



Carolyn Rhodes's recollections about the beginnings of Women's Studies at ODU
from her oral history interview in 2009

Interviewer: In 1977, you worked as the principal investigator for the National Endowment for the Humanities Pilot Grant in Women's Studies in hopes of beginning a Women's Studies program at ODU. Please talk about how that evolved – what was the impetus for this program, and how were you involved?

Every feminist on this campus knew that the way we were offering women's studies courses, piecemeal and occasionally persuading departments, really needed to change, become better and more meaningful and have more of them. If the classes could be organized into a program, we'd read lots about women's studies programs forming around the country, but what could we hope for at ODU? Funding really seemed to be out of the question, no matter how ardent we caucus members were, and we were the main instigators. Most of the decision makers were indifferent and many opposed. Who first thought of getting a grant from outside, from some foundation, from some federal source? I can't say for sure.

But anyway, the notion appealed to our caucus members, and we turned to the people who dealt with grants – ODU's Research Foundation, particularly Maxine Lippman and Katherine Owen. They had good ideas. They said; apply to NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities). They found a category where we might fit in our application, namely a pilot grant. That type of funding supported trial teaching projects. It would fund sets of experimental courses, and if your proposal convinced the NEH judges that your campus was ready to welcome and might even continue the studies you proposed.

We knew it would be hard to decide what were the best courses to start with and maybe harder to choose who'd teach them. Soon we found out that the first step wasn't planning of that kind, but getting university approval just to be able to apply. Everybody had to sign off on it. We took our hopes about this NEH application to Dean Heinz Meier in the School of Arts and Letters and found out that he was pleased. He liked the idea and sent us right on up the chain to ask people in higher administration. So, the final approval came from Provost Charles Burgess and that was either late in '75 or early in '76.

So those of us who wanted to help shape it started to brainstorm and we spread the news that we'd welcome course descriptions from anyone who wanted to try to be part of the program. Katherine Owen, Research Foundation, guided us through further steps. We had to set up committees, then we had to find consultants to select . . . well we set up committees for various other reasons and had consultants for creating workshops to offer before the teaching year and after.

Amongst ourselves, we started a group called the Women's Studies Proposal Development Group and we had the responsibility to choose which courses would finally make up the year. We depended on other ODU agencies with plenty of experience to run the kind of workshops we'd need, to bolster and enlarge our teachers' knowledge of feminist resources and pedagogies. Among the would-be teachers for the pilot year, some had not yet shaped courses that would be suitable for cross-listing into a women's studies curriculum. And others who had taught such courses, namely in women's history and in sociology of women, could join the experts who were training us. After the pilot year, we'd take part in extensive evaluations. ODU's own Center for Instructional Resources supplied our teachers with four instruments. They could choose one or two to use to rate their courses and the teacher effectiveness.

To measure campus reactions to our startup year, we also developed an anonymous questionnaire we were going to send to all teachers and administrators on campus asking for comments on introducing women's studies here. Those who hadn't even heard we were trying to do it or were running it for a year could still state their opinions about what such an addition to the curriculum was worth. Some of the planners in our Proposal Development Group really thought why have those expensive follow-ups -- evaluations of the pilot year. But, the ones who carried the day that we needed to review the impact of our activities were right.

Later we learned that the National Endowment for the Humanities committee of judges was especially impressed that we set up so many ratings. Our proposal, it seems, measured up for accountability. As we went on shaping the proposal, dozens of people took part with varied committees making decisions, working through what to teach, how to manage the workshops, and very importantly selecting a very reputable outside evaluator to come here during each of the four semesters. That was Elaine Rubin, Director of Women's Studies at George Washington University, who was also that very year, the founding president of the National Women's Studies Association. She came full time in matters of -- I've forgotten -- a week or more for the pre- and post-workshops. And she came for just a couple of days during the semesters of the courses, and attended classes, and gave the teacher feedback.

But, to get back to our choices, they were intricate and they were debated. And I've forgotten just the sequence of who demanded what. But, I haven't forgotten how urgent it was to make those decisions. It was wonderful when all of our efforts really began to take shape.

Toward the end the time came for choosing the principal investigator, that is, the person who would organize the parts of the proposal and write it up. If the pilot grant were funded, then she would also coordinate the four semesters. It was my fortune, my good fortune, that Dorothy Johnson's book-in-progress would keep her busy in the coming year -- she was an obvious leader. So, I got to become the project director. The Research Foundation people called the job "principal investigator" I guess because so many of their grants supported scientific research. Here on campus, I was simply "the coordinator." We feminists chose that egalitarian title because we didn't want to suggest a hierarchy of director and directed.

I spent the summer of 1976 putting the proposal together. You should have seen my house. There were huge tables with piles of stacks of each category. So, partly that meant I would

assemble information from all those others. It was really a jumble of material about important - but somewhat messy -- about the teachers and their resumes and their class descriptions; also descriptions of the before and after workshops with scheduled sessions led by expert visitors; salaries and honoraria for all those people – me and the teachers and the work shoppers; lists of supplies for every activity and for office use; books that our teachers or experts wanted to have the library to purchase -- NEH gave us lots of money. It was all those little budgets which added up to one giant budget of over \$50,000.

Pat Hyer dealt with all of that accounting, and a lot of the workshop planning. If I helped, it was only as a proofreader. The parts that were challenging for me to compose were the narratives. I had to explain all that we wanted to do, including things that other people were making up for us to do. Besides background commentary on the Tidewater region and the university, NEH required that we should discuss our rationale, our objectives, and the benefits we expected to come from having a pilot here. One way and another, that proposal was shipped into the NEH -- at the last minute, by speedy express -- in Fall 1976, all 37 pages of it. For the next eight months, we waited to hear their decision. We tried not to brood over it or hope too much.

In April of 1977, really wonder of wonders, NEH sent us news that they would fund our trial year. Their commitment of \$42,000 was supplemented by ODU's \$12,822 and thus, the School of Arts and Letters was granted, was gifted, was funded for the largest grant it had ever received.

Full April 8, 2009 interview:

<http://dc.lib.odu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/oralhistory/id/682>