Requirements, Suggestions, & Resources for Required, Core & Cross-Listed Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies Courses

From the WGSS Curriculum Committee

Last Updated: Spring 2016

Also available at: https://www.wooster.edu/academics/areas/wgss/cross-courses/

Requirements for all WGSS Courses “at a glance”

1. Mention in syllabus (and in class) that your course counts as a WGSS course
2. Course descriptions should explain how feminist perspectives and/or gender/sexuality will be approached in your course

At the outset, we want to note that we do not expect any cross-listed WGSS course to “do it all”: many courses offer a specific disciplinary focus on women’s history, masculinity, or LGBTQ experiences that contribute to our WGSS curriculum in important ways. That said, we ask that all affiliated WGSS faculty look for ways to enhance students awareness of the intersection of gender and sexuality with race, class, nation, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, religion, and other dimensions of difference.

All WGSS courses should include in the syllabus that your class satisfies requirements for the WGSS major & minor. For example:

**Economics of Gender**
ECON 24000 (cross-listed with Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies)

-or-

**Heartbreak & Masculinity**
ENGL 23036 (accepted as a core course in Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies)

Additionally, please mention to students in class that the course is affiliated with WGSS, so they know to expect course material that will interrogate gender, sexuality, etc. from feminist perspectives. It may also be useful to talk about how these topics and perspectives will be integrated throughout the course. (Some cross-listing professors have been concerned when course evaluations complain that the course was “too feminist,” or focused too strongly on gender or sexuality. Making WGSS affiliation explicit up front will help explain your expectations for the course for students who may not have been previously aware of these connections.)

Requirements for WGSS Required Courses:
The *Introduction to WGSS, Doing Feminist Research: Theory & Practice, and Senior Seminar: Applying Feminist Pedagogy* are required of all majors & minors in WGSS. Each of these courses highlight scholarship and activism within the field of WGSS, emphasizing Interdisciplinarity, Intersectionality and Social Justice.

Requirements for WGSS Core Courses

WGSS Core Courses, typically offered at the 200-level emphasize feminist and queer theory, and intersectionality (attending in particular to transnational and women of color feminisms). These currently include interdisciplinary courses offered through WGSS, *Histories of Feminist Thought* (WGSS 20200), *Transnational Feminisms* (WGSS 20400) & *Queer Lives* (WGSS 20600), as well as *Histories of Feminisms* [or alternative class] (HIST 24700), *Black Women Writers* (ENGL 21002), *Heartbreak & Masculinity* (ENGL 23036), *Mediated Gender, Race & Sexuality* (COMM 23300). Affiliated faculty are welcome to propose additional regularly offered classes that accomplish the goals for Core courses above.
**Requirements for WGSS Cross-Listed Courses**

All cross-listed course descriptions should include mention of how feminist perspectives and/or critical inquiries into gender/sexuality will be approached in your course. Will your course “offer feminist perspectives on …” or “introduce students to gender/queer theory relating to …” or “demonstrate the key contributions of feminist and womanist thinkers to …”? You may also wish to include a list of feminist scholars/activists/thinkers that you will include, but this is not required. All WGSS cross-listed courses will draw from Women’s/Gender/Sexuality/Queer Feminist Studies theories and perspectives, versus the approach of merely adding a few female (or LGBTQ) authors to an existing syllabus. Finally, when we advertise our cross-listed courses to students and affiliated faculty by circulating their course description, it is our hope that the explicit inclusion of WGSSy perspectives in the course description will draw even more students and give them a sense of how this course will complement their WGSS degree. Here is one example (please feel free to ask the Chair for cross-listed syllabi in your discipline or on related topics):

**Virginia Woolf** is both an English course and a Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies course. This configuration poses special challenges and points toward complex and intriguing insights. It is designed to explore relationships between textual practice—uses of language and form—and the experiences of a particular writer, as shaped by her personal history and the social and literary context in which she wrote. In these explorations, we will analyze Virginia Woolf’s writings as both expressions of and resistance to prevailing cultural assumptions—especially those about women, gender, and sexuality—and we will consider Woolf’s own developing feminist perspective and its pertinence to feminist issues in our own time.

Once your course has been accepted as a WGSS cross-listed course, please let us know each time you teach it and we will be happy to advertise it to our students. All new instructors of a course (even one that is cross-listed for another instructor) must submit their course description and/or syllabus for review by the WGSS Curriculum Committee. As always, please feel free to discuss any questions with the Chair of WGSS.

**Suggestions for all WGSS Courses**

1. **Integrating Students:** Don’t let students segregate themselves into groups of majors from your department and WGSS students. This is tempting for students, because those are often the peers that are most familiar, but both cross-listing professors and students have noted that the effects over the course of the semester can be detrimental to learning in the class. Instead, consider exercises that pair or group students from different disciplines. Ditto on group assignments, group discussions in class, etc.

2. **Gender Pronouns:** Be conscious of diverse gender identities in your classroom. Consider taking the excellent training program on campus, Safe Zone, offered through the Center for Diversity & Inclusion (and encouraging your students to do so). For more info, see: https://www.wooster.edu/students/diversity/osgi/safe-zone. In the classroom, doing an exercise with students on Gender Pronouns (she, he, ze, they, hir, etc.) as they relate to the topic of your course may be useful. Also, many professors ask students to identify themselves as they review the roster for the course (or call only their last names), and ask students to let you know their preferred name and gender pronouns for the class. Other faculty ask students to provide written information, including what name they prefer to be called and their gender pronouns, along with other information relevant to the course. Be sure though to let students tell you when it feels “safe” to use particular names and pronouns, since what feels appropriate in a WGSS course may not feel safe to a student in other contexts. Several faculty (thanks
especially to Bryan Alkemeyer [English]) developed the following handout that has been useful in classes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is a gender-neutral pronoun?</th>
<th>Gender-neutral pronouns are pronouns that are not associated with a specific gender. Just as some individuals identify with the pronouns “she” or “he,” others do not and may therefore wish to be referred to with gender-neutral pronouns.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What types of identities may be outside the binary of male and female?</td>
<td>The term “cisgendered” has gained popularity in recent years to refer to people whose biological sex and gender identity align according to conventional understandings (i.e., male/masculine and female/feminine). There are, however, multiple identities beyond “male” and “female.” Some people identify as “transgender,” meaning that their biological sex does not align with their gender identity (and it is important to keep in mind that what constitutes “alignment” can vary widely across cultures and time periods). Others identify as “genderqueer,” “fluid,” or “non-binary” meaning that their identity cannot be adequately described in terms of a male/female binary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the gender-neutral pronouns?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender-Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender-Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular “They”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This handout is adapted from [http://web.mit.edu/trans/GenderNeutralPronouns.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/trans/GenderNeutralPronouns.pdf)

The following is an article that Kabria Baumgarter (History) uses to promote conversation about gender identity on the first day of her Introduction to WGSS course, before asking students to identify themselves.


3. Content Warnings (aka “Trigger Warnings”): Much ink has been spilled (and blog posts typed) about the subject of trigger warnings in feminist classrooms in recent years. See, for instance, the following website which is useful in explaining when a “trigger warning” may be needed and offering suggested language for doing so.


It is also notable that many feminist scholars have been critical of the increasing use of trigger warnings in the classroom (see links to several polemic pieces below). You may find it useful to discuss these limitations with students.


[http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neoliberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/](http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neoliberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/) (on “tranny” as a potential trigger)

Although the recent attention to “trigger warnings” (which many critique as a problematically gun-based metaphor) has drawn criticism from many faculty, it is useful to remember that notifying students about challenging course content is not new in WGSS. In fact, since the 1960s women's studies has been at the forefront of developing classroom spaces that provide learning environments sensitive to the personal histories and experiences of those within them.
In the current context, WGSS professors often find it useful to discuss with students the difference between material that may challenge or discomfort us (a central aspect of many WGSS courses) and issues that may trigger PTSD. Students in *WGSS Senior Seminar: Feminist Pedagogy in Action* in 2015 with Nancy Grace drafted the following chart to explain the difference:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What a “trigger” isn’t ...</th>
<th>What a “trigger” can be ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being offended by a topic, idea, image, etc.</td>
<td>A topic or idea that brings about involuntary physical and psychological responses due to past trauma or mental illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crying because a topic, idea, image, etc., that makes one sad.</td>
<td>Involuntary crying as a part of a depressed mood or as a response to past trauma in relation to a topic or idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being uncomfortable or even extremely uncomfortable with a topic, idea, image, etc.</td>
<td>Having psychological and/or physical responses to topics, ideas, images, etc., such as dissociation**, agitation**, suicidal thoughts/behaviors, increased heart rate, cold sweating, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being angry with a topic, idea, image, etc.</td>
<td>Becoming very agitated and/or irritable in response to a topic, idea, image, etc. that is based in past trauma or mental illness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many faculty have found that a statement in their syllabus about challenging and potentially-triggering content can be useful to cultivate a classroom environment in which students feel comfortable and able to learn. The following example is excerpted from Professor Jacob (Jenna) McWilliams (Education & Transgender Studies, University of Colorado) “Nonviolent Social Movements” syllabus:

**Content warning:** This course focuses on issues of deep social injustice and the strategies used by oppressed groups to resist subjugation. It is impossible to explore these issues without also considering the tools of oppression—including instances of physical, verbal, emotional, and social violence. These are stories of trauma, and engaging with them may be distressing or painful. I will do my best to provide advance warning when we will be reading, watching, or discussing stories of trauma. If you anticipate needing additional accommodations—or if at any time in the semester you find yourself needing additional accommodations—in order to engage effectively with course materials, please let me know. Additionally, we will spend a good deal of time this semester discussing issues of deep social injustice—including racism, sexism, heterosexism, and transphobia. Some of what we read or view in class could well leave you feeling guilty, uncomfortable, anxious, and sad. These are normal and healthy responses to exploring social injustice, and I will do my best to build a community in which these feelings can be discussed honestly and openly if necessary.

In addition to statements on syllabi, some faculty note potentially-triggering topics on the syllabus or discuss them in class before readings, films, and other assignments that include potentially triggering topics, such as sexual violence/abuse, child abuse, domestic violence, racial and gendered violence, suicide, self-harm, disordered eating, military violence, torture, gun violence, drug use/abuse, or transphobia. Others refer students to databases that provide additional information on some commonly assigned books and films:
Many professors have shared concerns that triggering material may come up in class discussion when the professor has not prepared for it, or a student may say or bring up something that may trigger someone else; it is not possible to accommodate or predict all potential scenarios. Toward this end, many faculty talk with students about their expectations and student responsibilities. In the event that a student is traumatized by material, how should they approach the professor? Is it appropriate for them to address their concerns with the class if they feel comfortable? If a student feels the need to leave class and take care of themselves, should they initiate a conversation with the professor afterwards? Should they feel free to bring a friend with them to help explain their response to the professor if they feel unable to do so? In terms of participation in the course (missing or leaving classes, alternative assignments, etc.), instructors should encourage students to come and talk with them directly and consider alternatives that still maintain course objectives and student responsibilities. The staff in the Dean of Students Office, Center for Diversity and Inclusion, Multicultural Student Affairs, and the Learning Center can provide useful resources for both faculty and students.

Another strategy that some faculty have found useful is to collaboratively design a statement with their class to foster a space of mutual engagement with challenging material. For instance, students in the WGSS Senior Seminar: Feminist Pedagogy in Action in 2014 with Christa Craven drafted the following statement that focuses on the responsibilities of every member in the classroom:

We all commit to making this class a “patient space” (as opposed to a “safe space” that many feminists have critiqued for being potentially disingenuous). We want each other to feel comfortable for grappling with new and unfamiliar ideas, terminology, etc., as well as changing our minds as part of our changing feminist consciousness (in the spirit of Cherrie Moraga). Although what is said in class will likely lead to great conversations outside the classroom, we will all be sure to maintain the anonymity of the original speaker(s) and not post comments in public forums/on social media. If anyone feels uncomfortable, upset, or concerned about a conversation or comments in the class, we agree to either bring those concerns to the class, or talk with another member of the class & ask them to air the concerns. We recognize that sometimes when you are feeling uncomfortable, you can be at a “learning edge,” and that it is not necessarily a “bad thing.” Nonetheless, we encourage everyone to voice their discomfort as they are comfortable.

WGSS faculty are in conversation regularly about how to best address student requests for trigger warnings and the controversial nature of much of the material we cover in WGSS courses. The most important thing is that we don’t want to dissuade WGSS faculty from covering challenging and potentially disturbing content in WGSS courses—oftentimes our classrooms are the best and most open spaces in which to discuss controversial issues within a scholarly environment. If you have questions, concerns, additional resources, or a particular issue arises in your classroom, please contact the WGSS Chair.

4. Other ideas, suggestions or advice … please feel free to contribute anything you’ve found helpful!