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Feminism as Social Justice

08.20.2008 | Culture and Society, Faculty, Campus and Community Rebecca Whisnant is taking the helm of UD's women's and gender studies program at a time in American history when many women are seeing political and career success and girls are catching up with boys in math, while a culture of pornography continues to grow.

At the same time, many young women don't identify themselves as feminists or see the evidence of continuing sexism and oppression, said Whisnant.

"So many students have misconceptions about feminism," Whisnant said. "Many of the ways that feminism and feminists are discredited have remained constant. There are stereotypes that present feminists as not being proper women...as ugly, as hating men, or as hostile and joyless. These stereotypes scare women away from feminism. But once I start teaching about patriarchy and how it operates in our daily lives, students become willing to explore why we still need a movement to confront these issues."

From her experiences with the program, which brings an awareness of gender to a variety of majors and fields of study, Whisnant said many students are drawn to courses on gender issues because they think the courses will be entertaining. She said they usually leave with positive reactions, although they may feel disturbed about some of what they have learned.

Whisnant said she was raised to look at feminism as a social justice issue, but she didn't become a professionally active feminist until she realized that the pervasiveness of misogyny and violence in pornography and mainstream media is largely ignored.

"The anti-pornography element continues to be compelling to me, because the harms of the sex industry seem to be growing and have become an under-noticed moral and public health emergency in this society," Whisnant said. "Yet, there are so few people doing work against pornography and prostitution from a feminist perspective. I feel very needed in that field."

To raise public consciousness on that issue Whisnant co-founded StopPornCulture!, a new non-profit organization, independent of the University, that educates how pornography affects individuals, relationships and the culture at large. The group is currently creating a slideshow for its Web site, www.stoppornculture.org, to educate teachers and parents on the sexualization of children and teenagers in pornography and other mass media.

"The University of Dayton's Women's and Gender Studies program, under Dr. Whisnant's leadership, continues to be centrally important to our educational mission of fostering critical, ethical reflection about pervasive social injustices," said Paul Benson, dean of UD's College of Arts and Sciences. "Scholars of Rebecca Whisnant's academic caliber and personal commitment are indispensable resources for our students' ethical development as persons who advocate for service, justice and peace."

As an associate professor of philosophy, Whisnant will continue to teach courses like "Philosophy and Women" and "Race, Gender and Philosophy," while moving the Women's and Gender Studies program forward.

"I like being a witness, being part of the process by which students come to see the world differently," Whisnant said. "Whether it's women's studies or philosophy, I try my best to reach all I can and to provide places of entry for every student. Women's and Gender Studies is an interesting discipline because it's always had a strong activist component. This program has continued that tradition, and I hope to carry it on."

Whisnant joined UD in 2003 from the University of Southern Indiana. She received her doctorate in philosophy from the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. Her most recent article is "A Woman's Body is Like a Foreign Country: Thinking about National and Bodily Sovereignty." She co-edited *Global Feminist Ethics and Not for Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography* and is a regional editor for the journal *Women's Studies International Forum*.

UD's women's and gender studies program was founded in 1978 and began offering a major in 2004. Students can seek a major or minor in the interdisciplinary program, and all UD students can take classes exploring gender issues in many disciplines including visual art history, sociology, philosophy and political science.

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