**Thorn (or Prickle) in the Side or Creative Contributor to the Campus Community?**

**2104 Awards Luncheon Keynote Address by Janice Welsch**

Abstract: Though not a founding member of the Western Organization for Women, Janice Welsch has been a member almost as long as it has existed. She will give a personal perspective on WOW’s role at the university as she highlights aspects of its history.

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Thanks to the WOW Board members and to everyone who is here. In one of Rebekah’s memos announcing this WOW luncheon she mentioned that it would be fabulous. I assumed that since I’m on the program I would be expected to contribute to making it so, though personally I have never identified myself as fabulous nor, to my knowledge, has anyone else. The term, however, does fit the Western Organization for Women, given its accomplishments, its contributions to Western.

Rather than referring to WOW as fabulous, however, I’ve been referring to WOW as a “thorn in the side” for a long time. I have not been completely satisfied with the reference. On the one hand, as Barbara Berg, a former WOW president, wrote “The advantage of [having] [being] a political organization free from the official aegis of the University gives WOW a special role and obligation to challenge University structures that limit opportunities for women at Western.”

On the other hand, thorns are hard and often brittle, not very flexible, usually unbending. That’s not how I actually see WOW. I was happy then, when I searched the web to find out what the function of thorns on roses is. I not only found the answer—to keep predators, often rodents, from destroying them—but I learned that what is usually referred to as thorns, when referring to roses, are actually prickles, still sharp, still likely to draw blood when pressure is applied, but with somewhat more give than thorns, and still capable of protecting the roses.

I agree with Barbara Berg that WOW’s position in the university gives it an advantage and an obligation. It has a certain freedom offices such as Equal Opportunity and Access do not have.
Being an integral part of the official structure of the university means you are subject to all the rules and regulations that come down from the state as well as those put in place by the university. There are advantages to being situated in that way, but there are also advantages to being outside that structure.

WOW has benefited by having the support of WIU's administration on many occasions, but it has also enjoyed a certain autonomy that has allowed it to initiate programs the administration was not ready or able to initiate. Two of the most important of these programs: Women's Studies and the Women's Center.

Backing up a bit, however, one of the first and most significant contributions WOW made was the salary study that provided evidence of the disparities between the salaries offered male faculty as opposed to female faculty. Since that first study in the early 1970s, others have been carried out to help insure equity, and WOW continues to be involved in these as well. They have gone beyond salaries to include studies of tenure and promotion rates, certainly a significant contribution to the women who have reaped the benefits of both.

Two of the WOW initiatives I was more closely involved with, however, are the Women's Studies minor, now a major, and the Women's Center. These were incredible advances and both came into being because of the grassroots efforts of WOW members in the mid-1980s. By 1980 many universities had established women's studies programs as well as women's centers. And, of course, by 1980 many of WIU's women faculty were identifying ourselves as feminists. We were familiar with Women's Centers and Women's Studies programs at other institutions and were interested in seeing both at Western. Some of us had developed and were teaching courses with a clear feminist bent.

The Women's Studies initiative began, I believe, in Morgan Hall among the women faculty in philosophy and religious studies and political science but, because of their membership in WOW, it didn't take long before women in other departments joined them. We looked at the campus curriculum and identified courses that were already in place and were appropriate Women's Studies courses. Some were a bit of a stretch but to make a minor viable, we knew we had to have sufficient courses to allow students to complete a minor in four years.

Among the courses we had to work with was an easily identifiable feminist course, the introductory course that had been taught for over a decade. We agreed on the need to create a capstone course to strengthen the program. Feminist Theory and Practice became that
course, a 400-level course that did just what its title suggests: it gave students an opportunity to realize projects that reflected the feminist theory they were learning.

I was particularly attached to this capstone course, because it so effectively fused feminist theory and feminist action, which are, in reality, inseparable. And it was a joy to teach because the young feminists who took the course were imaginative in their choice of projects and creative in their implementation. To mention three: the hotline stickers on the stall doors of restrooms in Western’s academic buildings; a brochure providing information about various social services available to teen mothers in a student’s home town; and a panel on the “F” word, i.e. Feminism.

Identifying courses and developing new ones were just two steps in the process of securing approval for a minor. Approval entailed WOW members justifying the program in a way that would satisfy Western’s administration as well as the Board of Higher Education and the Board of Governors. Backed by the WIU administration, the minor was approved in 1987 and I became its first coordinator. Since then under Polly Radosh’s and Aimee Shouse’s leadership, marginal courses have been dropped, new courses developed, and the program has grown into its status as a department and a major.

The Women’s Center became a reality in 1986 and, just as WOW members were the catalyst for the Women’s Studies program, we provided the impetus for the Center, though it was Judy Kohler, the former Executive Director of the Illinois Commission on the Status of Women and a Macomb resident, who provided the nudge needed to get this initiative beyond the talking point. She suggested we approach the Provost with a request for a Women’s Center; Provost Sue Fleming in turn directed us to provide her with a White Paper, justifying the center and outlining its function.

WOW members formed a committee and began researching in earnest Women’s Centers around the country, both community and university based. After lots of meetings as well as trips to the Women’s Centers at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and the University of Iowa, we drafted a Working Paper that was essentially our proposal for WIU’s Center. One of the most vexing issues encountered during our discussions was the question of under whose aegis the Center should fall: the Provost’s Office, i.e., Western’s academic hub or Student Services. Since most of the women behind the initiative were faculty, it is not surprising that we took the academic route and sought support from the Provost. We did receive approval but the support was less than generous.
Maurine Magliocco became the Center’s first director and, though she received a bit of release time as director, she received virtually no budget. The Committee helped her scrounge for space and for furnishings as well as for secretarial help, but Maurine led in this foraging. If I remember correctly, the first secretarial help came through an internship or practicum program. The furniture was a collection of discards from various offices, a mismatch of furnishings for the two rooms in Sallee Hall that became the Women’s Center.

Administrative support continued though it was not overwhelming, but in the mid-1990s permission was given to hire a director, on its face a boon. The Center migrated from Sallee Hall to Memorial Hall and then to Seal Hall before finding a home in the Multicultural Center, where it is far more happily situated. It also migrated from the Provost’s Office to Student Services when it was in danger of being orphaned. Given its history of barebones budgets and material support, the Center’s accomplishments from the beginning of its existence have been amazing. The support it has provided students, faculty, and staff has been fabulous.

Currently, as you know, it is thriving under Janine Cavicchia’s leadership and the team of students and volunteers that staff it. Recently, however, its full-time office manager position has been cut by two-thirds. Granted, the university is going through a painful budget crunch that is affecting virtually every unit, but it seems to me, WOW might keep its prickles ready should further advocacy be needed.

A social scientist would probably quantify the contributions of the Women’s Center by counting programs and program participants. If they did, I’m sure they would be impressed with the numbers such quantification would reveal, but I would contend that the value and quality of the programming and mentoring provided through the Women’s Center is immeasurable. It has made an immense difference in people’s lives on campus and in the larger community. The people who have benefited have WOW to thank for getting it underway and strengthening it.

WOW has often cooperated with the Women’s Center on programs, one being the Women’s Advance that took place in January 1995 while Martha Klems was serving as interim director. The conference was specifically designated an Advance in contrast to a Retreat. Led by Dr. Brenda Rodriguez, who had facilitated a workshop on race and racism during a Dealing with Difference Institute, it emphasized working together and focused on examining and redefining the purpose of both the Women’s Center and Women’s Studies.
Among programs WOW has championed are some filed under Women’s Athletics. Why? One response: In 1974 women athletics requested a budget of $81,000 and received $25,000. In contrast, men’s athletics requested $170,000 and received $162,000. If my figures are correct, women received roughly 30% of their request while men received 95% of theirs. It was information like this, in addition to the disparities between women and men’s salaries that launched WOW and prompted it to expand its impact across the university.

Various WOW Presidents and members have encouraged WOW to recognize women athletes by attending their games, and women in athletics have sought and received support from WOW. Helping make women athletes visible has been a WOW goal.

Phyllis Farley Rippey while WOW president can be credited with another effort to make women more visible. Taking note of the small number of women participating in WIU graduation ceremonies, she urged members to march, to make our presence known as a potential incentive to graduates and their parents. And for the first time since I graduated from high school, I marched—and continued to march rather than find a substitute when my turn subsequently came around.

While Dr. Sue Fleming was Provost, WOW president Nazareth Hattwick and I, with help from Beth Stiffler, initiated a Town and Gown women’s group when the Provost pointed out that her chances of meeting community members were more limited than male administrators because many civic organizations through which she might meet them were male-only organizations.

Another WOW initiative: sponsorship of 51% on WIUM-FM. When first proposed to WOW the focus was to be special programming for International Women’s Day (the first Thursday in March), but the wisdom of a more constant presence on Tri-States Radio was apparent and WOW began sponsoring the weekly program. Again, the programs’ impact is difficult to measure, but I want to believe 51% interviews and information have resonated with listeners, if not all listeners all the time, some listeners some of the time.

Members of WOW are also responsible for a Feminist Reading Group. While active, it brought a small group of women, and an occasional man, together to do what reading groups do: discuss agreed upon texts; in addition, it offered an opportunity for readers to come together and discuss what was going on in our lives, both on and off campus. Like this reading group, WOW receptions and WOW-sponsored presentations and panels have deepened Western’s
understanding of feminism and gender equity and have fostered camaraderie among its members.

Back to that prickle on the rose: WOW served to energize various administrations, to prick their consciousness and raise awareness about the legitimacy of both Women’s Studies and a Women’s Center. Neither idea was enthusiastically endorsed by many administrators, though I think Dean Richard Schaeffer’s help when Women’s Studies was proposed and approved, was essential as was Provost Office support. When the Provost’s Office backed away from the Women’s Center, Vice-President Gary Johnson’s readiness to continue it as part of Student Services, was decisive. Prickling helped.

Other issues on campus that called for WOW prickling? The ongoing need for more comprehensive and flexible child care on campus has prompted repeated prickling and has not led, to this point, to a resolution.

Though WOW’s membership has been primarily female feminists, it has tried to be inclusive. Taking note of the small number of civil service employees who have become members, for example, WOW has made a conscious effort to make sure they are welcome. WOW also has been consistent in encouraging men to become members. It has, however, failed to attract a significant number of women—or men—of color. The reasons are no doubt complex but their absence should be a concern and merits reflection, investigation, and action. Responsiveness to issues identified by Black women were included in the list of subjects the Women’s Center might address when the document was drafted, and it has been the Women’s Center that has been more responsive to matters of particular interest to women of color.

When it comes to college and university awards and committee appointments, ongoing prickling seems to be necessary. An example: of the 45 Distinguished Lecturers WIU has recognized since 1969, eight have been women. Of those eight, five were honored between 1979 and 1988, the same period in which WOW was working to establish the Women’s Center and Women’s Studies. Since 1988, three of the 25 awardees have been women; the last, in 2007. That record is worth WOW attention and concern.

In 2013 the total number of male full professors was 148; the total number of female full professors: 70. Clearly, there are more male full professors to choose from than female professors for Distinguished Faculty Lecturer, but I find it hard to believe that year after year,
men outshine women in their accomplishments or have more relevant ideas and insights to share.

I know women have been nominated for this honor and I know women have served on the committee making the choice, but I don’t think women have ever outnumbered the men on the committee—something I should have researched so I could eliminate the “I don’t think”. But here are two more “I don’t thinks” that could be in play: I don’t think we have overcome the subtle prejudice that informs decisions that favor men when women and men are put in competition with each other for recognition. And I don’t think the subtle prejudice that often sways individuals to consider male-identified research as more important than female-identified research has evaporated.

What to do? Make sure committees, not just the Distinguished Faculty Lecturer Committee but as many committees as possible, have women in sufficient numbers to guarantee gender equity. The Faculty Senate still makes many committee appointments and membership lists are available—as is the membership of all university committees.

I know the members of WOW are already particularly conscientious people, busy people who have an array of obligations and don’t have a lot of “free” time. But equity is important. Justice is important. Diversity is important. And though men can be feminists and can support these ideals, most of the work to achieve gender equity and justice has been done by women. I suspect it will continue to be.

Recently, backed by Illinois legislation, WOW won an important victory when its work led to the creation of lactation rooms for mothers who are breast-feeding their babies. Not a complete triumph given the state of those rooms, but a solid advance. And WOW continues to keep an eye on salary, tenure, and promotion issues as well as elder care leave policies, a growing concern of professionals whose parents are more frequently dependent on adult children for assistance.

I’ve been very impressed with the younger faculty who have taken on these issues and continue to carry out WOW’s mission to insure gender equity on campus. WOW’s history as I know it, as I have been privileged to live it over the past 30+ years, has and continues to fulfill, again in Barbara Berg’s words, its “special role and obligation to challenge University structures that limit opportunities for women at Western.” In doing so it has had to do some prickling but in the process has proven to be a Critical and Creative Contributor to the
Campus Community. If you and your colleagues are willing, it can continue to fulfill its special role and its obligation.

Those prickles we associate with roses and which I associate with WOW are the prickles that protect gender equity and justice.

Thank you.