

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 30

Article 28

10-1-2006

Talking Back: Gender Matters

Laurie M. Joyner

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Joyner, Laurie M. (2006) "Talking Back: Gender Matters," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 30, Article 28.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol30/iss1/28>

Gender Matters

Expanding the Conversation to Include the Diversity of Women's Lives and Their Experiences of Inequality

By Laurie M. Joyner

In the spring 2006 issue of *Conversations*, the issue of equity as it relates to women in Jesuit higher education is addressed from multiple perspectives. Collectively, these articles document the progress women have made in terms of their numerical presence on campus and the establishment of institutional policies regarding such matters as maternity leave and sexual harassment. However, it remains clear that this presence has not translated into women achieving parity. For example, empirical evidence in study after study reveals that as faculty rank increases or the power and decision-making authority connected with administrative positions increases, the number of our female colleagues decreases. Further, the continued existence of an earnings gap and the perception that women face multiple obstacles to promotion are well documented.

While the articles are excellent starting points, discussions about the presence, roles, contributions, and challenges facing women in Jesuit higher education

must expand to recognize the diversity of women's lives and their personal experiences of inequality. If we are to affect the lives of women on our campuses we must create an organizational climate that: a) recognizes that women's private and public experiences are diverse based on variables such as race, class, age, sexual orientation, marital status, and the presence or absence of children; and b) invites our female colleagues who have experienced differential treatment to share their stories with others across campus to raise awareness of the harmful effects of gender inequality.

The Diversity of Women's Experiences

While the significance of gender as a variable influencing our social relationships and institutional opportunities, it is clear in the pages of the magazine, there is little attention to the diversity of women's experiences based on the intersection of other social variables such as race, class, age, sexual orientation, and family status.

Given this, future discussions should create safe spaces for individuals and groups to explore the complexity of these interrelation-

ships as well as to question how the structure and culture of our institutions either reinforce or "undo" some of the harmful effects that have emerged around these socially-constructed categories. The importance of understanding the nature of institutionalized inequality is critical in developing policies that address the most pressing needs of all women and fulfill the Jesuit promise to work in solidarity with marginalized groups within the context of an explicit social justice mission.

The Actual Lived Experiences of Women

The experiences of women in our institutions are profoundly influenced by organizational culture. Numerous writers have raised awareness of both overt and subtle discrimination that has had

Laurie Joyner is associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Loyola University New Orleans. She has taught in the sociology department at Loyola since 1992 and has served in the dean's office since 2003.

Students studying
near the
Gallagher Center
on the campus
of Xavier
University.



detrimental effects on women, their productivity, and their chances for advancement. Over the years, I have become concerned about the differential treatment of women that often goes unnoticed by both women and men because it is viewed as “normal” or “acceptable.” Authors have highlighted examples of subtle discrimination that resemble my own conversations with dozens of female students, staff, faculty, and administrators

The following examples in isolation might not raise significant concern but, taken together, illustrate a pattern of women being perceived as less capable and respected than men.

Selected examples illustrating the point include: females not being credited with comments or suggestions as often as males in public settings; males and females being differentially evaluated on work of similar value; female pro-

fessors or administrators being referred to by their first names while their male counterparts are routinely referred to by formal title; female faculty members shouldering disproportionate teaching, advising, and/or service responsibilities; female faculty members being questioned or complimented about balancing personal and professional commitments in ways that male colleagues escape; female faculty members having an emphasis placed on their physical appearance versus their professional competence and accomplishments; female administrators locked into support positions; pay differences between women and men not easily explained by discernible differences in educational background, experience, or performance; and males being encouraged and/or selected for key administrative roles while qualified females are excluded

from such opportunities and sometimes even questioned about their “readiness” for advancement.

Collectively, these examples have powerful consequences because they undermine women’s confidence and bolster inaccurate perceptions of them being less than capable. No doubt such experiences result in talented female colleagues opting out of the academy or choosing to play it safe by never fully bringing themselves or their experiences to the table.

Talking Back

Ultimately, these outcomes inhibit individual development and frustrate institutional interest in nurturing the talents of lay leaders on campus.

How Shall We Proceed?

Numerous excellent examples emerged from the spring 2006 *Conversations* authors in terms of strategies to address gender inequality in higher education. The overarching strategy of getting the status of women on the institutional agenda strikes me as most promising. The creation of broad-based groups representing multiple constituents on campus with responsibility for systematically investigating and reporting on the presence, roles, experiences, contributions, and distribution of rewards across groups is encouraging.

These groups can heighten awareness of the challenges facing women and also provide baseline data from which to start program initiatives (e.g., offering faculty development geared toward creating gender-inclusive classrooms, creating initiatives to improve the status of and support for our female colleagues from recruitment to retention and promotion, and monitoring efforts to ensure that workload distribution and evaluation of performance are consistent across faculty and staff members).

Such efforts will highlight areas that must be addressed in order to work toward incremental change in an effort to create more humane work environments.

In conclusion, this is a call for men and women at Jesuit institutions to expand the conversation about gender equity by exploring the objective and subjective realities of diverse women on campus and then agitating for social change that will assist our colleagues in fully developing their talents to make the greatest contribution to our students, campuses, and communities. If success is best measured by distance traveled, then women have certainly come a long way in higher education. Yet, we are part of the proud and noble tradition of Jesuit education that calls for a higher standard of success. This standard is nothing short of fair and equitable treatment for all women and men. ■

Jesuit and Feminist Education: Transformative Discourses for Teaching and Learning Conference

at Fairfield University,
Fairfield CT

October 27-29, 2006

Keynote Speaker:
Dr. M. Shawn Copeland
Associate Professor of Systematic
Theology, Boston College

Join us in a dynamic dialogue that will enliven and impact our campuses for years to come

We invite faculty, students, and administrators from Jesuit universities and colleges to participate in a conference that focuses on how feminism, in dialogue with Jesuit education, can form, inform, and transform each other, our institutions, and the people in them. We will consider questions such as what role do gender and diversity play in Jesuit education, and how might we explore the intersections and methods inherent in Jesuit and feminist pedagogy?

Panel topics include: *The "Her-Story" of Jesuit Education; Campus Ministry and Women's Studies Programs: Discerning Meaning in a Diverse World; Sexual Orientation, Ignatian Pedagogy, and Feminism: A Most Unholy Trinity; and Foreign-Educated Women Faculty: Global Perspectives on Jesuit and Feminist Education.*

For further information, please contact the conference organizers: Dr. Jocelyn Boryczka, Politics Department, Fairfield University at jboryczka@mail.fairfield.edu or Dr. Elizabeth Petrino, English Department, Fairfield University at epetrino@mail.fairfield.edu. See our website at <http://www.fairfield.edu/jfemconf>.

This conference is made possible with the support of The Humanities Institute of Fairfield University.