The Women’s Resource Center: A Support Service for Women and Gender Studies

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Abstract

The Women’s Resource Center (WRC) at University of the Pacific is discussed. The WRC provides support for women and gender studies. Support services include special events designed to promote awareness of women’s and gender issues. Corrie Martin, director of the WRC and Shannel Hawkins, a student worker, are interviewed. The history and value of the WRC are discussed and supplemented by observations.

*Keywords:* women college students, gender issues, support services.
The Women’s Resource Center: A Support Service for Women and Gender Studies

The Women’s Resource Center (WRC) was founded in 2006 by a group of volunteers interested in promoting awareness of women’s and gender issues and to encourage women’s leadership at University of the Pacific (Pacific). Corrie Martin, WRC’s founding director, was hired in 2010.

The emergence of women’s centers on college campuses has been an important factor in female student development. Research by Leaper and Combs (2011), for example, indicated that women’s social identity, exposure to feminism, and gender-egalitarian attitudes contributed to feminist identification. Research by Bargad and Hyde (1991) and Williams and Wittig (1997) also indicated that exposure to feminism is related to women’s support of feminist goals and values. The WRC at Pacific supports these goals through activism, special events, and one-on-one student support.

Location

The WRC is located inside Pacific’s Multicultural Center (MC). The MC was created in 2007 and is comprised of three areas: the African, Latino, Asian and Native American (ALANA) Center, the Promoting Respect in Diverse Environments (PRIDE) Center, and the WRC. In the beginning, WRC initiatives and events were organized by staff, faculty and volunteers. Volunteers met to create special programs, such as the Women of Distinction (WD) program. WD recognizes Pacific faculty, staff and students who are outstanding leaders in women’s issues. According to VanderMeulen (2010), many universities also have women’s centers offering similar services.

Corrie Martin, Director

Martin began volunteering for the WD and Women’s History Month programs in 2007. Initially hired as the assistant director of clubs and regional programs for Pacific’s Alumni
Association, she chaired the Women’s History Month planning committee for two years and volunteered with the WD program. She became involved in other activities, such as the Women’s Leadership Conference for students. “I gave a workshop on public speaking for women,” she said. “The Conference did a great job of bringing campus women together with the dream of someday having a real (women’s) center.”

*Jane Doe v. Pacific (2010)*

WRC volunteers advocated to Dr. Elizabeth Griego, Pacific’s Vice President for Student Life, for a separate, permanently staffed space for the WRC. The suggestions were considered, but no formal action was taken until 2009. A female student was sexually assaulted by three of Pacific’s basketball players in 2008. The incident and subsequent legal case, *Jane Doe v. Pacific (2010)*, had a big impact on the WRC’s future. Chang et al (2010) suggested that external forces, such as court decisions and government policy, can shape campus diversity. “It wasn’t so much a catalyst, but reinforced the need to address gender issues on campus,” Martin said.

“I believe that the test of a crisis is this: does the community further fragment and come apart, or does it come together. It was a testing of Pacific’s soul in a way,” she added. According to Martin, Pacific had a long-standing reputation in the Stockton community for denial and obfuscation of campus crimes. Creating a permanent director was part of Pacific’s response to the community in the aftermath of the alleged assault.

**A Unique Campus Partnership**

Martin partnered with Griego and Dr. Thomas W. Krise, the Dean of the College of the Pacific (COP), to create a proposal for the position. Griego and Krise had worked with Martin before on alumni concerns, and had total confidence in her ability to envision the position and what it could be. In this way, Martin said, the position serves as a bridge between student affairs
and academic affairs. “We came at the need for dedicated student services from two different angles,” Martin said. “The Pacific community absolutely responded in the best possible way to something really horrific. The Stockton community doesn’t quite believe that, but that’s okay. It means we have to keep working and keep collaborating.”

A need for the center, however, went beyond responding to the Jane Doe case. The WRC and MC serve as gathering places for diverse student populations. Chang et al (2010) have suggested that cultural centers can build help retention rates for such populations. They can also, according to Martin, address equity issues at Pacific. “The lack of equity is almost invisible and unspoken until you start talking to women and talk to them about their experiences,” she said. Equity issues, according to Martin, range from tenure to promotion rates to child care. She spoke of one female faculty member who wanted another child, but could not have one unless she received a research grant. The main problem was not finances, but rather the lack of child care on campus. The faculty member could not effectively balance another child and her workload without campus child care and other forms of support that enable faculty to balance work and life demands. Because Pacific is wanting in this area, the faculty member had to seek support outside the institution.

Social Support for Students

Studies by Cohen and Hoberman (1983) and Licitra-Keckler and Waas (1983) have examined the relationship of social support to moderate stressful life events. The results were inconclusive, but a study by Swift and Wright (2000) on whether support services buffered the effects of depression and anxiety in college students indicated that support services had a significant impact. Women with self-esteem support systems, for instance, experienced less
depression and anxiety than those without support systems. The WRC, then, can serve as a social support buffer—a bridge between the student and the university.

In another example, we discussed a female student who, because she is a new mother, cannot effectively participate in her graduate school cohort because of the lack of child care. She attends class but cannot attend after-class activities, such as cohort dinners. The disappointment in her eyes is obvious, and there are few support services on campuses for her and other non-traditional students. Martin agreed. “We can’t support women students with children,” she said. “We say we care about student success. Look at the women who get pregnant while they are students. There is no support for them, no child care. We will continue to be that type of campus until we raise issues about the quality of life on campus for women.”

**The WRC: Responsibilities and Challenges**

The position is just a beginning for Martin. “I am not the sole champion of women’s issues at Pacific,” she said. “However, the WRC is one place that can move that effort and make sure we pay attention to it. It is not my job to change Pacific by myself. My job is to get Pacific together as a community to address the issues we face.” She also uses her alumni contacts to further women’s issues. She said her previous experience at Pacific helps her at the WRC because “we have a really diverse group of alumni who have a depth of passion for helping our students. The alumni want to bring that passion to the WRC, and help us keep moving forward and growing. There are an incredible number of alumni who get women’s and gender issues, and want to support women in their success.”

Martin works daily with student workers and volunteers. They craft monthly programs on gender and women’s issues that are designed to complement MC programming, such as Black History Month. Shannell Hawkins, a new student worker, was busy working on a PowerPoint
presentation for a Latinas in the Media class for National Hispanic Heritage Month during one of my observation periods.

Hawkins was enthusiastic about her work with the WRC. “I didn’t know they (WRC) had so many resources to learn about women’s culture,” she said. “I hope to gain more knowledge from other women, and learn about their experiences.”

Martin’s daily work is either at the WRC, in a private office or teaching at COP. She is always available for emergencies. One of our initial meetings was postponed due to an emergency, for instance, which demonstrates the sudden changes the job is subjected to. She also teaches gender studies as part of the position. “Women’s issues are one of my passions in life, so to be able to do this job for a living is absolutely inspiring.”

She is interested most in working daily on gender issues, and having an impact on the students and Pacific as an institution. The downside of the job, she said, is paperwork. “I like telling the story of the WRC,” she said, “but there is a point where it gets in the way of the work.” She constantly generates reports for Academic Affairs and other departments, and must justify every expenditure and proposal. “I must show value, validate and document everything,” she said. “I sometimes feel like I don’t have control over what I am going to put out, and wish I had more of a say.”

**Intersectionality of Issues**

Part of WRC’s mission, according to Martin, is to be very intentional about how specific women’s issues—race, class and sexual orientation--intersect on campus. “I feel that the WRC enriches the discourse on campus about gender because we bring in those dimensions. There is a tendency in diversity discussions to forget about gender. We can be vigilant about that here.” Chang et al (2010) agreed with that approach, indicating that the framework for engaging
diversity on a campus includes a multi-faceted approach to diversity, such as the MC and the WRC. Success also requires difficult and sustained efforts because campuses are dynamic communities.

The WRC is staffed from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. In that time, students, faculty and staff can drop in to talk about anything that concerns them. The WRC contains a small but growing library of books on women’s issues. Martin dropped off a large crate of books during one of my observation periods.

“I have a large range of feelings about my job,” she said. “They include complete elations, triumph, anger, disappointment, frustration, and all of those feelings are in extremes.”

Martin would like more resources for the WRC. “I am a one person show,” she said. “We could use another full-time staff person just to address sexual assault on campus, including prevention and training. Another staff person could assist with Women’s History Month and other community collaborations. To really do this well, we need more staff and more space.”

She gives student workers as much training as possible in women’s issues so they can teach their peers.

**Location Concerns**

The biggest challenge last year was physical space. The WRC is located in the back of the MC, and not easily visible. The MC is located on the bottom level of the McCaffrey Center, just across from The Grove convenience store. During an observation period, I noticed that anyone wishing to use the WRC must first enter the MC and walk through an area that is almost continually busy with students playing pool, video games, or just hanging out. There is little privacy at the center, although the WRC has blinds that can be drawn across its windows. The room is acoustically sound and effectively minimizes the noise generated by students using the
MC. There was little activity during the observation times; however, it is noted that observations were concluded at the end of September. Martin said that activity increases throughout the academic year.

Martin said that the location is part of a larger challenge. “We need to figure out how the center fits into the MC,” she said. “It’s not just a matter of space. Structurally, how do we fit?” She said the MC will undergo a program review soon, and wondered if the WRC was part of the review or not. She is concerned about the WRC’s relationship with the MC, and how to make it work best.

Still, she said, she is at Pacific at the right time. “Pacific really wants to improve. There is a lot of collaboration and openness to change in areas such as housing and residential life on issues such as sexual assault response when there could have been resistance. People want to serve better so we are working hand in hand.”

Conclusion

I enjoyed my experience with the WRC. I thought it served an absolutely essential function for Pacific, as college can be challenging for women and mixed gender students. I have spoken with mixed gender students in the admissions process and am aware that many perceive Pacific’s Stockton location as a possible barrier to social acceptance. Women students, too, were fearful of attending Pacific in the aftermath of the Jane Doe case. The WRC serves as a reassurance and a buffer to those fears. Students are comforted by the idea of an existing support structure. If anything, the WRC should have a stronger presence, and relocation is in order. The center is hard to find on campus, especially for new students.

I would consider women’s support services as a possible career. I admired Martin’s enthusiasm and the idea of helping a specific student population. I once volunteered at a Planned
Parenthood office many years ago, and enjoyed helping others in that unique way. However, I would not consider the specific configuration of Martin’s job because it requires teaching classes. My strength is in administration.
References


