

Women's studies programs fight for recognition

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Though more relevant than ever, the field seems to have to continually justify its existence.

The bad news broke on a Monday night in February 2016. Earlier that day, Lisa Dawn Hamilton, acting director of Mount Allison University's women's and gender studies program, had received a glum surprise. Nearly two decades after its 1999 founding, funding for the interdisciplinary program was on the chopping block – a move that would effectively eliminate all four of the school's core women's and gender studies classes, despite a consistent waitlist and burgeoning enrolment. Although the university administration did not equate the budget cut with an official termination of the program, it was hard to see how it could survive without funding. In an email to students, Dr. Hamilton reluctantly [rang the death knell](#): "This means that, currently, there are no plans to offer any women's and gender studies courses in the coming academic year."

Backlash against the cuts was swift, and not only from the 192 students who'd filled women's and gender studies classrooms that academic year. By the next morning, an [online petition](#) to save the program's funding had garnered more than 2,000 signatures. Within two weeks, it reached more than 7,000. Students protested. Overwhelmed by the attention, the program's steering committee [launched a website](#) to act as a hub for information. Open letters poured in from women's and gender studies programs across Canada, each pressing Mount Allison to reconsider its cuts. Fellow faculty at Dalhousie University and Saint Mary's University penned a [damning letter](#) urging the school to consider how the cuts might affect the campus, noting that "rape culture is on the rise."

In other words, the lessons of women's and gender studies go far beyond the classroom. "To ignore women's and gender studies as some fringe field or a trend that comes and goes is really wilfully naive in some circumstances," says Allyson Jule, co-director of the [Gender Studies Institute](#) at Trinity Western University and current president of [Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes](#), the national professional association for women's and gender studies in Canada.

In their protests against the cuts, faculty members across the country argued that universities needed to confront campus crises, including rape culture, through every available venue, including their curriculum. As universities try to make their campuses more equitable and "culturally competent," wrote the Dalhousie and Saint Mary's supporters, it made little sense to axe programs that encouraged critical thought and challenged social inequalities. After all, what kind of message did a university send when it silenced its loudest counter-narratives to gender-based violence?

In the end, the support across Canada saved Mount Allison's women and gender studies program, albeit temporarily. In the face of growing pressure, the university gave the program a 12-month McCain Postdoctoral Fellowship for the 2016-17 academic year. Funded through an endowment, not the university's operating budget, the teaching fellowship provides enough funding for one teaching salary for one year. The Mount Allison program and its supporters welcomed the reprieve, but the program's future remains a question mark – not to mention the possibility of women's and gender studies activists having to re-enact their own version of Groundhog Day once the fellowship funding expires.

It's likely a dismal thought for scholars in the field, who already feel they have to grapple with gender-based campus violence and, to a wider extent, a seeming rise in anti-feminist narratives in mainstream society. "We would say it's more critical now than ever to have robust gender studies programs," says Dr. Jule of Trinity Western.

Take recent events at Dalhousie, home to one of the many women's and gender studies programs that protested the Mount Allison cuts. In 2015, Dalhousie experienced its [own damaging sexist culture](#) after male students in the fourth-year dentistry class posted misogynistic and sexually explicit comments on a Facebook group. The ensuing

outcry included protests, an [online petition](#) with more than 50,000 signatures calling for the students' expulsion and,



Photo courtesy of [The Cannon](#).

eventually, a comprehensive report on misogyny, sexism and homophobia on campus. The next year, enrolment in [Dalhousie's Introduction to Gender and Women's Studies](#) class rose by 20 percent to 200 students, the largest ever. Many women's and gender studies programs have seen similar enrolment spikes in recent years.

Yet, if the battle to save Mount Allison's program highlighted strong national support for feminist work on campus, it also revealed a more uncomfortable observation: when it comes to budget cuts, contend feminist scholars, women's and gender studies programs tend to be early sacrifices, even though they are often among the leanest and smallest programs. Mount Allison's, for instance, had a budget of \$24,000.

Not every women's and gender studies program has won the fight to survive. In 2009, the University of Guelph [closed its women's studies program](#), citing budget pressures. The savings reportedly represented 0.17 percent of the university's budget shortfall. U of Guelph students responded by holding a [mock funeral](#) with headstones inscribed: "R.I.P. Feminism: Apparently We Don't Need You." Events like this expose a deep schism when it comes to defining feminist values within academia and on campus, sometimes placing university administration on one side and faculty and students on the other.

From the start, women's and gender studies scholars have fought to gain and then maintain a position in academia. Feminists managed to get women's studies into the Canadian university curriculum in 1970, with the University of Toronto's first for-credit course. That year, the first degree-granting women's studies program in North America was established at San Diego State University. A year later, courses in women's studies were offered at the University of British Columbia. It took UBC 20 more years to establish a degree-granting program in the field.

Those early classes were often taught by activists, creating women-centred learning spaces and engaging in research that would advance the burgeoning women's rights movement. The subject matter and approach in those early classes would be unrecognizable now – and that's a good thing, according to many women's and gender studies professors today. As feminism has evolved from its second-wave focus (and its prioritization of white, middle-class women), women's and gender studies has moved with it, often giving the field a needed push toward inclusivity and diversity.

"There was this question of who is this woman we're talking about in women's and gender studies," says Annalee Lepp, chair of the department of gender studies at the University of Victoria. As a result, she says, the field has embraced a never-ending process of self-reflection. It's a deliberate method of assessment that has led to a plurality of feminisms within programs, with a particular focus on intersectionality (the layered interactions of oppressions, such as race, ability, sexuality, social class and so on). It makes for a field that's indefinable, says Dr. Lepp, precisely because it isn't trying to achieve fixed definitions.

What women's and gender studies is trying to accomplish is much more intangible: new theoretical and empirical ways of understanding the world. For Dr. Lepp, much of that work requires the players to challenge systems of discrimination, which are becoming more entrenched.

"I would say the question of what is the core of women's and gender studies is an ongoing debate within the field," observes Susanne Luhmann, chair of the department of women's and gender studies at the University of Alberta.

“And I actually have to say I love that. I love that we are in this constant process of deciding who we are, what we want to do, and what our core values and core knowledges are.” As soon as a field is defined, she says, boundaries of inside and outside are set. That leads to alienating arguments of who and what is classified as feminist.

To Dr. Luhmann, the strength of women’s and gender studies is the way it invites discussion, creating a field that’s a sum of disagreements and debates. For a discipline rooted in feminism, this reluctance to follow the status quo fits: it offers a lens through which to view, and challenge, the world. But when feminism itself is challenged, problems arise, and that, many argue, is what is happening right now.

“On some level within the popular imagination, there is a belief that there is no longer a need for a gender analysis, or an analysis of oppressions,” says Carla Rice. “And that programs, policies and laws focusing on gender equity are no longer needed – that essentially we’ve arrived.”



Illustration by Cristiana Couceiro.

Dr. Rice is an associate professor, and holds the Canada Research Chair in Care, Gender and Relationships, at the University of Guelph. She argues that such sentiments influenced U of Guelph to close its women’s studies program and are responsible for similar moves at other universities. At U of Guelph, she adds, students tell her they feel cheated after finally encountering women’s and gender studies material later, saying they wish they’d discovered it earlier. She says that sexism is continuing in overt and covert ways, globally and locally, and these programs are meant to give students the tools to face this reality. While other fields aim to deliver career-oriented graduates, say academics in the field, women’s and gender studies wants to form agents of change.

Some of the challenges these programs face are tied to damaging, sexist stereotypes about feminism, say scholars – namely, that it is rife with man-hating, hairy-legged women who don’t wear bras. To help move away from these tired, yet remarkably persistent, perceptions, many women’s studies programs have undergone name changes in recent years, adding, for instance, gender. Others chose a more complex name that signaled the many layers of feminism’s current commitment to pluralities. UBC’s program became the [Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice](#). Nipissing University’s program was remade as the [gender equality and social justice department](#). At the University of Prince Edward Island, women’s and gender studies became [diversity and social justice studies](#).

“Names are like an invitation,” says Ann Braithwaite, professor and coordinator of the UPEI program. “They’re a way to say to people that you are welcome here. This is a place where certain kinds of things are going to be talked about.” For her, the name change at UPEI acknowledged the broadening and deepening parameters of both feminism and of women’s and gender studies. The trend might be seen as recognition of feminism’s own changing definitions, away from gender binaries and towards equality for everyone.

But some disagree with these changes, arguing that women’s and gender studies shouldn’t need to make itself more palatable and, with its history full of erasure, the word “women” matters. Chantal Maillé, a Concordia University women’s studies professor and former principal of its [Simone de Beauvoir Institute](#), says the fight over names is part of the field’s “border wars” – what women’s studies is, and isn’t. While she agrees that women’s studies is having a good moment – enrolment is up at many universities, including Concordia, where it has almost doubled in the past five years – she argues that the field is also being invaded in many ways. She says stitching together women’s studies with a very different field like sexuality studies, with its traditionally male point of view, risks diluting and changing the field in detrimental ways.

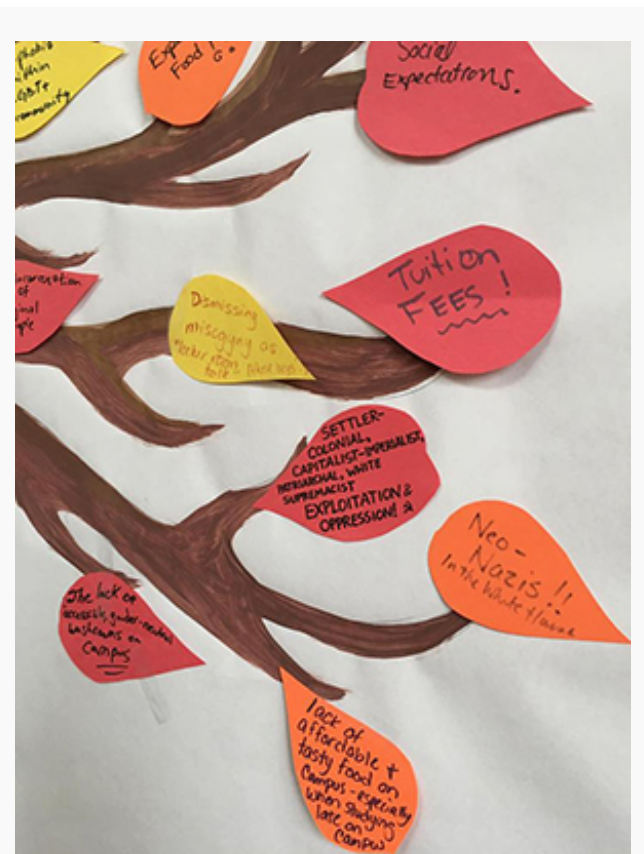
Those who argue against the discipline’s title changes are also concerned that the concessions undercut the field’s radical roots in favour of friendlier-sounding names that will get more bums in seats. On the other hand, perhaps catering to new audiences isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Nipissing’s program, for example, experienced a tenfold increase in students after its name change. “We all have to be the audience,” says UPEI’s Dr. Braithwaite. “And our role is now to find ways to reach the audience that never saw themselves as part of this conversation to begin with.”

Meanwhile, as some programs close or change names, others are being added. Université Laval announced in January it is opening a new feminist institute called [l’Institut Femmes, Sociétés, Égalité et Équité](#); and Université de Montréal confirmed that as of this fall it will be offering a new minor in women’s, gender and sexuality studies.

In early November, when Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election, those who were devastated by the news included many students and teachers of women’s and gender studies – understandably, given Mr. Trump’s [many disparaging comments and actions toward women](#). This feeling was underscored by a deeper disappointment: that, in 2016, a woman still could not break the highest of glass ceilings. Discussion on what this meant dominated classroom talks. At UPEI, Dr. Braithwaite helped organize a [Social Justice Week](#), featuring an “outrage tree” where students could write their concerns on giant paper leaves.

In the U.S., Barbara Bickel, an expat Canadian professor and director of [Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies](#) at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wrote a note to her women and gender studies listserv in the early morning after the election; she says she needed to get her feelings out so that she could go to work that day. In her note, she spoke of recovery, love and compassion, and she urged her colleagues not to give in to fear. “I feel overwhelmed and ill-prepared for what is to come,” she admitted, but added: “It is time to get to work.”

That’s true in Canada, too. Though Prime Minister Justin Trudeau may have [declared himself](#) a feminist, both women’s rights advocates and scholars in the field argue that Canada’s problems with women also run deep. Besides rape culture on



UPEI's Outrage Tree. Photo courtesy UPEI.

campus, there is the unresolved crisis over murdered and missing Indigenous women, which the federal government has been slow to act upon. Other evidence includes the still pervasive wage gap; discrimination against women in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics; and rising poverty, which disproportionality affects women, particularly single mothers.

Universities have also experienced a rise in anti-abortion and men's rights movements on campus. Many women feel these groups mobilize people against feminist work, sometimes violently. "If we thought that men and women were becoming more and more equal, I don't think we can make that claim anymore," said Trinity Western's Dr. Jule a few days after the U.S. election.

Optimistically, this leaves women's and gender studies programs in a prime position to lead conversations on campuses and in classrooms, if they can continue to eke out an existence among what Dr. Bickel of Southern Illinois University calls a pernicious rise in neoliberalism within the academy. To her, this means an emphasis on financial efficiency, quick graduation rates and job outcomes, all leading to the death of learning for learning's sake – which is as apt a description of women's and gender studies programs as any. Women in the field might argue that it's hard to find a space within institutions that were never meant for them in the first place. But, it doesn't mean they will stop trying, as the fight to save Mount Allison's program showed.

Many academics in the field would like to see every university in Canada implement a women's and gender studies program. Dr. Rice, not surprisingly, would first like to see U of Guelph reinstate its program. Professors also want to see women's and gender studies break out of the social sciences and influence learning in such disciplines as mathematics, science and business.

As well, some would like to see women's and gender studies become a core introductory course for first-year students. Dr. Jule maintains that it is as critical to understanding the world as core English or science classes. If Canadian universities did make it a mandatory course, she says, they would be taking a stand on the side of human rights and social justice. "To keep women's and gender studies as a side issue or a special interest group is a shame. It could just be so much more."

Lauren McKeon is a former editor of [This](#) magazine. Her first book, F-Bomb: Field Notes from a Post-Feminist Future, is due out this fall.