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Amber L. Vlasnik

Wright State University - Main Campus, amber.vlasnik@wright.edu

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Ohio Women's Centers: Statement of Philosophy

Issue Brief 01

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Campus-based women's centers are a relatively new phenomenon in U.S. higher education. While the first women's center was founded only 50 years ago, their presence on college campuses has grown quickly. Today there are over 4,300 institutions of higher education in the United States,¹ at which there are almost 500 women's centers.² These centers carry out their work in every state except Mississippi,³ with Ohio institutions of higher education hosting 23 centers.⁴

Although the first women's center was founded in 1960, it was not until the widespread campus activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s that women's centers were established in significant numbers. These centers shared a commitment to institutional and social change, and their creation has been described as a "natural response to the growing awareness...of the unmet needs of women."⁵ The women's centers' scholarly literature describes five key areas in which centers serve women: safety, education and awareness, support and advocacy, equity, and community.⁶ In recent years, the literature has called upon campus-based women's centers to also include leadership,⁷ internationalization, and technology as additional foci for their programs and services.⁷

¹ National Center for Education Statistics. (2008). *Special analysis 2008, Community colleges, Table SA-1*. Retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics website:

http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2008/analysis/sa_table.asp?tableID=1053

² National Women's Studies Association. (n.d.). *NWSA campus women's centers database*. Retrieved from National Women's Studies Association website: <http://nwsa.org/research/centerguide/>

³ For a complete listing by state, visit the National Women's Studies Association website (n.d.).

⁴ Goettsch, J. (2010, March 9). Ohio campus-based women's centers. Oxford, OH: Miami University Women's Center. According to the National Women's Studies Association (n.d.), Ohio is one of six states with at least 20 women's centers; other states include California (56 centers), Massachusetts (48), New York (32), Pennsylvania (27), and Michigan (21).

⁵ Gould, J. S. (1989). Women's centers as agents of change. In C. S. Pearson, D. L. Shavlik, & J. G. Touchton (Eds.), *Educating the majority: Women challenge tradition in higher education* (p. 219). New York: American Council on Education & Macmillan Publishing Company.

⁶ Kunkel, C. A. (1994). Women's needs on campus: How universities meet them. *Initiatives*, 56, 15-28. Kunkel echoes her concern for these areas in Kunkel, C. A. (2002). Starting a women's center: Key issues. In S. L. Davie (Ed.), *University and college women's centers: A journey toward equity* (pp. 65-78). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

⁷ Davie, S. L. (2002). Drawing new maps. In S. L. Davie (Ed.), *University and college women's centers: A journey toward equity* (pp. 447-458). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Women's centers at Ohio institutions of higher education range in age from two to over thirty years. Fourteen find their homes at public institutions (including three at community colleges and separate centers at The Ohio State University for students and for faculty and staff), and nine are sponsored by private institutions.⁸ Yet, for their tremendous diversity, Ohio's women's centers tend to share similar historical roots, theoretical bases, and missions.

These shared roots and purposes spurred the women's centers of southwestern Ohio to formally organize in 2006. Gathering to network, share resources, and support each other in their campus and community efforts, the Women's Centers Committee was the first joint committee of the Southwestern Ohio Council on Higher Education (SOCHE) and the Greater Cincinnati Consortium of Colleges and Universities (GCCCU). In 2009, the committee expanded its mailing list and membership to women's centers across the state. While geographic distances and varying funding levels have limited the involvement of some centers, efforts have been made to include all centers and their staffs who expressed interest in the Women's Centers Committee.

In recent years, the Women's Centers Committee has become an important place to discuss the changing context for the work of Ohio's women's centers and their institutions. Stagnant local, state, and national economies; budget cuts; layoffs of personnel; fluctuating enrollment levels—these are only a sample of factors that have changed and challenged institutions of higher education in the state. As a partial response to these environmental factors, the Ohio Board of Regents created the University System of Ohio (USO) to coordinate the efforts of the public two- and four-year institutions and their regional campuses and to work toward three common goals: graduating more students, keeping graduates in Ohio, and attracting more talent to Ohio.⁹ In the words of the state's new strategic plan for higher education, "We currently have the worst of both worlds—highly regulated institutions that operate with little coordination or cooperation."¹⁰ The new USO encourages coordination among public institutions—in partnership with private institutions, state government, and Ohio businesses—to spur economic growth and development in the state. The Women's Centers Committee has watched the unfolding of the USO with great interest to determine how the emerging University System of Ohio and the Board of Regents' strategic plan will influence, shape, and/or constrain the work of campus-based women's centers at both public and private institutions.

It is in this context for Ohio higher education that the Women's Centers Committee began a year-long collaborative process to co-create a statement of philosophy.

⁸ Goettsch, 2010

⁹ Ohio Board of Regents. (2008). *Strategic Plan for Higher Education: 2008-2017*. Columbus, OH: Ohio Board of Regents.

¹⁰ Ohio Board of Regents, 2008, p. 20

Knowing that collaboration and capacity-building are key strategies for promoting feminism, social justice, and positive social change, the centers united to strategize for a shared vision that would illuminate and expand their roles in the state's new higher education environment. Additionally, Ohio women's centers sought to clarify their unique contributions to, and histories and roles in, their institutions. The process of writing a statement of philosophy necessarily situates women's centers in their history—which is intertwined with the histories of women's studies and the feminist movement—in order to forge a vision for the future. This issue brief outlines the context for this project, our process, and the shared statement created by the Women's Centers Committee.

The Process

The shared statement, to be crafted by women's centers at public and private institutions, was first discussed in late 2008. At a retreat of the Women's Centers Committee in February 2009, participating women's center staff members and students created a list of critical questions they believed would be helpful to consider for the philosophy statement. While more questions were generated than any one statement could address, the participants felt that generating the questions and the ensuing discussion were helpful for the process. The questions, which were later grouped under four themes, are listed here:

1. Citizenship and Community

- What do women's centers imagine for the women students, faculty, and staff on our campuses?
- How do women's centers "fit" with an institution's mission statement?
- How do women's centers figure into an environment that is increasingly commercialized and businesslike?
- How do women's centers prepare graduates for civic, work, and family life?
- What roles do women's centers play in helping women strive for life-work balance?
- How do women's centers build bridges between the institution and the community? How do we facilitate the university's role as a citizen in its community?
- How do women's centers in the state of Ohio understand their collective role in Ohio higher education?

2. Histories, Theories, and Locations

- How do our histories and theoretical bases help us to do our work?
- Why do campuses need a women's center?
- How do women's centers manifest "theory to practice"?

- How do women's centers help students practice what they learn in the classroom?
- How do women's centers address intersectionality?
- How do women's centers understand their relationships with cultural centers? What intersects? What is distinct?
- What roles should women's centers play in determining their institutional purposes, roles, and responsibilities?
- How do women's centers build community?
- Are women's centers institutional change agents or are we band-aids for problems our institutions are reluctant to address?
- What are women's centers' relationships with academics and research?
- How do we envision the relationship between women's centers and women's studies programs?

3. Constituencies

- What are our responsibilities related to advocacy? How do we engage in advocacy? For whom or what causes?
- How do women's centers keep pace with changing student populations?
- How do women's centers enhance student learning and development?
- How do we engage our students in learning that transforms?
- How does working or volunteering at a women's center impact students? In what ways does it affect how students make meaning?
- How can women's centers continue to engage alumni?
- How do women's centers serve faculty who are not in women's studies?
- How do women's centers engage men?
- How do women's centers encourage leadership?

4. Unique Contributions

- If women's centers went away tomorrow, what would be lost?
- What is the future of women's centers?
- What's in a name? If the women's center was called something else, what would it mean?
- How do women's centers help students survive in college? Help faculty and staff in their careers?
- How do women's centers promote social justice?

After the February 2009 meeting, the committee began work on a statewide retreat to be held in late summer. Invitations and save-the-dates were issued to all women's centers and other interested staff. The goals of the August 2009 retreat were to network among Ohio campus-based women's centers, discuss changes in the state of Ohio, investigate strategies and practices to support each other, and generate a draft of the

statement of philosophy. However, it was acknowledged that not all women's center participants would be able to travel to this retreat. As a result, the committee innovatively created a locked "wiki"—a web-enabled database that allows for easy collaboration and sharing of data among multiple users¹¹—allowing participants to create user profiles with their photos and contact information. For approximately four weeks in July–August 2009, women's center staff members and other interested parties posed questions and potential answers related to the previous list of questions. Many who could not participate in the August retreat (for example, women's centers that could only send one representative due to staffing concerns for the center) were able to contribute online.

At the August retreat, small groups took printed copies of the wiki results for each of the four question areas and worked to craft one sentence per area. Two question areas were combined to a single sentence, so that the final statement includes three concise sentences. As a result, the following statement of philosophy for Ohio campus-based women's centers emerged:

Women's centers reflect the unique needs of their institutions and communities, yet share a commitment to historically underserved individuals and groups. Additionally, women's centers play a leadership role in understanding the changing workplace and preparing members of the university community to engage successfully with an increasingly complex world. Women's centers are integral to transforming institutions into inclusive environments; through community-building, advocacy, education, support, and research, they encourage the full participation and success of women.

The statement was publicly revealed at the November 2009 conference of the National Women's Studies Association by members of the Women's Centers Committee. In addition to the statement, the committee members presented about the collaborative process among Ohio campus-based women's centers to create the shared statement of philosophy.

Conclusion

This project, while deceptively simple in its product, has several critical outcomes. First and foremost, the project clarified the unique purpose and shared philosophy of women's centers in the state of Ohio. It is important to note that this statement of philosophy does not necessarily send women's centers into new directions; rather, it is a clarification of the important work in which they already engage. The audience for this issue brief—our institutions, peer committees of SOCHE and GCCCU, the Ohio Board of Regents, the citizens of Ohio, and women's centers across the nation, to name but a

¹¹ For additional information, see <http://wiki.org/wiki.cgi?WhatIsWiki>

few—may or may not be familiar with the significant and aligned work of women's centers. An important outcome of this project, then, is to educate about the work and promise of women's centers in Ohio.

Second, this statement is meant to be helpful to women's centers in other states. The project was undertaken in the hopes that other women's centers might benefit not only from the statement itself but also from the documentation of the process. While states vary in the numbers and resources of women's centers and geographical size, among other factors, this issue brief pilots a template for other states to consider, adapt, and advance. This piloting may be critical, for while women's centers within the National Women's Studies Association attempted a national statement of philosophy, it proved difficult to implement a process inclusive of almost 500 women's centers. A state- or regional-focused approach may be better suited for this task.

Last, the questions printed in this issue brief constitute a list of possible research topics for students and scholars in women's studies, higher education, social work, and anthropology, among other disciplines. Women's centers are increasingly compelling locations for research as well as important and discrete objects of inquiry. The extensive list of questions in this brief represents the only known list of possible research topics generated collectively by women's center staff members and students.

The Author

Amber L. Vlasnik is the Director of the Women's Center at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.

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