

The Female “Rite of Passage” in an American Department of English

Sara Munson Deats, Distinguished University Professor, Department of English, University of South Florida

Abstract

In 1970, a freshly minted PhD from the University of California at Los Angeles and an Assistant Professor English, I came to the University of South Florida, an institution totally dominated by men, who held almost all the tenure-track positions and leadership posts. Only the Colleges of Nursing and Education promoted females to Chairs and Deans. Thirty-five years later, in 2005, a stellar year for women at the University of South Florida, USF presented a very different profile, boasting a female Chair of the English Department, a female Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, a female Provost, a female President, and equal gender distribution among most of the tenure-track faculty and Full Professorships in the Humanities, including the Department of English. The English Department had even erased the notorious pay gap between female and male faculty.

My article traces my progress and that of female colleagues in the English Department from marginalized advisors and teachers of Freshman Composition to leaders in the Department and University as a microcosm of the progress of women throughout the United States as delineated in Gail Collin’s respected book, *When Everything Changed*. In my article, I shall ask not only “When did it change?” but “Why?,” “How?” and “Has it changed enough?” I shall also explore the strategies promoting this progress—many of which I helped to initiate and implement—with the goal of helping other Departments to achieve a permanent gender equality. In addition, I shall consider areas that have not changed enough and discuss possible solutions to continuing gender inequalities.

Introduction

In 1970, a freshly minted PhD from the University of California at Los Angeles and an Assistant Professor of English, I came to the University of South Florida, an institution totally dominated by men who held almost all the tenure-track positions and leadership posts. Only the Colleges of Nursing and Education, traditionally the province of women, promoted females to Chairs and Deans. Thirty-five years later in 2005, a stellar year for women at the University of South Florida, USF presented a very different profile, boasting a female Chair of the English Department, a female Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, a female Provost, and a female President. Moreover, the University leadership showed an unusual diversity, with a female African-American Chair of the English Department and a female Provost from India.

My article traces my progress and that of female colleagues in the English Department from marginalized advisors and teachers of Freshman Composition to leaders in the Department and University as a microcosm of the progress of women throughout the United States as delineated in Gail Collins's respected book, *When Everything Changed*.¹ I shall ask not only "When did it change?" but "Why?" "How?" and "Has it changed enough?" I shall also explore the strategies promoting this progress—many of which I helped to initiate and implement—with the goal of helping other Departments to achieve permanent gender equality. In addition, I shall comment on the advancement of USF female faculty in other disciplines besides English and compare their evolution toward equity to that of my own Department. Finally, I shall consider areas that have not changed enough and discuss possible solutions to continuing gender inequalities.

How It Was Then

But first I would like to explain how someone like myself, educated almost exclusively in California—BA from UCLA, MA from Stanford, PhD from UCLA—ended up traversing the United States to teach in Florida. Collins comments on women's limited options in those early days: "most girls who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s grew up without seeing a woman doctor, lawyer, police officer, or bus driver."² Similarly, only after I graduated with a PhD and entered the job market did I realize that I had spent eight years at two of the most prestigious institutions of higher learning in the United States and had encountered only one female teacher, a Professor of Medieval Literature at UCLA; significantly, there were no female professors at Stanford University at that time. Originally, I aspired to a faculty position in one of the ten state universities in California, but despite a number of awards—including a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship—I failed to receive a single interview with a California state university, although the state colleges, with four-course teaching loads concentrating on Freshman Composition, were extremely interested in my candidacy. I counseled with the Chair of the English Department at UCLA, who made several telephone calls on my behalf; however, the exclusively male Chairs of the various English Departments that he contacted (including one of his own former students) told my Chair in no uncertain terms that they were not interested in hiring women. The justification cited was the belief that marriage and children meant an end to a woman's career, so why should they invest time and money in a new female PhD only to have her later relinquish her career for her husband and children. After some research, I was flummoxed to realize that among an average of 40 faculty members per department, the majority of the English departments in California universities did not include a single woman; significantly, the English

1. *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).

2. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 11.

Department at UCLA hired several Assistant Professors that year, but none were females. So I went to Florida.

The English Department at USF, like most of the University, was totally controlled by men. Yet, among a roster of 35 faculty members, the Department included four female tenure-track professors, a far better ratio than any university in the celebrated California system. Nevertheless, we female professors were definitely second-class citizens, relegated to teaching Freshman Composition or traded to other Departments, like Humanities, to instruct large introductory courses, while the male professors monopolized the major courses and graduate classes. Only after four years of teaching Composition, Humanities, and a variety of introductory courses, was I finally granted a course in my area of speciality, Shakespeare, and I had to wait seven years to be assigned a graduate course. I am pleased to recall that the allowable quota of students for that class was filled well before the deadline.

When It Began to Change

Collins relates that in the 1960s everything in the United States began to change. In 1964, the U.S. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which prohibited racial discrimination in employment. An amendment, added by Senator Howard Smith of Virginia largely as a joke but vigorously championed first by Representative Martha Griffiths of Michigan and later by Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine as a very serious cause, expanded the bill to protect women from job discrimination as well.³ To the surprise of everyone, particularly Senator Howard Smith, the bill, with amendment intact, passed both houses of Congress. However, nothing much changed, and in 1966, a group of women led by Betty Friedan, frustrated by the failure of the government to pursue sex-discrimination cases, organized what Friedan termed “an NAACP for women”; they called this organization NOW; and the Woman’s Liberation movement in the United States was born.⁴

A hiatus frequently exists between the conception of an idea and its implementation. Collins argues that the escalation of married women in the workforce was really the key to women’s liberation.⁵ However, although in the 1970s the nation began to realize that most women were going to work outside the home, according to Collins, only in the 1980s did the country fully accept the idea that women could have serious careers.⁶ The birth-control pill, which allowed women to limit their families or even remain childless, if they so desired,

3. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 75-81.

4. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 84-85.

5. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 99.

6. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 292-93.

contributed to women's independence.⁷ The number of women attending college edged past the number of men and a third of law students in 1981 were women—up from 10 percent in 1971.⁸

In the 1980s, the English Department at USF, indeed the entire University, also began to take women seriously. In the late 1970s, one of my colleagues, Helen Popovich, began her meteoric rise to academic eminence, moving from Associate Chair of the English Department to Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences to President of the USF Faculty Senate to Provost at Winona State College in Minnesota, the first woman to hold any of these positions. Ultimately, in the late 1980s, she was selected to preside over Florida Atlantic University, the first female President in the Florida system.

Not coincidentally, Helen was a second-generation leader among women educators. Her mother, Winifred Hauser, was a pioneer member of Delta Kappa Gamma, originally a secret society for women educators, including teachers from K-12 to university professors. This organization, now open and recognized, has expanded to incorporate chapters throughout the world. My mother, Eula Bea German, also participated in this clandestine society that banded together to encourage women in education, and both Helen and I have been active members and presidents of this significant networking organization for women.

Helen opened the door and I leapt through it. I was appointed Associate Dean of the College in 1980 and elected President of the USF Faculty Senate in 1982. I also smashed a glass ceiling or two of my own: in 1983, a red letter year in my career, I received the Jerome Krivanek Award for Distinguished Teacher in the University, the first female professor so honored; later that year, I became the first female Full Professor in the USF English Department; in 1984, I was appointed the first female Associate Dean of the Graduate School. With these glass ceilings in shards, other women began to receive recognition. Since 1983, among the 28 recipients of the Distinguished Teacher Award, 16, more than half, have been female, with a total of five female English professors receiving this coveted honor. Four female English faculty have also earned the rank of Full Professor, and our current Graduate Dean is a female.

The USF English Department Comes of Age

As Collins explains, in the 1990s, the “first generation of American women who had not been told that their only place was in the home came of age.” Female heroes, like the indomitable Xena and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, intrigued television audiences; the number of women in managerial positions burgeoned⁹; working wives provided 41 percent of the average family income, with a quarter of these working women earning more than their husbands.¹⁰

7. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 102.

8. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 293.

9. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 330.

10. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 332.

In the 1990s, following national trends, the English Department at USF also came of age. I returned to the Department as the first female Graduate Director and later as the first female Chair—two more glass ceilings shattered—and worked closely with my friend and predecessor as Chair, William T. (Tom) Ross, to rectify the obvious gender discrimination that had blighted the Department for so many years. The old boy’s club was aging and the many retirements produced multiple lines, so between us Tom and I hired eight faculty: six women, one African-American male, and one white male. We hired these women not as a gesture to Affirmative Action but as recognition of their excellence. In every case, we sought the most qualified job candidate and with women dominating graduate institutions, the most desirable potential faculty were frequently female. Many large research institutions treat their new Assistant Professors like indentured servants—indeed I had received that treatment when I first came to USF—but Tom and I nurtured our new hires, protecting them from excessive committee work and large classes so that they could find the time necessary for their research. With this careful mentoring, all of our new hires, both female and male, easily achieved tenure; two of the women I hired are now Full Professors.

Success in the New Millennium

Collins observes that by the new millennium everything had changed: “47 percent of the nation’s workforce was female, and the United States depended more on their contributions to the labor market than did most developed countries.”¹¹ Moreover, as Nicholas D. Kristof adds, “women now make up 51 percent of managerial positions in America, up from 26 percent in 1980.”¹² In addition, as Collins notes, 56 percent of all undergraduate and 58 percent of all graduate students are women, and half of all medical and law school students are female.¹³ Finally, 64 percent of the National Honor Society for top high school students are girls.¹⁴ Women have begun to outperform men on all scholastic levels, leading pundits to wonder if women are simply better suited than men to succeed in our post-industrial economy and to write provocative essays with ominous titles such as “The End of Men.”¹⁵ Although these dire predictions may certainly seem premature, women have undoubtedly made advances during the new millennium.

Finally, during the first decade of the millennium, women have at last begun to participate actively in government: currently 74 women serve in the House of Representatives and 17 in the Senate. Since 2008, the traditional belief that a woman could not be President has lost all currency; in that year a woman almost became President of the United States, while

11. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 358.

12. Kristof, “Don’t Write Off Men Just Yet,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2010.

13. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 352-53.

14. Kristof, “Don’t Write Off Men Just Yet.”

15. Hanna Rosin, “The End of Men,” *Atlantic Magazine*, July 2010, quoted in Kristof, “Don’t Write Off Men Just Yet.”

another ran for Vice-President. Currently, women occupy two of the most powerful positions in government (third and fifth in line for the presidency): Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Finally, we now have three women seated on the Supreme Court. On a local level, my hometown Tampa boasts a female mayor and a female police chief.

Reflecting the national trends, the new millennium ushered in a new era for women at USF. As noted above, for a couple of memorable years, women dominated the leadership positions at USF with a female Chair of the English Department, a female Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, a female Provost, and a female President. Although, our Provost was wooed away to become Chancellor of the University of Houston and both our female Chair and Dean have resigned, women remain active in the Department and the College, with our current female Graduate Director next in line to become Chair. Perhaps more significant, mirroring the composition of graduate schools throughout the nation, women have achieved numerical dominance in the Department, which comprises 16 female and 11 male faculty, including four Full Professors of each sex. Most important of all, departing from national trends whereby women, despite their outperforming men on almost all scholastic levels, still make slightly less than 85 percent of the salary of their male peers,¹⁶ we have totally eliminated the salary gap between women and men. Finally, the English Department at USF has been rated sixth among English Departments in the United States in the area of both gender and ethnic diversity. Considering the situation when I arrived at USF in 1970, the evolution of the English Department at USF is a stunning achievement.

How Did We Achieve These Goals

How did we achieve these goals, particularly in light of what Collins calls the “work/family divide”? As Collins points out, for all its achievements, the women’s movement has not managed to solve the competing demands of work and family.¹⁷ Ideologically, Americans still consider the wife/mother, even the professional wife/mother, the keeper of hearth and home, and current polls show that even among dual-earning couples women still perform two thirds of the housekeeping and child-care. Indeed, Collins argues that “Couples who really split chores were rare, even in homes where both adults worked full time.”¹⁸ One study even claims that the simple act of getting married creates seven hours more housework for women each day.¹⁹ Moreover, pragmatically, unlike so many developed countries, the United States has failed to institutionalize a solution to the child-care quandary. According to Collins, “The Woman’s Movement had not created the kind of open and caring society its more optimistic leaders had

16. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 353.

17. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 334.

18. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 360

19. Jessica Bennett and Jesse Ellison, “‘I Don’t’: The Case Against Marriage,” *Newsweek*, June 21, 2010,

envisioned”²⁰; these early feminists “had not considered the possibility that society might remain pretty much the same as always, and simply open the door for women to join the race for success while taking care of their private lives as best they could.”²¹ Considering these overwhelming challenges, how did the women in the USF English Department succeed so spectacularly?

First, of course, credit must go to a group of talented, dedicated female faculty who balanced the demands of family and career with unusual dexterity and who were determined to succeed despite subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle gender discrimination.

Second, the decisions of Chairs, not only Tom Ross and me but the Chairs who followed us, to hire the most accomplished faculty helped achieve gender balance in the Department.

Third, the careful mentoring of these promising young professors, first by Tom and me and later by our departmental successors, ensured that we retained their services.

One aspect of this mentoring was my effort, during my tenure as both Graduate Director and Department Chair, to help my female colleagues achieve the publication record so necessary to their advancement. As Co-Directors of the Center of Applied Humanities, my colleague Lagretta Lenker and I edited five books relating literature to social issues: youth suicide, family violence, gender in academe, aging, and war. Whenever appropriate, we included in these books colleagues, both female and male, not only from the English Department but from other departments in the University—Art History, Communication, Education, World Languages—as well as colleagues outside the University. Moreover, whenever possible, we enlisted junior faculty or even graduate students in these endeavors. In total, 20 of my female colleagues at USF participated in my scholarly publications, thereby enhancing their professional vitae.

Fourth, another administrative decision contributed to the advancement of both female and male faculty. Over the years, USF, originally a teaching institution, evolved into a prestigious Research I University. In light of the changing expectations for faculty, as Chair I was able to reduce our teaching load from three courses to two. Although this benefited all faculty, given the domestic burdens that most professional women assume, this course reduction was particularly crucial to their advancement. This reduced course load also made USF more attractive to qualified faculty, both female and male.

Fifth, during my tenure as Chair, I persuaded the Provost to implement a policy of spousal hiring. Since in our society, women are more prone to follow their mates than men are, this enabled the Department to attract many highly qualified women with academic husbands who might otherwise have gone elsewhere. Later, USF expanded this policy to include partner as well as spousal hires, thereby increasing our appeal to qualified faculty.

20. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 371.

21. Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 204.

Work Still to be Done

Nevertheless, despite the success of women at USF, some disconcerting inequities still remain, if not in the English Department, at least in the University as a whole. As expected, the science departments in the college continue to be dominated by males: Biology comprises 10 males and 5 females; Chemistry, 23 males and 7 females; Physics, 23 males and 4 females. The reasons for this imbalance are probably multiple. Perhaps the “work/family” divide, identified by Collins as the single greatest impediment to female professional progress, may impose a particularly heavy burden on female scientists, who are required to spend long hours in the laboratory in order to advance. Moreover, although statistics show that girls and boys perform about equally in math,²² many members of the scientific community may still accept the hoary myth, expressed by the former President of Harvard Lawrence Summers in a notorious 2005 address, that women and men may possess inherently different aptitudes for math, science, and engineering.²³

Even more egregious is the gender imbalance within the ranks of USF’s Distinguished University Professors: among the 43 faculty achieving this top echelon in the University hierarchy, only seven are female. I suggest two reasons for this numerical disproportion. First, as Chair of the University-wide selection committee for Distinguished University Professors, I perceived a bias, not against women *per se*, but against disciplines in which women predominate: Nursing, Education, and Library Science. This disciplinary bias may partially explain the exclusion of women from this top level of academic achievement. However, I am proud to say that while I was Chair of the DUP Selection Committee, we awarded the position of Distinguished University Professor to two highly qualified women from Nursing and Library Science, respectively. More significantly, this gender disparity may exemplify the limitations imposed on professional women by the “work/family divide.” Multitasking women, trying to juggle professional duties, children, and domestic tasks, often simply cannot find the time to produce the publication record necessary to achieve distinction in research.

A glaring lack of parity is also evident in the area of departmental administration. Disturbingly, among the 22 Chairs in the College of Arts and Sciences, only five are female, fewer than when I chaired the English Department in the 1990s. Moreover, as expected, most of these female Chairs preside over departments in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Anthropology, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Women Studies), although, rather surprisingly, one of these female Chairs leads the Department of Biology. Again, I would suggest that the work/family divide may at least partially explain the numerical disparity between female and male Chairs. Given the difficulty of coping with competing professional and familial responsibilities, many beleaguered, overworked academic women may not wish to assume the 24/7 burden of chairing a department. The college leadership reveals a slightly more

22. Kristof, “Don’t Write Off Men Just Yet.”

23. Marcella Bombardieri, “Summers’s Remarks on Women Draw Fire,” *The Boston Globe*, January 17, 2005.

equitable gender balance; the twelve colleges of the University include four presided over by women: Education, Nursing, Public Health, and the Graduate School. However, with the exception of the Graduate School, the colleges with female Deans are predictably comprised of the disciplines traditionally associated with women.

A personal anecdote illustrates the difficulty of managing professional and domestic responsibilities. Although generally quite liberated, for the first 16 years of my career, I accepted the established stereotype that women should prepare the meals and men should take out the garbage and cut the lawn; thus, like so many of my female colleagues, I attempted to balance professional and domestic priorities. However, when I became Associate Dean of the Graduate School, working a 60-hour week, everything began to unravel. Finally, my longsuffering husband, art critic and columnist on our local newspaper who worked many fewer hours than I, protested that he was weary of TV dinners and would take over the grocery shopping and cooking. Coming from a traditional family, I was incredulous and exclaimed, “You won’t be able to do it!” Well, I should have known that my husband can do anything that he sets his mind to, and so he did. He became an accomplished chef and I became a Distinguished University Professor.

In 1986, when my husband began supervising the kitchen, after 16 years as a university professor, I had published only a dozen well-placed articles but no book. Twenty-four years later, free of domestic responsibilities, I have published 10 books—several with female colleagues—and 45 articles and book chapters, and I have addressed the Round Table at Oxford University. I thus attribute much of my professional success to the indefatigable support of my husband. However, many professional women do not have this support, and without salient ideological and pragmatic changes, I fear that many gifted women, at least in American universities, will continue to be denied the academy’s highest awards.

Conclusion

Female professors and administrators at USF, like women throughout the United States, have undoubtedly made tremendous strides toward equality in the last forty years, but there is still much yet to be done. On the national level also, although great advances have been achieved, men still markedly outnumber women in the offices of CEOs, in the U.S. House of Representatives, and in the U. S. Senate. At USF, although the English Department has achieved both numerical and financial equality, many other departments, especially in the Sciences, have not. Also, the higher echelons of academic achievement—Department Chairs, Deans, Provost, and, more glaringly, Distinguished University Professors—are still overwhelmingly dominated by males. Nevertheless, when I compare the situation of the female professors in the USF English Department in 1970 to their position today in 2011, I become convinced that anything is possible. Thus, to my sister academicians everywhere, still struggling against societal and

professional inequities, I offer the mantra of a brilliant academic who overcame insuperable odds, “Yes, we can!”

References

Bennett, Jessica and Jesse Ellison. “‘I Don’t’: A Case Against Marriage.” *Newsweek*, June 21, 2010.

Bombardieri, Marcella. “Summer’s Remarks on Women Draw Fire.” *Boston Globe*, January 17, 2005.

Collins, Gail. *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000.

Kristof, Nicholas D. “Don’t Write Off Men Just Yet.” *New York Times*, July 22, 2010.

Rosen, Hanna. “The End of Men.” *Atlantic Magazine*, July, 2010.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2010.