



1-22-2015

Sammye Greer

Sammye Greer
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/oral_hist



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Greer, Sammye, "Sammye Greer" (2015). *All oral histories*. 57.
https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/oral_hist/57

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by University Archivist & Special Collections Librarian at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.
©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Note: An image of three female figures from a Tarot card titled "Three Cups" was removed by the archivist due to copyright concerns. The link (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cups03.jpg>) remains in the caption below and was embedded in the image.

Three of Cups from the [Rider-Waite Tarot deck](#)

An Account of the Women's Caucus of Illinois Wesleyan University, 1972-82

by Sammye C. Greer

January, 2015

(Thanks to Meg Miner, IWU, University Archivist and Special Collections Librarian, and her student assistants for helping me clarify a few of my memories.)

I was Assistant-Professor, Associate-Professor, and Professor of English at IWU, 1970-1982. Since that time I have served as Academic Dean at Converse College, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Mercer University, Provost at Wittenberg University, and, now, Provost and Professor of English Emerita, Wittenberg.

A Circle, A Name, A Voice

This is a memoir, not a history, and, I hope, not fiction. I am aware of the deceptions of memory and the elusiveness, if not the illusion, of memories, and of the reshaping process of memoirs. But, alas, I always have difficulty pinning down past dates, and the Illinois Wesleyan Women's Caucus of the 1970s and early 1980s was not given to keeping records. Even the most obvious faculty history is difficult to piece together from where I'm sitting in Springfield, Ohio. Consequently, to fill in the blanks and to correct the errors, I am relying on the memories of Caucus members of the 1970s and on any information folks at IWU may come across. I urge others to add to and correct these memories.

* * * * *

My most vivid memories of the Illinois Wesleyan Women's Caucus spring from the spirited friendship among a dozen or so female faculty in the liberal arts college and the schools of music, art, and drama, along with Maggie Balistreri from the student affairs office. We found ourselves in a lively cluster of varying personalities and experiences, a charged circle, but without an enclosing circumference. The friendship was always permeated with professional interests and concerns; but the boundaries of academic disciplines were set aside as we sought to support each other's work across the

spectrum of the humanities, arts, and sciences during the time when most of us were within the first years of our careers, often struggling to gain the recognition that our abilities and our credentials deserved.

The friendship was also personal, however, most of us forming bonds with one another that have lasted to this day, even though after 1982, while a number of us remained at IWU, others spread from coast to coast – California, Florida, Maine, North Carolina, Massachusetts, South Carolina, and points in between – Wisconsin, Ohio, Kansas. At least three of the 1970s members are now deceased. Some of us still visit each other on occasion, and we make good use of email and the telephone. When we are able to visit face to face, it is as if we have transcended the complicated paths our lives have taken to find ourselves once again in that circle with no boundaries. At some point after several of us had moved away, the Caucus participants still at IWU had the lovely idea of making a Caucus t-shirt. Emblazoned on it is the image of the Three of Cups in the Tarot deck of cards: three female figures dancing in a circle and raising golden loving cups above their heads. It's the card known familiarly as the Friendship Card.

For a number of us that friendship kept us going during our time at IWU, the energy from the circle inspiring us. Carole Paul wrote to me recently about her experience in the Caucus:

The Caucus, the retreats, were all wonderful; they provided a place where we could speak freely, where we supported one another, and of course there was great friendship. [The Caucus] made a big difference in the way I thought about things. It opened my eyes, got rid of a lot of naivety and replaced it with the beginnings of political awareness. It was an education in feminism.

Early in the 1990s (year?) we had a reunion at IWU. Amazingly, we returned from those points south, east, and north – stepped off those varying tracks -- for the sake of friendship: by then we were

more or less on our own professionally. The circle came together easily and instantly. It was a weekend of not much sleep, as best I can remember, and lots of partying and eating, including a reception that was attended by the IWU men who had been our friends from the beginning, even though some may have been a bit wary of the political undertones of “Women’s Caucus” and mystified by the circle and the golden cup.

The reunion echoed one of our most prominent and mysterious (kept so by choice) activities: our annual Women’s Caucus Retreat, to which Carole Paul refers – to one park lodge or another (in one instance the showers were in a hut outside the lodge – an example of the luxury level of these retreats) or, once, at Peachtree Estates in Bloomington (only one shower, but indoors). Strategy sessions? planning our next moves? arriving at policy decisions? comparing notes on our reception by the establishment? Well, to some extent, but with no meetings, no committees, no minutes, and much talk, lots of laughter, abundant food, a modest amount of wine, and, always, a Tarot reading.

* * * * *

I can’t recall any actual (“official”) meetings of an organization – no chair, no secretary (regrettable, now, when an archive of minutes would be extraordinarily valuable), and certainly no treasurer (there being neither bank account nor piggy bank). Back then, one way women’s groups were protesting patriarchal organizations was to allow their own gatherings to tend toward disorder – to throw off rules, ranks, and assignments; but at least there were equity and sympathy. Nevertheless, we had concerns about professional status and recognition, salary equity, embedded bias in the curriculum, career advising and encouragement for female students, images of professional women, our own futures in a patriarchal world, negative attitudes on our own campus toward any woman who did not fit whatever mold was expected by the administration or departments. On which of these issues did we

take stands, officially, as the Women's Caucus? I can't remember. I hope that other members can fill in the blanks.

I remember one issue, however, in which the Women's Caucus played a role. In the mid-1970s (date?) the administration began publishing an annual list of faculty salaries in the University's liberal arts college and fine arts schools, but the salary scale evaded the question of gender equity by excluding all information that would indicate gender. Salary is always tied, to some extent, to rank and years of experience, which at that time would have put most women's salaries near the bottom of the scale; but there was no way reliably to compare women and men's salaries, according to rank and experience, even within that small sub-group. Consequently, while it provided helpful information for comparing IWU faculty salaries with salaries at similar institutions, the report did not address the other most significant issue.

It took the action of caucus members to provide that information. And that I remember: we broke the sacred rule of salary secrecy in a patriarchal structure. Each of us simply identified her salary on the scale, and then, still withholding names, reissued the list with the women's salaries marked. Enough of the women in the college and the arts schools participated to give a clear picture of the relation between salaries and gender across the University, excluding the School of Nursing, although there was no way to analyze salaries within departments since department membership was not an item in the scale. (Salaries varied somewhat between departments because some disciplines could command higher beginning salaries than others.)

Needless to say, there appeared to be significant gender inequities. Carole Paul notes, "It was very revealing- not to say shocking- as we were all at the bottom of the salary scale with regard to our rank (I remember that there were no women who were full professors and very few who were associate professors)." After all, this was the mid-seventies in the mid-west. Some male faculty were angry that

we had broken the secrecy system; a few were surprised that there appeared to be inequities, and some were alarmed and sympathetic; others suspected a Caucus scheme – as if we could do anything specifically to effect change. I can't recall the dean's response, and we were not accustomed to hearing directly from the president on controversial issues. In any case, the scale became known as "The Sheet." I don't know if there were a concerted administrative effort to adjust inequities, but it was clear to me that my own salary was receiving attention, although the increases above the across-the-board bump were identified as "merit."

Merit salary increases, determined by the dean and the president, were a feature of the salary system during my 12 years at IWU. It's possible that merit awards were used to address inequity, as long as the work was indeed meritorious, of course, but that strategy would have been slow and uneven because male faculty would also have been receiving merit awards. Carole observes, however, that when she left IWU (after I had left), "The Sheet" was "much more even in the distribution of salary and rank for women – we had become what had been missing."

* * * * *

Probably our greatest "political" effects were on curriculum and non-monetary personnel matters. We were vocal about the need to increase the number of women on the faculty. Beginning in the early 1970s and continuing throughout the decade a significant number of women faculty were hired, in the humanities, in particular, although the trend extended into the natural sciences, the social sciences, art, music, and drama with only a few new appointments. (In the early 1970s there were only four female faculty members in the natural sciences and mathematics, three of whom retired during that time, and only one or two in the social sciences.) With perhaps one or two exceptions, each new faculty member came with little or no full-time teaching experience, occupying the lowest rank on the totem pole; consequently, the gender issues continued.

But these new female faculty members brought radically different perspectives to the university, and, indeed, voices – products of a new age in most of their disciplines. The timing of the first arrivals coincided with the early days of the Caucus, bringing inspiration to our group and strong voices to various academic departments. I hope that someone can remember specifically how we came to be “the Caucus” and will remember anyone whom I have missed in the list of the original group: Cory Arensbach, Emily Dale, Sammye Greer, Sue Moretto Huseman, Doris Meyers, Pam Muirhead, Phyllis Parr, Allaire Schleicher, Linda Snyder, and Carole Thibideaux. An article in the April 16, 1982 edition of *The Argus* reported the tenth anniversary of the Caucus while noting that 23 women faculty and staff formed the founding group. I can’t get near that number, but perhaps a dozen more were on the original list but did not participate as actively as these. In the mid to late 1970s these new faculty became active in the Caucus: Bonnie Becket, Barbara Bowman, Carole Brandt, Maryanne Bushman, Margaret Chapman, Karen Gervais, Anna Calouri Holcomb, Jill McDonald, and Carole Paul, along with Maggie Balesteri from Student Affairs.

I don’t recall that any of the faculty of the School of Nursing (all female) participated in the Caucus during my time at IWU. They were certainly welcome, but probably their issues were of a different sort; and they were fortunate to have a ready-made group with shared interests – professionals in the same discipline and organized within the university structure. They were also members of an influential national professional organization with personnel standards that the university had to meet in order to award a legitimate degree in nursing.

Whether we were ever an “organization” probably doesn’t matter. What matters is that we *named* ourselves – and, with the political implications of the word, it was apparently a threatening name at that. Whether we realized it or not, we were using a traditional, male-oriented term ironically. (Its origin is an Algonquian tribal word meaning *elder, counselor*.) *What’s in a name?* In our case, much, it

seems – a linguistic annexation, an emphasis on gender, a connection with the times, the power of the group, an identity beyond the individual, a collective voice, a unified spirit, a circle. Once when two other women and I were having lunch in the dugout, one of our male colleagues -- our good friend -- asked if he could join us “—or is this a meeting of the Women’s Caucus?” In those days . . . where two or three (women) are gathered. . . . Moreover, our individual contributions to conversations about curriculum, departmental and cross-disciplinary, were sometimes, perhaps often, heard as the voice of “the Caucus,” to be taken as an assertive, if not aggressive, Caucus goal, criticism, or vision – perhaps to be reckoned with. It seems that naming the borderless circle gave us influence, and, of course, it amplified individual voices and it made us visible.

We did not progress notably within the university structure, however. When I became chair of the English Department (and Pam Muirhead joined the department faculty a few months later, just as Amy Emmers left) in the spring of 1972, there were no other female chairs or division heads, and the Director of the School of Nursing was the only female member of the central administration. This remained the case until Sue Moretto became chair of the languages department, mid- 1970s, and Carol Brandt was named Director of the School of Drama (late 1970s). The central administration remained all male, a new dean and an associate dean being drawn from the IWU faculty. From 1982 for the next few years three of us moved to other institutions to become a department chair, a college academic Dean, and a college president. Two or three others left to break from the shackles that seemed not to be slackening in their departments, and another chose faculty advancement at another University. A couple of others went elsewhere because of personal or family reasons, while several stayed on to devote their full careers to IWU.

Moreover, women’s advancement to the rank of Professor lagged far behind that of men’s, to some extent because there were so few women who had accumulated the number of years of full-time

college teaching required before promotion was considered; but also, for those who met the minimum years requirement, it seemed that no one even thought to consider them. When I arrived at Wesleyan there were three women in the rank of Professor, along with the Director of the School of Nursing; but they retired in the early 1970s, just as the new female faculty were being hired as assistant professors. Consequently, there were no images of women in that role. It was not that considering women for advancement to the rank of Professor slipped the minds of the men making these decisions; rather, it seemed that the concept of a woman as professor was never there, even though there had recently been three at the rank. Moreover, for the women faculty at the lower ranks, by the mid-1970s there were no senior female colleagues who had achieved the highest rank and could serve as inspiration by example or as sources of information on how to maintain one's personal integrity while advancing in a male-dominated organization.

In my own case, being a department chair, I had to rely on the division director for salary and advancement recommendations and on the dean and the president for the decisions. The division director and dean were dumbfounded when I asked why I had not been reviewed for promotion to Professor along with the men who had been reviewed on the basis of the same (or fewer) years of experience, especially when I had annually received high merit raises, which I assumed recognized professional progress as well as the quality of my work, and had just received the annual Distinguished Teaching Award. (I had come to Wittenberg with four years of full-time experience at another college). When I asked the question of the dean, he literally sputtered. I'll swear neither he nor the division director had even thought of the possibility of my promotion; and, after a few lame attempts to respond, the dean allowed that holding faculty leadership positions and being department chair for eight years, beginning in my second year at IWU, "did not count toward qualifications for promotion to Professor," whatever the time and energy required. It was 24 hours after that conversation that I decided to let someone else labor for the department while I turned my attention to my scholarly

pursuits.

* * * * *

Curriculum and course content, however, at least in the humanities and, in a few instances, in the social sciences, were profoundly affected by attention to the roles and work of women. This was happening nationwide, of course, but at IWU it seemed that significant change required a collective voice to amplify individual voices within the disciplines. A couple of years after I went to IWU I was roped into lecturing on *The Orestia* in the required humanities sequence. My “feminist” approach to this drama of the patriarchy so alarmed some of the other faculty that not only did they express their unease and doubt but also declined to invite me to continue the lecture (so time-consuming and intellectually challenging for me to prepare) for another year. A voice silenced.

Nevertheless, course content and approaches to subject matter began to change, at least in the humanities, along with course listings, as the result of the work of male faculty as well as female faculty. In fact, it would have been difficult in the late 1970s and early 1980s to have found a more congenial group of male faculty, across departments, notwithstanding the rigid resistance or the head-shaking bafflement here and there. A number of Caucus members directed their scholarly efforts toward work by or about women, and Anna Calouri Holcomb turned her artist’s eyes and hands to ceramic shapes that found their place among age-old images close to the hearts and minds of women.

In the spring of 1981 (date?), with the support of male colleagues, we invited to campus Susan Gubar, co-author of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the ground-breaking study of literature by women. Successful as a scholar, writer, and faculty member in a highly-regarded graduate program, she encouraged us not to lose the sight of the importance of our work as scholarly, energetic liberal arts educators and as active agents of change and passionate emissaries of equity.

Whether we stayed there as teachers and scholars, went to other institutions as administrators or faculty members, or pursued other careers, I am confident that we gained our voices at IWU and that those voices were amplified by the Caucus Circle. I am confident that in the decades following the 1970s, because of that circle, each of us has been a more effective professional and that Illinois Wesleyan has been a more timely, more humane, more impressive institution.