

COLLABORATION THROUGH CONVERSATION: How CSWS Developed the Research Interest Group Model

by Jenée Wilde, PhD candidate, English

In 1994, the Center for the Study of Women in Society (CSWS) launched a bold new vision—to foster scholarly collaboration through research interest groups, or RIGs. While the center had primarily funded individual research in earlier decades, the RIG model was designed to support a variety of intellectual and social connections among scholars working on gender in broadly related fields.

The idea for RIGs developed out of the center's long-range planning process, launched in 1991 when Sandra Morgen arrived at the University of Oregon.

"I came here because I had a very political sense of feminist scholarship," Morgen said. "I took the job [as CSWS director] largely because I saw so much possibility with the combination of a strong group of feminist scholars and the base funding from the endowed centers. If there was anywhere a vision of intersectionality and collaboration would work, I thought it would be at a place with resources."

Building on her experiences with other women's research centers, Morgen envisioned an expansive approach to research at CSWS that drew connections between individual and collective efforts. "I had a vision of where I wanted the center to go," she said, "but I realized that if we didn't get a general buy-in for that vision, it wasn't going to work."

The new process began with a year of "Research Conversation" events where faculty from a variety of disciplines came together to discuss issues involved in doing feminist research. "Conversation" topics included research praxis beyond the classroom, the use of autobiography and narrative in research, the pitfalls and possibilities of doing collaborative research, and the integration of gender, race, and class into the research process.

While the approach achieved some refinement of the center's research direction, Morgen felt a stronger process was still needed.

"If we were going to become known as a key research center on campus, we needed to build an identity as more than funding individual research," Morgen said. "We decided to build the new vision for CSWS from the ground up by not predetermining what the areas of strength or interests were. We wanted to know, what could CSWS generate in terms of collaborative projects and research?"

From 1992 to 1994, planning committees worked to develop group research opportunities that allowed both interdisciplinary work



International Leadership Research Interest Group, circa 2005-06 / photo by Jack Liu.

and research within a specific discipline, without being mutually exclusive. A key concern was how to maintain a vibrant community of scholars and affiliates while also focusing in-house research activities into one or two key areas. Another concern was including arts and humanities scholarship in the new rubric since, historically, CSWS had been oriented more toward the social sciences.

During two years of strategic planning, two primary approaches took shape: CSWS-housed research initiatives—beginning with an endowment for the Women in the Northwest Initiative in 1992—and a new model of "substantive interest groups."

In September 1994, the center hosted a fall retreat to "jump start" new interest groups that would meet throughout the year on a variety of projects. "The emerging research interest groups will serve as the essential building blocks of CSWS," Morgen wrote in the fall newsletter, "replacing some of our old committee structures, previously the primary route for involvement by affiliates with the center. . . . By the end of the retreat we hope to be closer to deciding those research areas having potential to evolve as 'hubs' or connectors for us as scholars, and/or to attract external funding to be funneled through CSWS."

In fact, RIGs became an important intellectual resource for feminist scholars on campus in the social sciences and humanities. Affiliates Dianne Dugaw (professor, English), Amanda Powell (senior lecturer, Romance Languages, Spanish, and Latin American studies), and Barbara Altmann (vice provost of Academic Affairs and professor, Romance Languages and French) recalled the fall retreat in an article coauthored for the center's Fall/Winter 2003 newsletter:

It was in 1994 that all CSWS affiliates interested in the RIG model gathered for an enormous planning meeting in Gerlinger Hall, during which we broke into "focus groups" for discussion. Of six or seven groups, one offered a humanities rubric. A huge circle of people convened in a back room behind the kitchen, thinking about "arts and literatures." It included scholars and practitioners of literatures, dance, music, art, and history, all interested in examining how our present moment constructs views of the past. After that first meeting, we began our collaborative process with an initial application to CSWS for funding for a RIG interested in "Reclaiming the Past" in women's and gender studies.

In spring 1995, the center's new Research Development Grants program awarded \$30,000 to several new RIGs, including Reclaiming the Past; Women's Health and Development; Women, Work, and Economic Restructuring; Women in Vietnam; Women and the Environment; RIG on the Right; and Rationality, Intuition, and Gender in Science and Other Creative Processes (RIG Squared). During the next academic year, these groups organized conferences, guest lectures, public forums, and pedagogical workshops; wrote external grant funding proposals; and explored collaborative relationships with other scholars and organizations.

By 1997, the RIG process had yielded two more major program initiatives: the Feminist Humanities Project, which grew out of the extraordinary success of the Reclaiming the Past RIG, and the Women's Health and Aging Research Initiative.

Over the last twenty years, RIGs have served many purposes for those involved. Some RIGs have been ephemeral, meeting a need for connection and intellectual commu-



A WORD ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF RIGS

Comments from 2014 by Sandra Morgen, CSWS Director 1991-2006

"In the larger feminist research community, there was a lot going on and there was a tremendous amount of exchange, so I can't claim I initiated the idea of RIGs. There had been clusters of research-type groups on other large campuses. But at the time, RIGs fulfilled a couple of things at the University of Oregon. Soon after I got here and got to know the campus better and the fabulous people here, we were envisioning more collaboration and more research identified with CSWS, rather than just individual scholars, and it was already clear CSWS was a home away from home for people who felt like strangers in their own departments. They cared about women and saw themselves as part of a very large national and international project of developing feminist scholarship, and some were particularly concerned to develop work that recognized women's race and class identities and experiences. CSWS was always an intellectual community; the RIGs and initiatives were ways of creating opportunities to make collaboration and inter- and transdisciplinary research more viable with institutional support—not just rhetoric of the importance of doing it, but facilitating it, including with financial support."

1995 photo of Sandra Morgen (left) with Mazie Giustina, who endowed the Women in the Northwest Initiative.

nity at a given moment, but many have had lasting impacts on the research communities of UO and beyond.

In 1998, for example, the Women and the Environment RIG was awarded a \$250,000 Rockefeller Foundation grant to study the intersections of gender, science, and the sacred. Not only was it the first Rockefeller grant received by UO, it also was the first to be awarded in the humanities in the state. In 2001, the Women's Health and Aging Research Initiative received just over \$1 million from the National Institutes of Health for two studies on the acceptability of the vaginal diaphragm among women for protection against pregnancies and some sexually transmitted diseases.

LOOKING BACK: 1995

"Collaboration does not have to mean abandoning one's dedication to individual work. Research interest groups can be intellectual salons where scholars bring their latest ideas, their thorny theoretical conundrums, their methodological or ethical questions, or an article/paper just needing polish, into a forum where others with related interests can share, listen, critique, and perhaps occasionally see a strong enough connection to propose a joint project. Collaboration might mean envisioning a grant proposal to do joint work or to develop an umbrella that will support different but related projects.

"CSWS has taken this bold step to create new opportunities for real inter- and multidisciplinary research because many of us believe that this path has great promise in fostering innovative research and theoretical development. We also are hopeful that the RIGs can contest the intellectual isolation that is endemic in higher education today as we have all become so busy with the multiple (and increasing) responsibilities of teaching and institutional service and governance in a changing university."

—Sandra Morgen, then-CSWS Director (Spring 1995 CSWS newsletter *From the Center*)

Some groups that started as RIGs have developed into their own centers, such as the Center for Latino/a and Latin American Studies and the Wired Humanities Projects. Others have expanded in scope into major partnerships, such as the Fembot Collective. In the last three years, Fembot has grown into an international collaboration among faculty, graduate students, media producers, artists, and librarians that promotes research on gender, new media, and technology and supports an open peer reviewing process for their online journal.

Some RIGs have simply remained RIGs because the flexible model, open to the shifting needs and interests of group members, works for the people involved. Such is the case for the center's longest standing RIG: the Social Sciences Feminist Network (SSFN).

Kari Norgaard, now a UO associate professor of sociology and environmental studies, was a graduate student when the SSFN was founded in 2000. "There were a handful of us," she said. "We were so compelled by the idea of having informal contact with one another in a peer networking space for us as graduate students."

The RIG was conceived at a coastal retreat for a discussion of feminist theory. Joan Acker (Professor Emerita, Department of Sociology) described the event for the Spring 2003 newsletter: "[The students] discovered that they knew little about each other and were isolated in individual worlds of academic work. Fortunately, CSWS was there to provide them with support and encouragement to form a RIG. . . . The retreats have been a rare experience for me, a time to talk and think with students in nonhierarchical ways that are not possible in ordinary faculty-student interactions."

In addition to retreats and works-in-progress sessions, SSFN has produced multiple conferences and collaborative research proj-

ects, including research on gender and time use among faculty in five university departments, presented at their 2011 In/Equality in Academia Symposium.

"That legacy of an informal time to give each other support is still what happens in the SSFN," said Norgaard. "It may have to do with its longevity. I know it was critical to my success at the time and who I am now." ■

—Jenée Wilde is a PhD candidate in English (Folklore) and winner of the 2014-15 Jane Grant Dissertation Fellowship from CSWS. She also holds an MFA in creative nonfiction and has worked as a magazine writer and editor.

LOOKING BACK: 2003



"From its start, 'Reclaiming the Past' seemingly went against the stream in several ways. The RIGs aimed to foster collaborative work, but joint projects are unusual in the humanities. Moreover, CSWS itself, in its origins and founding vision, was oriented towards the social sciences and professional schools. Fortunately, we feminists are accustomed to operating not only in, but also alongside and outside the 'mainstream' of academia, which rarely regards feminist projects as central to funding goals. Our participants were eager to explore collaborative models, learning from feminist scholars in other disciplines, and seeing what forms we could adapt to our own work. Perhaps our totem should be the salmon; upstream progress has been fruitful."

—Dianne Dugaw, English; Amanda Powell, Romance Languages, Spanish, and Latin American Studies; and Barbara Altmann, Romance Languages and French (Fall/Winter 2003 *From the Center*)



PLUGGING INTO THE RECHARGE STATION: Today's Research Interest Groups from a Faculty Perspective

by Mary E. Wood, Professor, UO Department of English

When I think of my involvement with the Narrative, Health, and Social Justice Research Interest Group sponsored by CSWS, I imagine myself as an electric car plugging into the recharge station. Like many of my colleagues, while I love the daily work of being a professor, it's easy to get distracted from the deep intellectual engagement and exchange of ideas that drew me to the profession in the first place. In the RIG I've found a group of like-minded colleagues (both faculty and graduate students) from a range of different academic disciplines and departments who spark each other's research interests and writing projects.

This particular RIG was the brainchild of three faculty—myself (a literary and cultural studies scholar from English), Kristin Yarris (an anthropologist from international studies) and Elizabeth Reis (a historian from women's and gender studies)—who share an interest in the cultural construction of conceptions of health, illness, and wellbeing and in the ways that social inequalities and injustices infuse healthcare delivery systems in the United States and worldwide. All of us felt constrained by the disciplinary limitations imposed by institutional divisions among departments and found that cross-disciplinary connections stimulated both our research and our teaching. By creating the RIG a year ago, with the enthusiastic help and support of CSWS, we were able to foster a way not only to meet regularly for an exciting and inspiring exchange of ideas but to connect with others—both faculty and graduate students—who share those interests.

This past year, in addition to beginning a works-in-progress series for our members, we were able, with the help of CSWS funds earmarked for RIG events, to bring Cheryl Mattingly to campus as a speaker. A medical

anthropologist from University of Southern California, Mattingly bridged all of our interests. In addition to scheduling a public lecture, we offered a methodology workshop that brought together graduate students and faculty from a range of disciplines. This and other RIG events have fostered mentorship and community learning in ways that stimulate the scholarship, and ultimately the productivity, of all involved. In 2014-15, our RIG will bring another speaker to campus—Johanna Crane, who works on the global politics behind AIDS-related healthcare practice and policy in Africa—as part of a national student-led global health conference coming to UO in the spring.

For me personally, participation in the RIG has had a profound effect on my scholarship, which has been influenced by our readings, discussions, and speaker events as well as by our sharing of teaching ideas (some of us have co-taught or done guest lectures in other RIG members' classes). Sometimes cross-disciplinary discussions can be challenging, as we work to understand each other's perspectives and priorities. The RIG has pushed me—in positive ways—to ask hard questions of my own discipline (why do literary and cultural studies matter when people are sick and dying?) and to confront my simplistic preconceptions about what other disciplines do. As we explore each other's points of view our understanding expands, and this can only have a positive impact on our research and writing. ■

—Mary E. Wood (*English*) is a member of the CSWS Advisory Board. Her books include *Life Writing and Schizophrenia: Encounters at the Edge of Meaning* (Rodopi Press, 2013) and *The Writing on the Wall: Women's Autobiography and the Asylum* (University of Illinois Press, 1994).



CREATING VISIBILITY FOR FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

by Megan M. Burke, PhD candidate, UO Department of Philosophy

In the world of academic philosophy, feminist philosophers occupy a marginalized space. This, of course, is not unique to philosophy as most academic disciplines give marginal status to those working on issues of gender and its intersections with sexuality, class, and race.

Like most feminist scholars, those of us practicing feminist philosophy seek out spaces to do and share our work. For me, the Feminist Philosophy Research Interest Group (FP-RIG) has been one of these spaces. As a previous coordinator for the FP-RIG and an ongoing participant, this group has served as an important space for my pursuits in feminist philosophy. While there are many practices the RIG engages in—discussions, paper workshops, conference and event organizing—from my perspective, one of its most

important functions is to foster visible feminist conversations within our department and beyond. This is important for members like myself to have a space to improve scholarship.

But, beyond this, it also serves to address larger issues of climate bias in relation to gender that plague the discipline of philosophy at large. In fall 2013, for instance, I coordinated, along with the assistance of members of the FP-RIG, a conference panel, "The Status of Women in Philosophy at the University of Oregon and Beyond," at the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy. As a product of the RIG, this panel brought the issues of gender inequity and sexual harassment in philosophy to a larger philosophical audience.

The problems that feminists work to dismantle within philosophy are made visible in this way. Without this visibility the possibility for implicit bias and explicit discrimination within the vast field of philosophy would remain prevalent and go unnoticed. And within our own department, each

year the FP-RIG organizes the event "Women and Diversity in Philosophy" to promote recognition of marginalized groups and marginalized work within the discipline.

While research interest groups are generally recognized for the traditional scholarship—the production of conferences, articles, intellectual discussions—to me, it is events like the ones mentioned here that make the FP-RIG of fundamental importance for feminist philosophers on campus. The space this RIG carves out for conversations and disciplinary biases, which are ultimately a part of our scholarship endeavors, contributes to the security of feminist practices within our discipline. At the same time, the visibility created by the RIG allows others to become aware of and invested in our efforts, which is vital if we are to continue to make philosophy a space for feminist philosophy.

—Megan Burke, ABD, focuses on feminist philosophy, existential phenomenology, twentieth century continental philosophy, and social-political philosophy.