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Women's studies is a vital, useful pursuit

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Women's studies is a vital, useful pursuit

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We write in response to George Will's May 21 column, "The sad state of women's studies." Women's studies is thriving at the University of Nebraska. On the Lincoln campus, a major in this field has been offered for 25 years. In Kearney, students have been able to earn a minor in women's studies since 1989; a recent student conference there drew nearly 100 participants. Just 15 months after its approval at UNO, 11 students are pursuing the major in women's studies.

This discipline helps students answer questions and prepare for careers as no other field can. Among women's studies majors at UNO are students planning careers where they'll work to end domestic violence and sexual assault. Others will go into business, the public sector or graduate school.

At NU, women's studies is an interdisciplinary program whose faculty hold full - time appointments in traditional disciplines. Faculty apply to join because this field offers analytical tools, concepts and methods they need in order to answer research questions, pursue creative activity and teach courses that are important to them and their students. At both UNO and UNL, more than 50 female and male faculty belong to the Women's Studies Program.

Women's studies poses tough questions about gender roles and equity, class, race and sexuality, and the answers are often unsettling. The Media Education Foundation documented the strategies used by conservative media figures to discredit legitimate concerns in the early 1990s about widespread "date rape" and, by extension, feminism.

Harvard student Katie Roiphe denied that sexual assault by someone known to the victim was a problem. While middle - aged male columnists and talk - show hosts could not directly address the issue of sexual assault on campus, in Ms. Roiphe they found a believable proxy for their views.

Will can say little by himself about women's studies, but he found a proxy in Christine Stolba. She may appear to have the requisite credentials, and she certainly could have performed a fine analysis of women's studies textbooks and contributed to debate in the field.

As with all scholarly disciplines, discussion in women's studies is largely conducted through publication of refereed articles in scholarly journals. The refereeing process ensures that published work adheres to the highest standards of scholarship. Stolba's report, though, is written for those who share her political agenda, not for an audience that demands quality research. (For instance, page numbers are not provided for the quotations she takes from textbooks, so they cannot easily be verified.)

Stolba's "analysis" does not hold up under close scrutiny. Because I've taught from one of the books she criticizes, I was able to check her quotations, which were largely taken out of context and misrepresented. For example, on page 11 of her report, Stolba asserts that silicone breast implants do not cause serious health problems in women. She then quotes Women in American Society as follows: "as of 1997, the research had shown no large increased risk of traditional autoimmune disease."

Stolba's point is that this is the sole textbook to "concede" that silicone implants are not a health threat. In fact, she quotes only part of the sentence. In its entirety, it reads:

"As of 1997, the research had shown no large increased risk of traditional autoimmune disease, but women who receive implants are required to sign a consent form listing what the FDA designates as 'known' risks (including hardening of the breast due to scar tissue, leaking and rupture ...) and 'possible' risks, including autoimmune disorders and fibrositis ... (Sapiro, 1999, p. 196)."

Clearly, silicone implants are a health threat to some women. That textbook is clear on that point, and Stolba misinterpreted it to support her claim.

Women's studies is a diverse field; disagreement, debate, and competing claims based on different kinds of evidence are central to its growth. Women's studies is based on diverse women's experiences and the knowledge that comes from women's lives.

While some people find studying women's lives and gender relations too threatening to consider, an increasing number find women's studies an exciting and challenging intellectual home.

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