

4-1-2006

Forum: Where Do We Stand?: We Have Come a Long Way...

Mary E. Procidano

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

Recommended Citation

Procidano, Mary E. (2006) "Forum: Where Do We Stand?: We Have Come a Long Way..." *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 29, Article 14.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol29/iss1/14>



WHERE DO WE STAND? FORUM

Introduction

In September we contacted a cross section of writers at our colleges and universities and asked their reflections on the progress of women on our campuses, particularly in the context of the Jesuit General Congregation's statement on Jesuits and women. If their responses follow a similar structure, it is because we approached them with the following task:

In 1995 the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus voted into policy a decree on "Jesuits and the Situation of Women in Church and Society." It invited all Jesuits and Jesuit institutions to "align themselves in solidarity with women." Admitting that practical ways of doing this will differ in different situations, the decree gave a number of examples of how such "alignment" might take place. Some are:

- explicit teaching of the essential equality of women and men in Jesuit schools;
- specific attention to the phenomenon of violence against women;
- appropriate presence of women in Jesuit institutions;
- genuine involvement of women in consultation and decision-making;
- elimination of all forms of discrimination between genders in the educational process.

Raymond A. Schroth, S.J.

WE HAVE COME A LONG WAY SINCE WOMEN WERE FIRST ADMITTED TO FORDHAM COLLEGE

Mary E. Procidano

Has the situation of women at Jesuit Universities improved since the mid 1990s? The short answer would have to be "yes"; but the question itself calls for closer attention to the basic interpersonal processes through which human development occurs on campuses.

Decree 14 calls for "an appropriate presence of women in Jesuit ministries and institutions" (GC 34, 377 13, 4), which translates readily into proportions of women faculty relative to men. Examining the composition of Fordham's faculty, distributed by academic rank and gender, in academic years 1993-94 versus 2004-05, suggests several things: that hiring at the assistant level has become somewhat more equitable over time (41 percent women in 93-94, compared to 48 percent women in 04-05), and that women's presence at the associate professor rank has improved markedly (28 percent in 93-94, compared to 41 percent in 04-05).

At the same time, these gains have not (yet) been actualized at the full-professor rank, where women's presence is still relatively low (27 percent, up from 22 percent). Gender equity in salary is another question (which Fordham's Faculty Senate is preparing to examine). Yet another is the extent to which formal and informal interactions at universities may reflect

missed opportunities to reward and encourage women scholars.

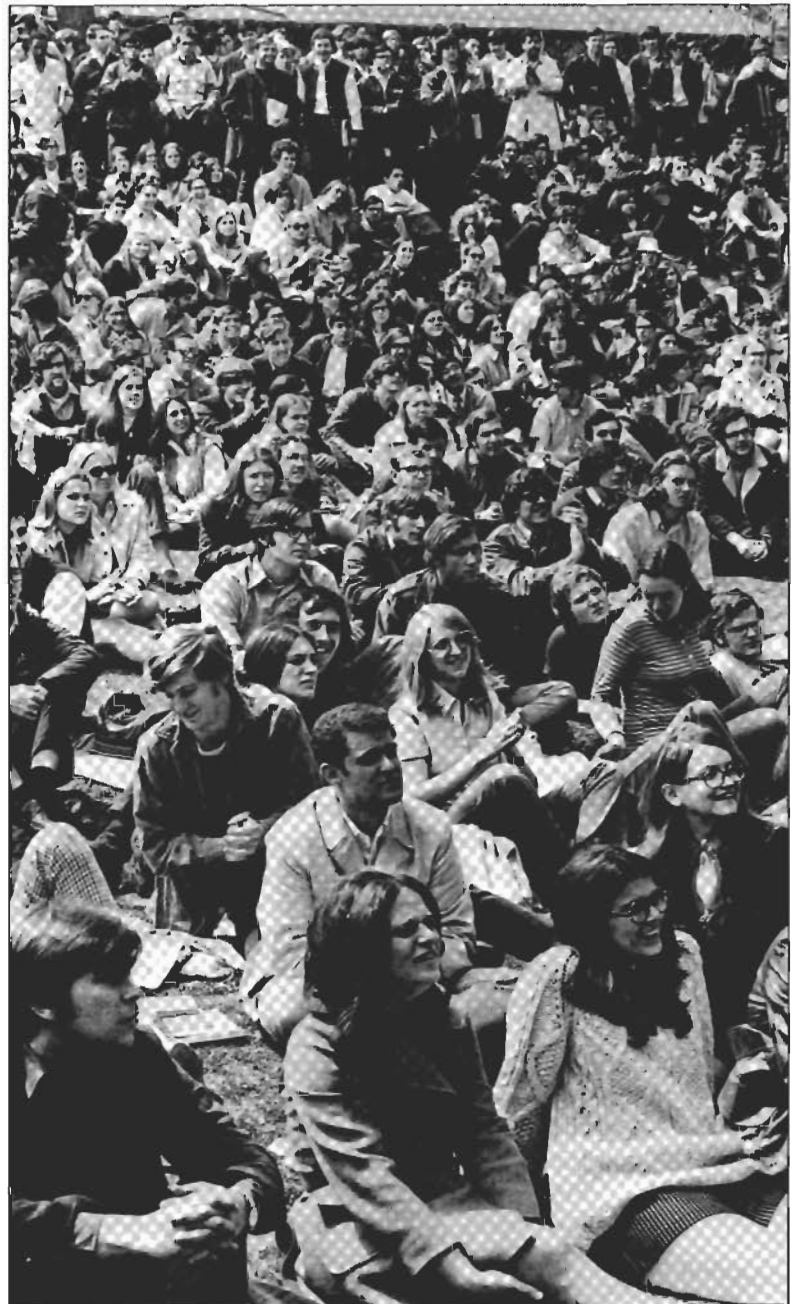
Consistent with Decree 14's call to promote the education of women, Fordham's enrollment data are certainly not negative: In Fall, 05, women made up 61 percent of the population of Fordham College at Rose Hill, and 69 percent of the population of Fordham College at Lincoln Center.

Still, the meaning of these data is somewhat unclear, since most people assume that a 50-50 male-female ratio is ideal. And we all know intuitively that to call this aspect of the question, we would need more systematic information about gender-related retention rates, narratives behind instances of drop-out, rates of application to advanced study, and more systematic attention to ways that we explicitly and implicitly reward and encourage competence and achievement in each one of our students.

At Fordham, and undoubtedly other Jesuit Colleges and Universities as well, many other important changes, consistent with Decree 14, can be documented. "Appropriately inclusive language" is clear throughout the University Bulletin, and in replacement of certain course titles (e.g., Philosophy of Man—"half a course," according to James R. Kelly of Fordham's Sociology Department—was replaced with Philosophy of Human Nature). "Specific attention to the phenomenon of violence" is evidenced through a well-articulated and publicized sexual harassment policy, education about date rape, and more comprehensive health services; as well as attention in courses, such as trauma and family violence, offered in the psychology department.

The women's studies program has flourished, and women's scholarship is now evidenced through an impressively broad array of courses, including women in antiquity, theology, and the Middle Ages. We have psychology of women, Hispanic women, Hispanic women artists, women & Italian cinema, etc. Yet it is not clear that this healthy increase in courses fulfills Decree 14's call for "explicit teaching of the essential equality of women and men," which requires not only specialized courses but "substantive changes in the discipline's core programs of study and therefore a more extensive change of heart in academia.

We have all come a long way since the time women were first admitted to Fordham College, and those guiding the process believed that female students required a separate administration, that "intellectually adventurous young women" required a separate honors program, and that mothers should not work. Anecdotally, female students' attitudes about this matter seem to have shifted. In the early 90s, many college women seemed to hold two distinct, non-overlap-



Fordham student protest, spring 1970.

ping beliefs: they were invested in their education and planned to pursue advanced study and/or a career; and they planned to marry and raise children, whom they would never leave under anyone else's care. Now, in contrast, many young women and young men have positive attitudes toward working mothers, largely because their own mothers worked while they were growing up. ■

Mary Procidano is a chemistry professor at Fordham University. She thanks Dr. Donald Gillespie, associate vice president for institutional research, for providing data.