

Ohio Women's Centers' Reflections on Evaluation & Assessment

Issue Brief 02
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In March 2010, the Ohio Women's Centers Committee¹ published its first issue brief (*Ohio Women's Centers: Statement of Philosophy*) describing the process of drafting our first collective statement of philosophy and the statement itself². At our annual retreat in July, the committee identified other topics of interest to address in subsequent issue briefs. After some discussion, it was determined that the next logical topic to consider, following the statement of philosophy, would be *evaluation*: its role in our work and issues related to its accomplishment.

Through subsequent conversations and data collection, three themes emerged among Ohio women's centers: 1) Women's centers increasingly appreciate the need and value of doing meaningful evaluation, 2) Women's centers experience a discrepancy between the institutional expectations of what constitutes evaluation and our own "best practice" of what feminist evaluation might mean, and 3) Women's centers struggle to develop and implement evaluation that accurately captures the nature of our work. While these issues are shared among many Ohio women's centers, they are certainly not unique to our state. In a study of 75 United States, campus-based women's centers, many directors expressed concerns about a climate of budget cuts and the resulting scarcity of resources and growing sentiments that women's centers are no longer needed or relevant to students' lives³.

While many women's centers share common issues related to evaluation, these issues are often experienced and responded to differently due to the diversity among us. The

¹ College and university women's centers in southwestern Ohio formally organized in 2006 to network, share resources, and support each other in their campus and community efforts. The resulting "Women's Centers Committee" was the first joint committee of the Southwestern Ohio Council on Higher Education (SOCHE) and the Greater Cincinnati Consortium of Colleges and Universities (GCCCU). In 2009, the committee expanded its mailing list and membership to women's centers across the state. While geographic distances and varying funding levels have limited the involvement of some centers, efforts have been made to include all centers and their staff members who expressed interest in the Women's Centers Committee.

² Vlasnik, A. L. (2010, May). *Ohio women's centers: Statement of philosophy* (Issue Brief No. 01). Retrieved from Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education website: <http://www.soche.org/for-members/councils-and-committees/womens-centers-committee/> and Greater Cincinnati Consortium of Colleges and Universities website: <http://www.gcccu.org/committees/womens-studies.cfm>

³ Kasper, B. (2004). Campus-based women's centers: Administration, structure, and resources. *NASPA Journal*, 41(3, Article 6).

very process of co-authoring this brief underscored where these commonalities and differences intersect. Together, we questioned the terms *evaluation* and *assessment*, deliberated on our audience, and contemplated "our" message. In doing so, we experienced evaluation as deeply political and hope that in this brief we effectively complicate the issue of evaluation and begin a sustained dialogue on how to make meaning of women's centers' work.

I. Traditional Evaluation

Whether institutionally mandated or staff-driven, the primary focus of a women's center's formal, in-depth evaluation is to evaluate its progress in fulfilling its unique mission. We can then use the resulting analysis to achieve these objectives:

- To quantify the center's impact on the institution,
- To answer institutional leadership questions regarding cost versus benefits of a center,
- To highlight structural (e.g. institutional reporting) or resource issues (e.g. insufficient staffing or programmatic resources),
- To ensure the center's mission is relevant to its intended constituents,
- To establish a strategic direction for the center's future,
- To engage other students, faculty, and staff in the center's work.

If the evaluation is truly comprehensive, meaning it not only captures the center's work but also the impact it has on constituents and the institution as a whole, we can use the results to develop future plans aligned with both the center's mission and the mission and strategic plans of the institution within which it is situated. These could include the following objectives:

- advocacy for additional staff and / or resources,
- identification of specific goals for fundraising and grant writing,
- illustration of where the bulk of the Center's impact is focused.

Ideally having both short and long-term foci, the resulting strategic plans can include specific goals, objectives, and outcome measures that will ensure the center "stays the course" and continues to have a positive impact on its community.

2. The Politics of Evaluation

Levin⁴ points out the tensions regarding evaluation that have long been experienced in the interdisciplinary field of Women's Studies: While *necessary* (internally useful and externally mandated), evaluation of student learning in Women's Studies classrooms also presents unique challenges due to conflicting institutional and organizational needs and ideologies. In other words, typical institutional-driven methods of evaluation are generally not aligned with feminist values, nor capable of fully capturing the scope and impact of our work. Campus-based women's centers experience this same tension.

⁴ Levin, A. (2007). Questions for a new century: Women's studies and integrative learning. Retrieved October 25, 2011 from National Women's Studies Association website <http://www.nwsa.org/research/publications/index.php>.

Other concerns are that most evaluation tools and assessment methods are, by design, gendered or biased, as are the ways in which assessment results are used. In the field of Women's Studies, it is widely documented that female instructors are evaluated differently from their male peers; evaluative tools and the results they produce are gendered; and Women's Studies courses, because of their challenging content and feminist pedagogy, are evaluated more negatively than many other courses⁵. We believe that a similar dynamic applies to programs that are sponsored by women's centers. Some of our programs are designed to challenge the status quo and therefore can generate resistance among students, faculty, and administrators. Our programs are not always appreciated or valued by students; arguably, nor should they be. Immediate feedback from programs can often be negative, and how meaningful our programs are in the long run is difficult to assess.

Consider the larger context in which these increasing institutional demands for evaluation are instituted--namely, the increasing corporatization of higher education. Assessment and evaluation trends are part of a larger transformation of higher education that has been going on since the 1990's, and coincides with when women began to enroll in numbers larger than men. (Many of the members in our southwest Ohio consortium have student bodies where women outnumber men in significant numbers.) As a result, some argue that trends toward assessment reflect a re-masculinization of higher education as fears over the feminization of higher education are expressed by pundits and state legislators.⁶

3. Development and Implementation of Feminist Evaluation

Understanding the politics of evaluation is critical for us to develop and employ strategic evaluation methods that are meaningful—to us, to our institutions, and to our constituents. Many questions remain for women's centers in terms of evaluation: How exactly, in the short term, do we measure the institutional transformation and climate change with which many of our centers are charged? How do we assess the increased awareness and understanding of women's issues among the student body? How do we measure the success, for example, of a poster campaign on sexual assault prevention or a Women's History Month program? We can count the number of posters printed or program attendees, but these outputs do not adequately reflect the cumulative impact of our work. Moreover, the personal nature of much of what we do is also difficult to translate into numbers. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, how do we prioritize evaluation with steadfastly dwindling resources and increasing constituent demand for our services?

⁵ Laube, H., Massoni, K., Sprague, J., Ferber, A. L. (2007) The Impact of Gender on the Evaluation of Teaching: What We Know and What We Can Do. *NWSA Journal*, Fall 2007, Vol. 19 Issue 3, p87-104.

⁶ Leathwood, C. and Read, B. (2009). *Gender and the changing face of higher education: A feminized future?* Buckingham, SRHE and Open University Press.

Despite the challenges in evaluating our work, Ohio women's centers continue to consider ways in which we might do this. Traditionally, for an evaluation to accurately capture both the scope and impact of a women's center it should include both quantitative (e.g. usage data, numbers of and reactions to programmatic efforts, budget histories, etc.) and qualitative (e.g. constituent surveys, results of focus groups or interviews, input from any advisory bodies, etc.) data. Benchmarking the center's efforts and achievements against other campus-based women's centers can also be very useful and is made possible by an active communication network and strong sense of shared mission and collaborative spirit among women's center staffs at hundreds of U.S. colleges and universities. Assessment using other "external" measures, including the CAS⁷ standards, can also enrich a formal evaluation.

Most Ohio women's centers employ some or all of the above mentioned evaluative measures. (See Appendix A and B for strong examples of quantitative measures.) The challenge is going beyond—employing evaluation as a feminist strategy to gauge how well we are doing what we say we do. Do we really develop students as leaders? Do we increase students' critical thinking? Do we support students in ways we hope to support them? To think about evaluation in this way calls for a centering of evaluation in our work. Rather than thinking about evaluation as an add-on, something to be done at the completion of a project, reframing evaluation as process-oriented can be transformative and feminist by design.

Case in point: As the University of Cincinnati Women's Center shifted its focus to year-long student developmental programs rather than one-time programs, new opportunities for different evaluative methodologies emerged. The focus of evaluation shifted from product to process. As an example, approximately ten students a year commit to the Women's Center's Reclaim Peer Advocate Program to respond to the 24-hour helpline and provide support services to students victimized by sexual and gender-based violence. Rather than having an evaluative outcome of the program be a certain number of direct service experiences for each advocate, the focus of the program evaluation evolved as developmental assessments of the advocates themselves: how they develop as leaders and activists loosely based on selected CAS Standards. Various evaluative tools such as journal writing, art projects, and Photovoice⁸ have been integrated throughout the year-long experience to explore the advocates' understanding of the role their program involvement plays in their own self-development. The evaluation culminates at the end of the year as the advocates present to their peers and the incoming advocates for the following year a creative representation of what the program has meant to them. It is an important opportunity to hear what the program has meant to students through a creative project. The different tools used have enhanced the

⁷ Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. (2006). *CAS professional standards for higher education* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

⁸ Wang, C. & Burris, M. A. (1997) "Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment." *Health Education Behavior* 24.3 (1997): 369-87.

program, especially the process of participants sharing their final project with their peers. This can be an important aspect of feminist evaluation, with emphasis on constructing knowledge through relationships and through participatory evaluation. By exploring and claiming various methodologies, custom evaluation can be applied to programs in women's centers.

4. Conclusion:

As noted before, many questions remain for women's centers regarding evaluation. One fact is clear: Finding meaningful ways to evaluate our work is critical for our survival. Because we are each unique, evaluation will likely (and should) look differently on each of our campuses. Promising evaluation practices include ways to integrate the evaluation into our current work rather than "adding on" assessment tools. Centering evaluation in our work will help us reframe how we make meaning of our work and how we enact our feminist missions. After all, evaluation in a women's center should reflect feminist values *and* help to promote the goals and mission of the center. Creating these opportunities for ourselves not only promises transformation for our organizations but for our institutions as we lead the way to new ways of thinking and practicing evaluation.

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