



Natural Balance by Zak Pence

Berea College Public Relations
Berea College Magazine
Summer Issue 2002

By Zachary Pence, '02

The addition of a women's studies major is the latest step in Berea's commitment to coeducation.

When Belle A. Pratt arrived at Berea College in 1869 one third of the student body was female. Her arrival coincided with that of President E. Henry Fairchild, a staunch supporter of the co-educational "experiment." Ladies Hall (later renamed Fairchild Hall in honor of President Fairchild) was not yet built, so women had no central residence hall. Pratt's everyday life was overseen by the "Ladies Board of Care," but her social regulations were not much stricter than her male counterparts—the key difference being that women had to be in their rooms two hours earlier than men in the evening. And she was the only woman enrolled in the College Department.

When Tammy Clemons came to Berea in 1995—unlike Pratt--she found more women than men on Berea's campus. The Ladies' Board of Care was long gone, and social regulations applied equally to women and men. But she was still a pioneer, becoming the first Berea graduate with a major in women's studies and an integral part of its success.

At the time of Berea College's founding in 1855, political and societal reforms were sweeping the nation. Many inhabitants of the South considered the Great Commitments upon which the College was founded radical and revolutionary. One of those Commitments, to create a learning community dedicated to the education of both women and men, launched the Appalachian region into a new era of intellectual development, in which women would not be left behind, discriminated against or taken for granted.

Berea College was the first college in Kentucky and the South to educate men and women in the same facility. E. Henry Fairchild, the College's first president, was a man firmly committed to coeducation. He carried with him the educational ideals of his alma mater, Oberlin College, the first college to grant undergraduate degrees to women.

While Fairchild, Fee and the original board of trustees were ready and willing to create a program for both sexes, the idea was still new to the South. Fairchild knew the people would have concerns about what behavior could arise from allowing young men and women to learn and live in such close proximity. Fairchild addressed these concerns in his inaugural address by listing the many advantages of coeducation, including the fact that it would be more economically feasible to educate women with men. He also believed in providing a "social culture" which is "as essential to the highest usefulness as learning itself; and a culture which neither sex can acquire in its highest degree, alone." But the most critical concern was the quality of women's education. Coeducation, Fairchild argued, "gives to young ladies a more profound and thorough education than they are likely to acquire in a female seminary. Their teachers in their advanced studies are college professors, and their classmates regular college students."

Berea's curriculum needed to be refined a number of times before becoming truly coeducational. In its beginning Berea College was divided into two departments of higher learning: the Collegiate Department (which was open to both sexes, but composed almost entirely of a male student body), and the Ladies Department, designed specifically for women, but not required of all female students. By 1875, however, the curriculum was completely revamped reducing the Ladies Department to a mere administrative division, and making Berea College the first Southern college to educate both sexes on an equal level.

While women at Berea College have had the freedom to choose the discipline they wish to study, the curriculum has not always offered opportunities to study women and women's issues. Like many institutions of higher education, in its early years Berea offered a classical curriculum, which concentrated on the achievements of great men through history, but neglected to discuss the roles women played in those same events.

But Berea has long participated in the development of women's studies. In 1970, women's studies was introduced formally into the general studies program through the freshman course, Issues and Values. In 1991, the Women's Studies Center, and an interdisciplinary minor, was established. In May 2001 the women's studies major was approved in hopes that it would help students develop the ability to address complicated issues from many points of view.

Women's studies can best be defined as the critical and scholarly pursuit of knowledge about women and gender from a multicultural and interdisciplinary feminist perspective, according to the 2001 Women's Studies major proposal. "In other words, this branch of study highlights the experience and accomplishments of women. And, because women have been present and participating to some degree in all matters, women's studies intersects well with all disciplines," explains Peggy Rivage-Seul, director of women's studies.

These varied points of view are what attracted Tammy Clemons, '99, to the women's studies major. Clemons declared an independent women's studies major in a time when only the minor was offered. "It was something I was doing on my own, because I was very aware of gender and differences in treatment," she recalls.

Clemons considers herself an eco-feminist, who tries to find the connections between oppression of women and the destruction of the environment. She is currently in the process of building her own home based on eco-feminist principles. Women are doing much of the work on the house, and learning to cooperate together to produce something worthwhile. She believes women's studies asks people to step out of their own context and view issues in new ways. The program gave her the knowledge to put her ideas into action.

Peggy Rivage-Seul agrees with Clemons' idea that women's studies can expand one's knowledge of different points of view. She believes that the program helps students not only understand the differences between men and women, but also understand the perspectives of different groups throughout the world. At the same time, according to Rivage-Seul, the study of the female experience strengthens the student's sense of self purpose and confidence, and allows women to take part in everything more fully.

While the study of women in society does greatly enhance a person's understanding and can bring to light the plight and suffering of certain groups, Rivage-Seul doesn't think the point of women's studies is to speak for other people. "It has something to say about everything, but not for everyone," she explains. "It may, however, give those people a chance to speak for themselves."

That may be just what female students of Berea College need. Barbara Wade, professor of English and first coordinator of the women's studies program, has lived most of her life in Appalachia. "Especially in the past," Wade explains, "every woman started off with a sense she had no predecessors." She believes "that women can get a sense of courage knowing that they share a common experience with other women. Some young women may have come here against the protest of their families," says Wade. "Learning what women have accomplished over the ages can give them a greater sense of confidence."

Wade and Rivage-Seul, along with educators throughout the country, assert that at least half of our history has been left out, and students will suffer for it, but they believe women's studies can help fill in the gaps. While education may be a long way from fully integrating the thoughts and experiences of both genders, Berea College is making a step towards that direction. Many involved in women's studies hope that one day the major will be obsolete, that the study of women will be part of every course taught. All over Berea's campus, in all different fields, faculty and students, men and women, are working towards that goal.