Director’s Report
—Dr. Asha Sen

I am happy to report that the Women’s Studies Program has been able to weather the budgetary crisis that was impacting us this time last year. The position that was vacated by Dr. Barbara Kernan’s retirement was “frozen” at the time of my last writing. Dr. Diane Detournay joined us in August 2015 as a probationary faculty member, filling this open position. Dr. Detournay’s expertise in critical race theory invigorates our program in meaningful ways, and she joins an amazing group of Women’s Studies Program affiliates and students who remain committed to our university’s vision of equity, diversity, and inclusivity.

We continue to serve the liberal education needs of the university through a stimulating selection of required and elective courses. Our major, minor, LGBTQ, and Women’s Studies certificates are flourishing. Every year we attract new cohorts of intelligent and passionate students to our program. In 2015, we witnessed yet another brilliantly conceptualized Eau Queer Film Festival that was packed to capacity. And we once again offered successful high-impact immersion experiences in San Francisco, Selma, and Nicaragua. As part of our collaboration with Miranda House Women’s College in New Delhi, India, we were able to bring two of their faculty and students to Eau Claire to participate in a three-week cross-cultural lecture series. Closer to home, our capstone students do grassroots work with Eau Claire community partners such as the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin, the Family Support Center, Planned Parenthood’s Eau Claire Health Center, the Boys and Girls Club of the Greater Chippewa Valley, and El Centro de Conexión de Chippewa Valley. Program alumni such as Caitlin Opatik and Erin Bernardy have gone on to become part of Aids Resource Center and Family Support Center staff since their graduation last year.

In the three years of my directorship, I have worked particularly hard at curriculum reform designed to attract and retain students of color. I am happy to note that more and more ethnic minority students are beginning to feel at home in and advocate for our program. The Women’s History Month speaker series this March, admirably coordinated by Dr. Rose-Marie Avin, testifies to the program’s commitment to meeting the needs of minority students and the institutional goals of equity, diversity, and inclusivity. As I leave the Women’s Studies Program to return to the English Department, I am happy to be turning my position of leadership over to Dr. Avin, whose many years of committed service and teaching in the program combined with her passion, commitment, and experience will make her an excellent leader!

However, even as I am happy to leave the program in a much more stable place than it was last year, I do want to end on a cautionary note. It is by now no secret that we live in a political climate that is very hostile to the social justice issues embedded in the fabric of our program’s being. Dr. Avin will need you—students, staff, and alumni—to help her steer our ship through challenging times, and I count on you to give her and our program your continued support and advocacy to sustain and nourish the vision we all believe in.

Dr. Asha Sen, Director of the Women’s Studies Program.

“In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” Continues to Offer a Lesson
—Patti See

This spring, I’m teaching Culture of the Third Wave (WMNS 210), a course I developed fifteen years ago. To help put this wave into perspective, I assign texts that represent the first and second waves of the American women’s movement. Early this term I taught Alice Walker’s “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South,” a seminal essay from smack dab in the middle of the second wave, 1974—and published long before she won the Pulitzer Prize for The Color Purple.

Walker wrote about how generations of Black women (including her mother) had their vibrant gifts and creative spirits stifled by difficult work and family commitments. How could a woman write or paint or garden or sew when she was bone tired from not just caring for but living for others?
I was reminded once again of the privileges warranted me based on my race but also because of my place in histo-
ry: not only did I get to play full-court basketball (unlike my older sisters), but I never doubted I could do and be anything I chose. I grew up learning how to “Just Say No” to drugs and how to roll on a condom. I came of age watching Madonna wearing not much more than a rosary, belting out “Material Girl” and “Papa Don’t Preach” on MTV. In 1994, I wrote my master’s thesis on mothers and daughters in Tillie Olsen’s work, and I started reading my first feminist texts which taught me the language to better understand my experiences as a lifelong believer in gender justice who didn’t always know what the word “feminist” entailed.

Alice Walker wrote that our mothers and grandmothers have “handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.” As a freelance writer, I share Walker’s obligation to all of those who came before me, including my own mother. Her dreams of an education were cut short in 1944 when she had to leave school after eighth-grade graduation to work in a canning factory and support herself. She married my father at age eighteen and had babies over a nineteen-year span. My mom told great stories, and she was a consummate letter writer to friends and family. Her everyday life was told in great detail on stationery, regularly dashed off in her perfect cursive after her eight kids were in bed.

I am a storyteller and a writer because of my mother. She was my first audience: when I was a five-year-old telling her the “news” I collected that day or an adolescent recapping a ball game. Teaching Alice Walker’s essay reminds me that all of us who call ourselves feminists stand on the shoulders of countless women and men who sacrificed so we could have that creative spark, a seed that we are privileged to nurture into whatever flower we choose.

Teaching Feminist Research Methodologies
—Dr. Audrey Fessler

It is daunting indeed to teach a research methodologies course in a vast interdisciplinary field like women’s studies. But when Dr. Sen asked me to do so, I was somehow heartened by momentary bravery, and I agreed. My next thought: “Help!”

Help?

Yes, help! The very best help imaginable arrived from every corner of campus the moment I asked whether colleagues would be willing to visit our class some Monday evening to lend a lively conversation on how to structure a needs assessment study to develop plans for improving commun-
ication in nonprofit and other community organizations. The case studies she wrote for our class may well find their way into the textbook she is working on.

Dr. Mary Canales (Nursing) traced the trajectory of her scholarship over recent decades, generating lively discussion. We studied and discussed her fascinating explorations of American Indian women’s perspectives on indigenous and Western medical approaches to mammography, and her more recent widely collaborative studies on food insecurity in Eau Claire. We drew hope from Dr. Canales’s discussion of the strategies that she and her research partners are developing to meet our community’s food needs. This is scholarship as community service.

Dr. Diane Detournary (Women’s Studies) offered a fascinating overview of the latest directions in feminist scholarship, with particular focus on transnational and indigenous scholarship. Students’ respect and enthusiasm for Dr. Detournary and her work are boundless, and so is mine.

Dr. Wendy Geniusz (Languages) discussed two books she published in 2015 that explore different aspects of her Ojibwe culture. Chi mewinza: Ojibwe Stories from Leech Lake, written in collaboration with Dorothy Dora Whipple, conveys the wisdom and humor of this remarkable elder. Several students vowed to line up at the university bookstoke to buy that book, as well as the book Dr. Ge-
isus coauthored with her mother, Plants Have So Much to Give Us, All We Have to Do Is Ask: Anishinaabe Botanical Teachings.

Dr. Theresa Kemp (English) reflected on her career-long work as a member of the Feminist Teacher editorial collective. Classmates read several Feminist Teacher articles to prepare for the conversation with Dr. Kemp, and she treated us to a captivating behind-the-scenes look at editorial work and what it means to organize as a feminist collective.

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A Feminist Framework for HIV Care
—Caitlin Opatik

I never thought of social work as something I could do without a social work degree, yet through a student re-
search project and an internship in the Women’s Studies Program, I find myself in the social work realm as a case
manager at the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin in Eau Claire.

To be more official, I am a “community-based medical case manager,” and the short answer to what I do is social work, strongly influenced by my women’s studies background. As a case manager I have a case load of diverse clients, all of whom are HIV positive and/or have AIDS, and my priority is making sure they are connected to care. This means I make sure they are enrolled in insurance, see an infectious disease doctor, and are taking their HIV medications.

So how does having a women’s studies degree help me to connect people with HIV to care? It’s hard to believe, but living with HIV is still a huge stigma in the United States. I know people who were fired (recently!) when it was discovered they were HIV positive. I know people who will not tell their children of their status, people who have been ostracized from their families. Men who have sex with men and injection drug users are at highest risk of getting HIV. In Wisconsin we find that the most affected population has been young, black, gay men. This is where intersectionality comes into play. Groups that are oppressed or ostracized such as nonheterosexuals and injection drug users have been most affected by this epidemic. While HIV affects all genders, some people hide their status because of the fear that the world will now know they are not heterosexual. People living with HIV are often stigmatized because of their gender role nonconformity.

My background in women’s studies has given me the tools I need to empower more than help my clients. I am not HIV positive, so telling someone who is positive what to do is ineffective and antifeminist. I understand the sys-
tems of oppression that often prevent people from seeking care. Many positive individuals don’t speak English, or are gay, low-income, or undocumented in a society where the norm is to be a straight, middle-class, affluent, white, male citizen. To be good at my job I have to understand these systems of oppression. Something as seemingly simple as taking your HIV medication is suddenly not so simple when you have no transportation, no income, a disability, or you live as a victim of domestic violence. While I have not shared in all of the experiences that my clients have had, my background in women’s studies has helped me to understand that a simple solution to a big problem (e.g.,
taking your HIV medications to keep the virus under control) is suddenly not so simple when there are systems such as capitalism and patriarchy that don’t consider you to be the norm. This feminist perspective keeps me in tune with the realities of my clients’ lives and, I hope, makes me better at my job.

Caitlin Opatik graduated from UW-Eau Claire in 2015.

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Women’s Studies as Inspiration: Inhabiting My Soul

—Emily Wievel

I graduated in May of 2011 with a major in women’s studies and a minor in Spanish. My path after graduation was not linear—I taught English in Argentina, served at a breakfast restaurant, and ran a needle-exchange program within a Wisconsin-based nonprofit. I am now very happily working in direct services and advocacy with victim/survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault and/or do antiviolence education and prevention work. While all located within the Midwest, this advocacy extends from campuses to shelters to outreach centers, bringing a variety of strategies and perspectives regarding practices within the field.

The discussion on this panel really engaged with examining what “feminist advocacy” is, how it might be done, and what power dynamics and hierarchies might be embedded within these concepts. As individuals, albeit in different ways, we assist victim/survivors in navigating systems that are often patriarchal and that perpetuate precarity by maintaining systems of institutionalized hierarchy, thus creating dangerous spaces for the populations we serve. As feminist advocates, we strive to dismantle forms of hierarchies and inequalities within the work we do, but we often must attempt to do so in ways that allow us to establish coalitions within communities that can be deeply entrenched in patriarchal ideologies and institutions (e.g., the education, criminal justice, law enforcement, healthcare, and human services systems). The safety of victim/survivors may be compromised by these institutions, and by their own intersecting identities. As we challenge aspects alienating victim/survivors, we must also be conscious of our own ideologies/intersections/institutions to provide feminist advocacy within marginalized populations.

Women’s Studies and Critical Thinking

—James Halverson

The experiences I have gained through the Women’s Studies Program at UW-Eau Claire have always been some of my favorite of my undergraduate career. I have really appreciated how applicable the courses are outside of the classroom because professors not only helped me learn new concepts, but also understand how to create and effectively articulate arguments. So much of the women’s studies curriculum focuses on the intersectionality of issues: not just looking at things from just one lens, but many.

My foray into women’s studies classes was Gender, Race, and Class Communication (CJ/WMNS 111), taught by Nicole Schultz. It was the first class in which I really synthesized my learning because we had in-depth discussions about the material presented instead of just learning through lecture. After exploring other cross-listed options I went on to get women’s experiences in psychology, history, and sociology. This broad knowledge base reinforced the critical thinking skills I gained early in my college career and helped open my mind to concepts and theories I would have never otherwise learned. When talking to fellow Blugolds, I always recommend adding at least one women’s studies course before graduating, because of their great value and how applicable they are to daily life. I very much look forward to using the perspectives I’ve gained through courses in the Women’s Studies Program at UW-Eau Claire, as they have shaped me into a much more open-minded and thoughtful Blugold.

The Birdcage and Beyond—Abby Vercauteren

When I arrived at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire as a freshman in 2005, I had little idea of who I was or where life would take me. My major and my future were both very much undeclared until I took my first women’s studies class with Professor Laurel Kiefer the following year. At the time—while frenziedly memorizing Marilyn Frye’s birdcage analogy for the midterm—I had no idea how much women’s studies would shape my life. Shortly thereafter, I declared women’s studies as my major and, after many more midterms, graduated with my bachelor’s degree in 2009.

In the next three years, I pursued my master’s degree in English and worked as a co-coordinator of the Women’s and LGBTQ Studies Program at the UW-Eau Claire, which gave me the opportunity to interact with the Women’s Studies Program in new and exciting ways. In 2012, after spending seven years in Eau Claire, I moved to Tempe, Arizona to work toward my PhD in gender studies at Arizona State University. I am currently in my fourth year of the PhD program and am teaching undergraduate courses while working on my dissertation proposal. I hope to graduate in the fall of 2017.

Though I have enjoyed my time at Arizona State University, attending one of the largest universities in the country has made me value and appreciate UW-Eau Claire even more. The dedication to learning that the faculty of UW-Eau Claire’s Women’s Studies Program exhibit is truly inspiring. Moreover, my interactions with the Women’s Studies Program helped make me both a better student and a more socially just person. Without this steadfast mentorship, I would not have had the confidence to move across the country to pursue my dreams and all of the challenges that have accompanied it. As I teach my own undergraduate classes, I try to pass along the values to my own students that I learned in the classroom at UW-Eau Claire. Although I cannot help but include a question about Marilyn Frye’s birdcage analogy on my students’ midterm, I hope the lessons they learn will be much bigger.
The economics of Latin America (ECON/LAS 356), along
with lights of New York City would end up teaching economics.

Many have read my curriculum vitae, I would like to say
that I am deeply humbled by your confidence in me.

I have been a member of the Women's Studies Program since
1994. I have served as a member of the Steering Committee
and the Curriculum Committee and as Chair of the
Liaison Committee. In 2001, I developed the Women and
Economic Development course (ECON/WMNS 357/357),
which focuses on the economic experiences of women in
the developing world.

I have taught a variety of courses: Principles of Microeconomics
and Macroeconomics, International Economics, and Women
in the Labor Market. Today, I continue to be more than
just a student dealing with the developing world (ECON 355/355 and
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Although most of you may be wondering who is Rose-Marie Avin,
the next director of the Women's Studies Program at UW-Eau Claire?
I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself and tell you about my lifelong
passion for social justice and women's issues. But first, I would like
to thank the Women’s Studies committee and affiliates
for giving me the opportunity to lead such an important
program during the next three years. I am both honored
and humbled by your confidence in me.

As I hope you can see, I am passionate about enhancing
understanding of women's lives in the developing world
and at the same time working with them as they pursue
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