rank is 242.9% or 13% per year. The reader also suggested seeing how this compares with the NCES data on the number of women in these categories over the same period. Reader A also suggested this is “important in making the case that the Task Force did better than the rest of the nation at creating a good academic community.” However, the only available data at the NCES is the characterization of faculty during the years 1992, 1998, 2003, in which the raw numbers (in thousands) are 176, 203, 261; while the general growth in the rank in those years went from 161 to 194, a 3,67% (no data on male-female was found here). I appreciated and was intrigued by the reader suggestion; yet my background - in literary and cultural studies, as well as in feminism, - explains my interest in offering a reading of our experience from a feminist perspective,

⁵ The School can show a 50% male/female ratio overall teaching faculty when they add the temporary instructors, where a larger number of female adjuncts ‘make-up’ the sum. This taken from the SUNY Potsdam FactBook, 2009.

⁶ Department Chair Breakdowns, according to Kathy Perry (HR, e-mail 10/15/09): Arts and Sciences: 8 females, 9 males; Education: 6 females, 2 males; Music: 2 females, 2 males. This is taken from a direct e-mail from Ms. Kathy Perry, HR director, at SUNY Potsdam (10/17/2009).

⁷ See “An MIT Professor’s Suspicion of Bias Leads to a New Movement for Academic Women,” by Robin Wilson in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 3, 1999, which also made available the full text of the MIT report in its website.

⁸ From the ‘Preamble’ of the *Preliminary Report* (2001):1

⁹ *Improving the Campus Climate for Women faculty and professionals*, a Four-College Forum on the status of Women at St. Lawrence University took place in the SLU campus in October 4, 2002 and it provided the first opportunity for us to disseminate our work beyond our own campus. We carefully prepared each presentation, and invited members of the Legal Advocacy Fund of NYS AAUW to support us in public. We also asked Marie Reagan, elected Town Council member and the President of the local AAUW to welcome guests. The forum was very formal in all aspects, widely attended, and well publicized.

¹⁰ A *Four-College Forum on Improving the Campus Climate for Women in Academia* took place in November 19th of 2004 at SUNY Potsdam. The event was co-sponsored by the Task Force on the Status of Women, the Women’s Studies Program, and St. Lawrence branch of AAUW. Most Deans, and many faculty members from the other three local universities attended the panel, including the President of Clarkson U, and our own President. Panelist were: Margaret Kent Bass and Danielle Egan from St. Lawrence University, Janice Robinson and Karen Spellacy from SUNY Canton, Mary Graham and Ruth Baltus from Clarkson University, and Provost Margaret Madden and Liliana Trevizan for SUNY Potsdam, while Anne Malone acted as moderator. Susan Sontog-Hearty, Legal Advocacy Fund Vice president for the New York State AAUW also presented an overview of their work in support of equity for women in academia. President Fallon said at that occasion: “Strong female campus leaders do make changes on campus and these changes are good for all of the people and the entire institution.” This statement is remarkable, if we consider that is only in May of 2005, three years later, that the President of Harvard, Lawrence Summers, announced that the university was going to spend at least \$50 million in the decade to hire and retain more women, which was also the year when the UC report was made public. (See *The New York Times*: University of California Faulted on Hiring of Women by Tamar Lewin, May 18, 2005.

At the same forum we were able to report that ‘of the College’s 27 academic departments, eleven (11) were chaired by a female faculty: eight in the School of Arts and Sciences, one (1) in the Crane School of Music, and two (2) in the School of Education.’(See *Connection The SUNY Potsdam Women’s Studies Newsletter, Fall 2004*).

¹¹ A *Campus Climate Forum on Family Friendly Workplace Policies* took place on April 5, 2005 at 4:00 in the 8th floor of Raymond Hall. It was organized by the Task Force on The Status of Women, co-sponsored by the Women’s Studies Program, the St. Lawrence branch of the AAUW, and introduced by Anne Malone and Liliana Trevizán as ‘based on Strachan and Burgess (1998) definition of ‘family-friendly workplace;’ in which we wanted to bring back an important issue presented in our original letter that had been left out in the ‘charge’ we received from the President. A lack of policy was creating disparity among faculty. Panelists were Heather Sullivan-Catlin, Sheila McIntyre, Janet Schulenberg, Lynn Hall, and Bethany Usher, all recently tenured faculty members continued to work on it with HR, members of the Task Force, and Provost Madden that took leadership in order to produce a policy for the College.

¹² We invited Professor of Law Isabel Marcus from the U at Buffalo in March of 2000, and a private appointment with our President was part of the agenda we prepared for her, as well as a working luncheon with interested faculty that was paid by his Office. Our administration was well aware that Evvie Curry, the NYS LAF VP for AAUW had agreed to introduce our Preliminary Report to the press as she did, just before the President’s response to it.

¹³ Provost Madden expressed this at her presentation at the already mentioned November 19th 2004 Forum, she has since repeated in various venues, including at the Cortland conference on *Succeeding as Women in Higher Education*, October 23-25, 2009.

¹⁴ The St.Lawrence Co. branch of the American Association of the University Women.

¹⁵ Vivian Ng, Iris Berger, Marjorie Prize, and other colleagues from the Women’s Studies programs at both the University at Albany and Buffalo that we met at the monthly meetings at SUNY Albany provided important support and inspiration.

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¹⁷ I must recognize that it was this direct question from *Wagadu* Reader A that forced my reflection to be more specific in this point.

¹⁸ I am not discussing race issues at SUNY Potsdam in this paper, a complex issue that deserves much attention and in which the College has not made the same progress. Nevertheless, I can mention that women and feminists are aware of the big race gap that exists, and have been at a minimum supportive of diversity. The Women’s and Gender Studies major, e.g. requires students to take at least one class marked as ‘multicultural,’ a designator that College-wide we don’t have.

¹⁹ A Major in Women and Gender Studies at SUNY Potsdam was approved by SUNY Albany April 25th of 2006; the Program had existed since 1992 and also it had a robust WS minor ever since.

²⁰ Our NYS UUP produced its first document on gender *The UUP Gender Equity Project* appearing in The Chronicle of Higher Education on 1/16/2004, where they expected to start collecting data by June of 2004. This was the result of having hired Professor Mary Gray in 2002 as a gender consultant. UUP representatives, all male at the time, visited our campus and asked for feedback, but they had not read our report of 2001, and were not really interested in our experience or feedback at the moment. It is commendable that the UUP project generated interest and is now a most valuable source for advancement of women in the profession. The UUP Gender Inequity / Salary Inequity Study Poster session presented at the SUNY Cortland Conference on Succeeding as Women in Higher Education (October 23-25, 2009) by Kathleen Burke and Jamie Dangler was an exceptionally meticulous and important study, that hopefully s going to get the attention it deserves, perhaps even by the current SUNY Chancellor, Nancy Zimpher, who vowed to pay attention to the issues.

²¹ ‘Is Higher Education Soft on Workplace Bullies?’ *AFT On Campus*, May/ June, 2009: 5.

²² This is been perceived as a current problem by a number of faculty in different areas of our College, as reflected by the fact that— with support from Affirmative Action, HR, and UUP - a group of colleagues organized a well attended conference on the subject of bullying in the workplace on campus on March 18th and 19th of this year. Joel Neuman from SUNY New Paltz, and expert on harassment, violence and bullying in the workplace, was the main speaker.

²³ This was said by professor Galen Pletcher, Dean of Arts and Sciences at an official meeting with alumni, according to Dr. Anne Malone, who attended that fund-raising trip in summer of 2006. I heard a statement of the same sort during his official year report to faculty in 2007.

²⁴ One of the most interesting pieces of new research regarding women in academia came out of the Modern Language Association MLA Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession this year, focuses on the fact that now women seem to be attaining equal numbers in hiring's, but that they still lack behind in attaining the Full Professor rank. 'Standing Still: The Associate Professor Survey' *Profession 2009*: 313

²⁵ Provost Madden has said publicly that reading the Preliminary Report on the Status of Women at SUNY Potsdam not only helped to decided in favor of accepting the College offer, but it also provided her with a document she trusted had set priorities for women and minorities that she wanted to address in the job; by 2003 and 2004, the Provost had developed a set of Responses to the Task Force and monitoring the College responses. This is not to say that there are no frictions between the Provost and female faculty in all different positions; but the fact remains that Provost Madden is part of the Women's and Gender Studies Program, and she teaches its required class on Feminist Research Methods, which she team-taught the last two time with Lisa Wilson, Chair of English. Our participation in the Cortland Conference on Women was encouraged by Madden, who also presented at the Conference.

²⁶ Nevertheless, and only as per its anecdotic value, it has been interesting to notice how in a few occasions, women in the position of department Chairs have been more vocally opposed to the policies of a female Provost, while they seem reluctant to express publicly a disagreement with their Deans.

²⁷ My gratitude goes to those that read this paper in any of its various iterations: Margaret Kent Bass for her general input, Ramona Ralstom and Lisa Wilson for their comments and editing suggestions. The two anonymous readers of *Wagadu* were extremely helpful, in particular Reader A, because those many questions, suggestions and comments made this paper a stronger one. I also would like to thank those attending this as a presentation at the Cortland Conference in 2009, and gave great feedback and questions. Thank you to all the colleagues at SUNY Cortland that organized the conference and fostered this publication, as well as the editor of *Wagadu* for her detailed work, her patience, and her graciousness. To the many colleagues of Potsdam and other places that have been in conversation about these issues for decades, in particular all members of the Task Force and all Women's and Gender Studies colleagues that have worked since 1992, as well as those of recent arrival. I am not giving them credit because there are too many of them, but also because they have influenced my thought to such extent that is difficult for me to discern theirs from my own.