AN EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVE FOR WORKING CLASS WOMEN:

THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF NEIGHBORHOOD WOMEN'S COLLEGE

Project Demonstrating Excellence

Doctoral Project

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to the Union Graduate School

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TO THE READER

This study is based on my two year association with the National Congress of Neighborhood Women's College. The opinions and conclusions are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of other individuals connected with NCNW.

In some instances names of students and faculty have been changed or composites created to protect the privacy of people involved.
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BIBLIOGRAPHY
The National Congress of Neighborhood Women is a national organization which was started in October 1974 when the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs sponsored a conference of community organizers and national leaders in Washington, D.C. Out of the conference came a realization of the need for an organization which would deal with the difficulties of working class women in urban neighborhoods. Therefore, Janice Peterson, a UGS doctoral candidate, community organizer and feminist therapist; Frances Palmentieri and Elizabeth Speranza, Brooklyn community activists; Barbara Milkulski, Baltimore City council member; Nancy Siefer, Institute for Pluralism and Group Identity; Gail Cincotta, Chicago community organizer, Marjorie Thompson, Women's Conference of Concern, Detroit; and Anne Smith, National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs, met to form the National Congress of Neighborhood Women.

The NCNW, with its national headquarters in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York, consists of working class, low and fixed income ethnic (Italian, Polish, Black, Hispanic) women who have joined together around issues of immediate concern: education, employment, health, housing, legal services, and welfare.

In March, 1975, Janice Peterson, with women employed through the Comprehensive Employment Training Act, began organizing in the Williamsburg-Greenpoint-Northside area where Ms. Peterson was well known as a community activist and as a feminist. The NCNW office at 690 Metropolitan Avenue became a center where women met, first to find jobs and, ultimately, to talk about shared concerns in their personal and community lives. As the organization took form and these women discussed their priorities, education emerged as a strong-
ly felt need. In fact, the women recognized employment and education as areas in which they were most strongly concerned. Because the existing institutions did not appeal to them personally, or meet their educational needs as they saw them (the reasons why will be explored further in this study), they decided that the establishment of a community-based college program should be a priority for the organization. Thus, in the early months of the NCNW's existence in Brooklyn, staff and members designed the NCNW college program. After much negotiation, in September, 1975, NCNW, in conjunction with LaGuardia Community College, began giving college credit courses to sixty women.

I became part of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women's College through Jan Peterson, whom I met in August of 1974 at the UGS colloquium in Switzerland. We discovered shared interests in the problems of working class women in our rapidly changing society, specifically in relation to feminism, politics and education. Both Jan and I identified ourselves as women from working class ethnic families. We both were and are feminists. Though different in our training and experience, her work as a community organizer and therapist and mine as a teacher provided a framework for a dialogue that began in Switzerland and is still going on.

In my original UGS proposal, I outlined a curriculum project for working class women. At the time I thought of forming a study group where women could explore, through readings and discussions organized around themes rather than academic disciplines, their personal identity in relation to their lives as women and as members of the working class in America. As I then stated, I wanted:

...to generate a curriculum for working class women, essentially a curriculum of identity. The content of such a course would be literature, history and psychology, though
it would certainly draw from other areas. In the process of such study, women would, through discovery and discussion of information and experience and through collective learning, grow in awareness about themselves and their society. Such awareness should increase self esteem and enhance the individual's sense of power on a personal and political level.

Clearly, my interest in the creation of an alternative educational experience for women coincided with the needs of the NCNW when they began exploring the possibility of their own college program. Jan contacted me when the NCNW began to actually establish such a program. Although my plan had been for a small study group, I was drawn to the potential inherent in the idea of a neighborhood college for working class women, so I committed myself to work on the curriculum.

My desire in doing so was to deal with the question of women's identity as it was related to social class and to explore how education could be a force for helping people to grow into a sense of themselves. This paper is an exploration of some of the issues that absorbed me while I worked on the NCNW curriculum.

My work at NCNW has been a significant experience for me in many different ways. Most important, the issues involved -- feminism, class and ethnic identity, the role of education in human growth -- are concerns that are and have been fundamental problems in my own personal development. Although I have always cared about such matters, I have regarded them as essentially intellectual and social problems. However, developing curriculum with the women of NCNW has been exciting because I have been dealing not only with intellectual realities, but personal and emotional ones as well, and with women who are very much like me. This experience has given me the opportunity to analyze such issues with other people for whom they
were equally significant. In effect, it's been like engaging in productive work and stimulating dialogue with my own mother and sisters and with a part of myself that has lain dormant for as many years as I have been moving "up" through class and caste.

When I entered Union Graduate School, I wanted to provide others with an integrating intellectual experience, to give them a "curriculum of identity." As I complete this phase of my own educational experience, I see that my desire to help women to learn in a human, not alienating way was rooted in my own desire for wholeness. Working on this project has helped me to resolve some of the contradictions in my perception of myself in relation to others—professionally, intellectually, and personally.
THE NCNW COLLEGE STUDENTS

In order fully to convey the spirit of the NCNW college program it is necessary to look at those who are involved in the project: who they are, and why a college degree assumed priority to them in their consideration of needs and resources.

The "neighborhood" that the NCNW Williamsburg office serves is an urban ethnic neighborhood, comprising Williamsburg, Greenpoint, and the Northside communities. Nancy Siefer's description of a white ethnic neighborhood aptly describes the community (Seifer, Absent From the Majority, p. 7):

In these little Italys, or Greek, Polish, Jewish, Irish, German or Lithuanian neighborhoods, ethnic restaurants, butcher shops and bakeries still flourish. Storefront windows may advertise a Polonia political club, an Italian fraternal association, a Gaelic athletic league or a Ukranian youth group. The local candy store sells newspapers in the 'old country' language, and contrary to the contemporary wisdom which suggests that immigration has subsided, a steady flow of immigrants from many southern and Eastern European countries continually refuels ethnic traditions and lifestyles.

A walk through the community reveals an enclave, what author Richard J. Kirkus would call "a healthy social system in an environment of social disorganization..." The streets are practically spotless; modest houses are immaculately kept, their facades often enlivened by intricate stone work, mosaic tiles carefully inlaid in the cement area ways, rose bushes tenderly nurtured. These people care about their neighborhoods, and the depth of their concern is reflected in their homes' cleanliness and the amenities of their art.

The women of this community, who comprise the NCNW and are the students of the college, are all working class women. Even as I write that term, I hesitate. Still, if Warner's theory of social class as it appears in Social Class in America, were to be applied, these
women would in fact fit into his designation "lower-middle-class," shading off into "upper-lower," by virtue of income, educational level, and by the very fact that they live where they do, they fit into that category.

However, I have trouble with the language of sociology and so will render an impressionistic view of the students. They are first, second, or third-generation Americans. Most are of Italian or Polish ancestry; the others are Hispanic, black American, black West Indian, and Irish. They are the first of their generation to attend college, though many of them have children in college. They range in age from 24 to 60. Most are married, with children; a few are single, divorced, or widowed. Many of the students are working formally for the first time in their lives, though some have been consistently employed and/or active in community work.

Although they are from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, the women share certain values. Most of them live in the Williamsburg area where they were born and raised. They still live close to their parents, many even in the same houses. Those who are married have husbands who do skilled or semi-skilled work and experience a minimal amount of economic and employment security. Their marriages seem much like those described by Mirra Kamarovski in Blue Collar Marriage. They regard family ties and relationships, along with their religious affiliations, as the most important connections in their lives.

Today, however, their values, traditions, and lifestyles are in a state of flux and they know that they must adjust to change. Their economic stability, marginal at best, is now being threatened. The turbulence and violence of inner-city life disturb their once solid
sense of physical safety within the enclave their parents had created. Alternate values and lifestyles threaten the family and religious ties which nourished the way of life they knew and had foreseen for their children. In order to survive in a rapidly changing world many of them feel forced to move away from traditional and family ties. Having mastered the familial modes of interrelating, they find they must now learn more universalistic behavior patterns through which they can achieve goals necessary in dealing with the sophisticated bureaucracy.
WHY COLLEGE?

The reasons the women have for wanting a college are multiple and varied. To a certain extent, they stem directly from the formation of NCNW, relating to the women's new awareness of their problems, an awareness that their traditional roles are no longer viable in this rapidly changing society. Out of this awareness grew a felt need for not simply a college, but a special college. As I will describe later, the college experience proved to be, for many, the pivotal experience in a lifestyle alteration. That is, I will explain how the college has become far more than an educational experience in the usual sense; it has served as the focus for a vast number of changes in attitude, values, and most important, perceptions about the self.

The women who came together in Williamsburg did so because they needed help and support for the various unfamiliar problems with which they were confronted. Along with generalized value changes, the women have been experiencing direct challenges to the traditional roles for which they had been raised. For many of these women, the essence of their identity was to be found in the approval and affection of their families. The state of the economy, perhaps as much as the influence of the women's movement, has forced working class women to reconsider their roles. Many of the Williamsburg women had to get jobs because their husbands were precariously employed, or if in stable positions, were unable to meet, unaided, the skyrocketing costs of raising a family in New York City. When faced with the prospect of returning to work or perhaps even beginning work, most of the women had to deal with their lack of job-preparedness. Trained only for traditional female roles in the home, the women could only see dead-end jobs for themselves as clerks, assembly line workers, typists.
Ironically, although our society demeans the roles of wife and mother, the rigors of sustaining family life in an increasingly complex society require intelligence, strength of character, discipline and a resiliency which over-qualify such women for the jobs society offers. A mother who juggles the dinner schedule of three children and a husband who works nights will not be utilizing all her administrative and organizational talents if she is confined to the routine tasks of typing and filing. Her expertise at human relations, developed in her role as the focus of family interaction should not be wasted in making coffee for the boss or in answering the phone. Through NCNW they realized that other job possibilities existed, but that they would need training for them. So for most of the women, the hope of gaining credentials which would provide access to more rewarding kinds of work was a motivating factor. It is this motivation that has proven particularly significant for the program because the college has been able to provide job placements in community service agencies by obtaining CETA funds. Thus the college program has become not only a work-study program but also a study of work.

Still other women appear to have been urged toward college because of their experiences and successes in achieving social change in the neighborhood. They have managed to organize around problems involving day care, senior citizen needs, housing; they even stopped the expansion of a factory which threatened their homes, in the now famous Northside battle. Through these experiences, the activists had a taste of how success made them feel about themselves. They hoped that a college degree would enable them to manage the bureaucracy more effectively, leading to more successes, more good feelings. These women had clearly learned something important in their fights
with City Hall. They learned first that the effectiveness of family techniques was limited in a society dominated by large and intricate bureaucracies. They also knew that this system could be made to bend to their needs if the machinery could be understood, then manipulated. And they came to recognize, through their own encounters with those structures and institutions, that knowledge is, in fact, the basis of power. Power gets things done. As one student put it, "You can't just call up a friend in the neighborhood and get things done by someone you think has power. You've got to know where the power is outside of the neighborhood if you want to see why the streets aren't clean or why our day care isn't being funded. To work the system you have to know about it."

Another motive, less clearly articulated but pervasive nonetheless, was the need for a new focus for communal or perhaps familial instincts. As traditional lifestyles undergo change, women who are used to getting emotional and/or economic support from their immediate families have had to devise new communities to replace the extended family. For many women, the women's movement has answered this need. As one feminist friend of mine put it, "For me the women's movement provided community - it was a high." People of every class want some sense of belonging. Once the family fails to provide that sense, other groupings form. My impression is that the NCNW college functions that way for many of the students.

This need for community leads to the consideration of another issue regarding the NCNW as an organization and as a college--the relationship between the NCNW and the women's movement. Because this is a women's organization devoted to the improvement of the lives of women, and because of the presence of active feminists within the
WHY A SPECIAL COLLEGE

The women of Williamsburg clearly desired to further their education and to acquire that particular stamp of approval or badge of ability which completion of a college program carries. That they chose to do so in an alternate educational network of their own devising is a fact that merits analysis.

First, it should be noted that they made the decision. This is unusual. Instead of a decision being made without their participation, followed by a solicitation of their enrollment (the much more usual sequence), they actually decided that a college program should exist. The reasons the women wanted their own college program are to be found in the women's perceptions of themselves in relation to existing educational institutions which might have attracted them. Related to these is the simple fact of geography.

Geography, seemingly the most superficial factor, is a good place to begin, though of course beginning anywhere in an analysis like this is merely to acknowledge that to get anywhere one must begin somewhere. I think you'll see that the inside and the outside are interchangeable. Ties. Neighborhood ties. Family ties. These "urban villagers," to use Herbert Gans' apt phrase,7 are strongly oriented toward community. The institutions of their neighborhood are the ones with which they most closely identify themselves. Success in the larger societal institutions requires a mode of dress, speech and behavior which is, in effect, a betrayal of one's class and ethnicity. Going to college usually means going away from the neighborhood physically and mentally (though not necessarily emotionally), away from the familiar lifestyle and shared culture of family
and friends. The NCNW women, given the extreme pressures on their time, were obviously attracted by the convenience of having their own college in their own community simply because they could get there without too much trouble. Jean, probably speaking for many of the students as well as herself commented, "I just don't want to be too far away from the kids. In case anything happens I want to be able to be there right away. I don't think I'd go to school if I had to travel."

There were, however, reasons other than geography which explain their desire for a college in the community, reasons that are connected with their feelings about themselves in relation to education and how they perceived "college."

Much has been written regarding the alienation which "blue collar students" experience once they get into traditional institutions of higher learning, and conversations with the students at NCNW about their feelings on learning poignantly underscore the profound degree to which these women feel that advanced education is for the more deserving "others." The students repeatedly speak of college as a remote experience, one that they did not recognize as accessible to them. Again and again the prospect of continuing their formal education is referred to as a "dream come true." It seems that such women, while perfectly aware of the specific circumstances which interrupted their education -- economic exigencies, marriage, pregnancies, other family obligations -- somehow blame themselves for what they perceive as a failure to seize the educational opportunities at hand. It does not occur to them that societal pressures on women might account for their limited options. Instead, many of the women chastise themselves for not having made the "dream come true" earlier
in their lives. Clara, one of the younger women said that "The idea of going to college was more like a dream than a reality." One of the older women, Elizabeth, said "College to me was always a dream and now here I am a student after forty years without a high school diploma." And Florence put it this way:

"College, me? That is exactly what I asked myself when I embarked on this program. My dream of completing high school was destroyed by the poor financial state of my home; which forced me to quit school to get a job. I worked for several years in menial jobs with a glimmer of hope that someday I would return to school. That someday is here now and I am completely awed and childishly excited by it."

Another theme, or perhaps a variation on that expressed above, is put forth by Maria who seems to feel that she would certainly have managed to get herself an education before now had she not been lazy, or foolish, or otherwise "bad:"

"Here I was starting college at thirty-four when I never completed high school. I left school using my mother as an excuse. Since she was a widow, I convinced her and myself that I could take some of the burden off her by going to work. Working in an office was a big deal to me. Eventually I was going to get married and raise a family, right? So, why did I need a diploma when I could go to work and earn a salary?"

One hopes that in college thirty-four year old Maria will develop compassion toward sixteen year old Maria and a feminist class analysis of the young girl's actions.

Repeatedly the women mention their age in reference to feelings about college. In short, "it" was a "dream" to them; and, now that the dream can come true, they are plagued by their age which they regard as a handicap. The length of time since they were at school is another. Again, most of us who have had the job of working with "older students" and have been "older students" know how enriching
it is to teach and learn when one is building on significant life experiences. Nevertheless the women constantly called attention to how long it had been. Diana said, "Only on faculty night, after meeting the teachers, did the realization finally set in. Here I was starting college at thirty-four." Marie expressed the anxiety in another way, wondering how the teachers would feel.

September finally arrived and I was enrolled in classes with sixty women. Most of them were friends from NCNW and soon we were one big happy but nervous class ready to face school after so many years. I think our teachers were also anxious about how it would be -- teaching a class that hadn't been to school for so long.

From these comments we can conclude that the women wanted their own school in their own community so that they could remain in familiar surroundings in more than the obvious way. They felt secure about learning together with women who, like themselves, were mature and had not had a great deal of formal education. While current trends in higher education suggest an emerging pattern that differs from the common one of going from elementary to high school to college consecutively, the fact is that the women quoted above believe themselves to be unusually old and uneducated for education, a "Catch 22" situation. While they are part of an emerging trend, the "fact" of the college student as a late teenager or very young adult often makes the older student feel uncomfortable.

This picture in their heads of the perfect college student was not only a vision of someone much younger (not them), someone who went from high school to college (also not them) but he/she was, moreover, someone without family responsibilities (not them) and very well educated so far (not them) and extremely gifted academic-
ally (not them). These comments indicate how harshly they judged themselves:

As I write each sentence I question myself at least three different times. Am I making a grammatical error? Should there be a comma or a semi-colon? During the course my dictionary becomes my bible, even as I write this I am wondering, should I have written Bible with a capital B. I may never turn out to be a writer, but I'll bet my son's notes to my teachers will be well written.

"I had a very low opinion of myself. I thought I was very stupid."

Mingled with such comments about what they perceived as deficiencies are fears about the judgments of others -- teachers and classmates. Like all students they talk about being "smart enough." Enough for what? Presumably, smart enough to read hard books, perform well on tests on the hard books, and write papers on the subject matter in the hard books.

From the description of how the women felt about their capabilities as learners, it becomes apparent that the women were partly motivated to create their own college by their need for emotional support. Each woman was beginning a most frightening undertaking -- one had best do that with others like herself, if only for the comfort of knowing that fears of failure and disgrace are not one's own private demons.

I think, however, that there is one reason why the women wanted their own college which is perhaps larger than and subsumes all the others. It has been repeatedly pointed out, that working class people in America tend to be politically conservative because their economic status is marginal, their job security tentative. They are, according to this view, afraid of change because they regard
holding on to what they have, even at the risk of missing out on something better, as being of supreme importance.

Once it is recognized that change is inevitable, and I believe that the women of NCNW are sophisticated in their awareness of such inevitability, the important issue becomes who is to control the rate and nature of change. Like people of all classes, the women perceive education as a vehicle for their own adaptation to changing life scripts. Their experience with larger societal institutions, including education, which have as their aim the facilitation of change, was negative enough so that the women wanted to maintain a firm grip on their own education.

The very existence of such an organization as NCNW proves that the community women are searching their way through new problems and opportunities that confront them as women. While the women's movement has surely raised the consciousness of American society dramatically, that movement itself has not yet "reached" the working class woman for whom "it" is yet another force that endangers her relationship with her home and family. Nancy Seifer eloquently presents the dilemma confronting working class women:

...there are broad sweeping changes taking place in American society which will affect the lives of all women to varying degrees: women are having fewer children and will be homebound for fewer years; more educational and employment possibilities are available; labor saving devices have substantially decreased the number of hours spent on household tasks...10

She points out, moreover, that the utilization of women's skills and talents in areas outside of homemaking and mothering is becoming increasingly necessary for the well-being of society and, finally, that
Those women without the education, occupational skills, experiences and resources to cope with a complex and rapidly changing society will be at the greatest disadvantage. There is a direct correlation between the level of education among women and their receptivity to change in their roles. The more well informed a woman becomes, the greater the likelihood that she will choose a self-fulfilling role which may include a job or career, or simply a more satisfying way of adapting to new lifestyles. (Seifer, p. 63)

Fear and anxiety accompany any kind of meaningful change. Certainly, working class women are highly susceptible to the paralysis of such anxiety. They must cope with economic insecurity, unsatisfying jobs, poor working conditions, inadequate social and municipal services, deteriorating neighborhoods, and alienation from the mainstream. Moreover, they are handicapped by limited education and experience outside the home neighborhood and perhaps the work place also a "clash between traditional role expectations for women and conflicting pressures to play a role more equal to men." (Seifer, p. 63)

Education in America has always been regarded as an instrument through which masses of people can improve their lives. The idea that education will increase one's chances for acquiring a certain status, whether academic, social, or economic, is basic to the American dream. While obviously the loaded words here are "chances," and "status," we can easily see that in choosing college, the women were following a widely accepted route to "success." But they felt that existing institutions were incapable of meeting their particular needs. Although their parents, and mine, for that matter, accepted the concept of education as a way to move up the social ladder, the events of the nineteen sixties altered and reshaped some of the traditional ideas about the educational process. The
collective soul-searching that went on while the so-called "counter-culture" was "greening America" had produced changes in working class attitudes toward education that became apparent in the nineteen seventies.

Current attitudes reflect an ambivalence about the ways in which education ought to relate to existing economic conditions, since a college degree no longer guarantees a better job. Generations of newly arrived Americans rose by dint of hard work and education. For many, however, the price paid for such success was high, even, perhaps, exorbitant: the loss of their ethnic traditions, cultures, and values -- especially those associated with the family and the church. Now, in 1977, with the economic rewards questionable, the cost of that success may no longer be worth its achievement. As Elazar and Friedman have succinctly put it:

Many white ethnics who were firmly anchored in working class lifestyles worked to enable their children to advance socially and economically...In beginning their climb and enjoying its first fruits, many ethnics still confronted vast patterns of exclusion from the American mainstream. They found that their intellectual and cultural traditions continued to be despised by most of the American intelligensia.\[11\]

For the NCNW women, trapped in the contradictions inevitably arising out of both the traditional assurance of economic rewards and the present disillusionment with the value of certain kinds of social mobility so poignantly elaborated by Sennett and Cobb in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, the way out of the bind was to make their own school. It was to be a school where they could get their much needed credentials by building on their strengths for learning. They wanted to become educated without becoming homogenized.
That these women mistrust the public school system is further evidenced by the fact that most of them, with considerable personal sacrifice, educate their children in parochial schools. An analogy between education and urban renewal might be valuable here. Urban renewal has usually meant the destruction of neighborhoods in such a way that whole areas are levelled; the good and the bad simply vanish. Urban renewal (perhaps better called urban removal) in the sixties did much to destroy urban life while it claimed to improve its quality. Although entire neighborhoods thus succumbed to the bulldozer, the Williamsburg-Greenpoint-Northside communities remained intact. What is more, the efforts of the women to resist destructive change have been successful -- for the moment. Though it finally required the blocking of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway with their bodies, the women fought City Hall, managing to preserve their homes at the expense of the S & S Corrugated Cardboard Company's planned expansion. After this triumph, the women were clearly ready to create and to shape their own institution for learning. The analogy, then, is like the careful renovation of a lovely old dwelling versus the complete gutting of a usable dwelling in the name of modernization. The women wanted to learn because to do so was a positive act.

Positive growth and development through learning were, finally, what drew most of us, the "professional" feminist women to the college project. We are women whose roots are in the working class, but who had, nevertheless, experienced considerable ambivalence about our own ethnic and class ties as we advanced in our professions. To work in the NCNW program was a chance to recreate part of ourselves, to see if this time we could do it right.
FOOTNOTES

1. In the text this area is referred to as simply "Williamsburg," the term community residents use.


5. In a recent article mourning the so-called demise of the women's movement, the NCNW was highlighted as an organization that remains viable because it deals realistically with issues that touch the lives of the majority of women. (Veronica Gang, "Requiem For the Woman's Movement." Harper's, Nov., 1976).


10. Seifer, p. 63.

The Teacher

What drew me to the program and so engaged both my feelings and my intellect was the recognition of how much I shared with the women I would be working with. As female children of the working class, as wives, mothers, and workers, we shared similar personal histories and similar aspirations for ourselves and our families. Though I had become a professional -- a college teacher, no less -- my upbringing and the problems I was forced to confront as I grew made me especially aware of the needs of the women who participated in the NCNW college project. My world had been not unlike theirs.

I was born on October 3, 1937, in Auburn, New York. Like many of the women I would be teaching, I, too, was a child of immigrants. My parents were from Aquila, a village in the Abruzzi region of Italy. They came to America in 1921. By the time I came along, my mother had borne ten children. Six had died of the various illnesses that poor babies died of then. My mother was forty-one and worn out. My father had come to America with two of his brothers. He was the only one who had any children. They were counting on me to carry on the family name in America.

Being the child of Italian immigrants, it naturally followed that I was Catholic. My religion exerted a profound influence on my life, not only because it provided me with education, but it also gave me a moral and ethical system that was to weigh heavily and linger long. I went to the local parish grade school in Auburn,
New York. Even as a child I had trouble fitting in. While I was an excellent student, I was often in conflict with the school's rigidities. For, young as I was, the seemingly arbitrary system of reward and punishment upon which the school's discipline was based curbed my natural inclination toward personal freedom. I see now that the conflict was indeed real, for somehow, the teachers, all nuns, managed to intertwine study and school behavior intricately with eternal damnation or salvation. When you are a child with a vivid imagination, eternal damnation is a big price for being yourself. You fall into line. I learned a lot about humility at Saint Aloysious. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that sin cast a shadow over my school life, I did learn to love books. I also learned, through the lucky accident of encountering the only Italian-American teacher I was ever to "have," that I was, as they said, very bright and should go to college.

I stayed in that school until the eighth grade. By then I perceived the world of my neighborhood and parochial school as too parochial for me. I refused to attend the local Catholic school. Instead I went to West High School which, after what I'd been through, seemed like Summerhill. Of course, it was an ordinary small town vocational high school for kids from the less desirable part of town. But no one nagged me about my soul.

Two problems emerged during those years. The first had to do with my educational aspirations and career ambitions. In my culture and class, girls with such aspirations had problems. Even the teachers responded to my intellectual enthusiasm with reservation.
They encouraged the boys to be scientists and the girls to be secretarial scientists (that is the designation applied to the field in the school where I now teach). If the girls were bright they were urged into junior colleges where they could broaden and deepen their knowledge of secretarial science. I was repelled by the idea. Because I love studying literature and history, I decided I would become a teacher and a writer. But this decision was not reached without conflict. I was, after all, a girl of the fifties in a vocational high school. My sisters had not gone to college; they had gone to work and had gotten married. As I recall now the educational pressures of then, I can identify most strongly with the aspirations of the students in the NCNW program: what they went through to return to school and how hard they work to remain.

The conflict regarding what I wanted and what I should have wanted was not simple. Only now do I see the irony in how my teachers counseled me. My English teacher, an adventurous woman, urged me to follow my instincts. Mr. Williams, whose job it was to do whatever career and college counseling got done, had his own special agenda for me. Mr. Williams thought I was a fine student. He thought I should try for a scholarship to one of the more prestigious junior colleges and become an executive secretary. I had, besides brains, a winning personality and a pleasant appearance. His daughter, who presumably did not, went to Radcliffe. I didn't even know what that was.

My mother was also ambivalent about my aspirations. Quite unconsciously, she had been a strong role model for me. She had
survived and endured in America through the grim years of personal tragedy which, ironically, coincided with the Depression, without much help from my father who was clearly too sensitive and, therefore, too alienated from work in this country to be much of a provider. My mother became a businesswoman. She opened a grocery store and, like countless other immigrant women, ran it with one eye on the store and another on the kids. She was a testament to the virtues of self-reliance and hard work. But when my own desire to make myself into a self-sufficient woman emerged, she was clearly not totally sold on the idea.

One day I heard her, in effect, apologizing for my plans to the bread man. She really didn't think girls should go to college, she said. She thought they should settle down and get married. On the other hand, being a shrewd woman, she admitted that there might be two distinct advantages to my going to college: first, higher education would help me to marry a more economically viable man, and second, it would teach me to be a better wife and mother. That, anyway, is what she said. But about many things my mother had her own opinions. I am sure she believed, though she might not have been able to admit it even to herself or her friends, that women should be able to live independently. She had taught me that when I was very young. Besides, I was offered scholarships to college and my mother never could pass up anything for free.

The second problem of my late adolescence was my crisis of faith. I was then extremely religious in a dogmatic sense. My intellectual and social awareness during this period caused me to
to question those beliefs. I felt I was in danger of losing my faith. Since this was the time that the Catholic hierarchy railed from the pulpit against the dangers of atheism and communism on the secular campuses, I chose a Catholic women's college, Nazareth College in Rochester, New York, as a place where I thought I could study and learn without danger.

My years at Nazareth were, once again, filled with the conflicts I had experienced as a child in Catholic elementary school. I felt I was being smothered, but I endured it, partly for economic reasons and partly because I believed I was finding a way to live a full life without endangering my soul. Despite the stifling atmosphere, I did acquire the liberal education the college catalogue had promised.

I now perceive that phase of my life as one in which my natural hunger for learning was constantly clashing with what the school wanted me to know. Although attending Nazareth had protected my soul, there were many intellectual experiences of which I was to be deprived. I never read James Joyce, Henry James, or Virginia Woolfe, let alone Freud or Marx. Equally important was the absence from the curriculum of anything related to my ethnic heritage except for those dreary passages in history textbooks about those hard workers who built the roads and railroads and mined the mines. Judging from my own experience at a Catholic college, which one would expect to be more sensitive to ethnicity, the women at NCNW had a right to be suspicious about education.

As a graduate with a degree, the first thing I wanted to do
was get out of the narrow ideological tunnel which my home town represented to me. So I moved to New York where my first job was as a high school English teacher in East Meadow, Long Island. I enjoyed teaching but saw my work in traditional, conventional terms. I taught what and how I was taught. Because the students were essentially middle class, I felt out of place. I found myself teaching them competently but not passionately. I had not yet found, in teaching, an expression for my own individuality, nor, I suppose, did I yet know very much about it. And it was not until much later that I became interested in all the philosophical and social implications of teaching language and literature.

Next, I married. For although I was a rebel, I nevertheless found it necessary to follow the pattern of a woman's experience established by the culture, much the same way my students at the NCNW college had done. I overcame my conflicts about giving up my identity by holding on to it as best I could. During the first few years of my marriage, I taught in an urban high school in Pittsburgh. My eyes began to open to the great variety of problems inherent in the concept of mass education. I had my first baby immediately after our first anniversary. We move back to New York City. I also had two more children and finished my M.A. As the mother of three young children, I had little time and energy left after the huge chunks that were required in caring for and mothering the babies. Like the women I was later to meet at NCNW, I felt keenly the conflict between my needs and the needs of my family.
During this period I became involved in the problems of education on a personal level because of the difficulties faced by my three year old daughter at a local nursery school. With a group of like-minded women who were also seeking a sensible, humane pre-school situation, I started the Park Slope Community School. Through this extremely demanding process I learned about education and urban bureaucracies. I was drawn into community work, not out of ideology or principle, but out of familial concerns, once again echoing in my own life the experiences of the NCNW women.

Eight years ago, I began to teach at New York City Community College. My experiences with the students at the college placed my own background in a wider context. I had thought previously that my own experience was somehow unique and particular to Laura Polla Scanlon. However, in getting to know my students at this inner city unit of CUNY, I learned that my world had been shared by others, who were also children of immigrants or of people who were not quite assimilated. Our parents work in factories, diners, stores or they are unemployed. We find that the goodies of American life do not come to us easily or without personal conflict.

It was at this point that I began to search for an educational methodology that would liberate the students as well as the teacher. It was this search that brought me to UGS. And the search continues as I work with the adult women at NCNW. Like my students at the college, they too are trying to gain a measure of control over their learning and their lives.

What is interesting to observe, however, is that the students
at the NCNW college, lived with seeming contentment in much the same psychological and social environment that I had tried so hard and so long to come to terms with. But my work at NCNW revealed that in many cases the contentment was more apparent than real. They were struggling much as I had.

The Students

As I got to know many of the women, however, I discovered that beneath the skin, our kindred changes made us sisters. Let me introduce you to three of the women.¹

Stephanie is about twenty-four. Of Polish descent, she was raised a Catholic but no longer practices her religion. She married at eighteen and has three young children. She dropped out of high school to go to work as a file clerk in a local factory office. A person of great strength, she came through a horrendous childhood with grace, wit and a deep warmth, hidden beneath a mask of shyness. Before her involvement with NCNW, Stephanie had been trying very hard to mold herself into the rigid but socially accepted stereotype of obedient wife and good mother. While struggling to conform to this stereotype, Stephanie has separated from her husband several times. Underneath the self-effacing stereotype is a woman who writes poetry, reads novels and philosophy and is defensive about these accomplishments. She is, in fact, a rebel whose community concerns drew her into the program. In curriculum matters, Stephanie, who was always articulate, spoke for the integrity of the program's intellectual and cultural components. During the course of her participation in the NCNW college, Diane gradually became more willing to acknowledge and value both her non-conformity and her competence.

Loretta, about thirty-nine, comes from an Italian-American family. She is still a practicing Catholic. With her husband and four children she lives in the same house in which she grew up. Her mother lives upstairs. All her numerous relatives watch her closely and are extremely judgmental about her "selfish" behavior, defined by her return to school and her active community life. Loretta
has been prominent in local school politics as in the problems of day care and senior citizens' services. She identifies strongly with her Italian heritage and is always fighting with the men for leadership in the local Italian-American Civil Rights League. Loretta is vigorously intelligent and outspoken, an Italian version of Bella Abzug, with the same commanding presence. Loretta is typical of a large group of NCNW women who are in the college program to acquire the skills and credentials that will enable them to move upward in the local power structure. And unlike Stephanie, Loretta has no doubts about the rightness of her position as leader in the program.

Dolores is about thirty-five. She has three young children. She differs from Stephanie or Loretta, both grand-children of immigrants, in that she herself is an immigrant from Puerto Rico. She too is a devout Catholic. When she entered the program, Dolores was agonizing over the very great problems in her disintegrating marriage. Vulnerable and afraid, she appeared to be always on the verge of tears. However, when Dolores forgot about her personal difficulties, she became outgoing, exuding an understanding that drew people to her. The others trust her humaneness. In the classroom, the fact that she has undergone so much personal hardship gave her a wisdom and authority that was respected by all of us. Her experiences have taught her to see many sides of a given issue. Dolores came to NCNW as a woman in need of support because she was attempting to cope with a bad marriage, very young children, poverty, and loneliness. And the program gave her the sense that she did not have to solve all of her problems by herself.

Though these three women are different, they share attitudes that stem from their common experiences. All three are without pretension -- they are who they seem to be. They also share a conflict between the role expectations imposed by the culture and their desires to grow into autonomous individuals -- for example, their guilt over leaving their children while they work and study. Finally, they share a sense of being outsiders; others, in a patriarchal society. For me, they mirror fragments of my own personality.
The Question of Otherness

Woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject. He is the Absolute. She is the Other.

Simone De Beauvoir

The Second Sex

Otherness as a definition of a woman's experience is expressed in two ways: first, it is inherent in her enforced position outside of the institutions and activities that society most values and where power actually resides; and second, what she does must necessarily be justified in terms of the needs of those entrusted in her care, rather than the claims of an autonomous self. As one of my students, Rosanne, said:

"I constantly feel guilty regardless. I keep saying to myself that it's not just being with the children that matters but how you spend the time when you're with them. Even though I know that I'm going to school and working to better the household, my mind's never at peace, except sometimes when my mother takes care of them. (Italics mine)

Otherness: Time and Space

The mature woman who wishes to change herself through learning is never free of her primary responsibilities to home and family. This responsibility is so encompassing as to be part of her very identity. Anything she does beyond this sphere jeopardizes her very way of being in the world. Therefore, to decide to return to school places her in a classic double bind. Although she is "doing it for her family," it is expected that her educational experience will in no way alter the roles within that family. And any of the
restrictions on time and space as well as the ambiguities in motivation that are true for women in general are more intensely true for the working class woman. She simply cannot afford, either financially or emotionally, the luxury of giving over familial duties to another.

When the working class woman, in particular, returns to school, her very reasons for doing so are couched in terms of otherness. Since her identity rests in the reflection or in the service of someone else, she can only make her own desire for growth acceptable, both to herself and to her culture, if it fits into those feminine roles for which she was trained.

Seeing herself primarily as wife and mother, the typical NCNW college student rarely expresses her personal ambitions in "selfish" terms; that is, her stated reasons for going to college do not include such frivolities as the sheer pleasure of learning. This is not to say that such feelings are absent: the excitement of a sense of developing selfhood is apparent in the students' behavior in classes, in their writings, and in casual conversations about books and ideas. Indeed, probably far more than most college students, our women are having a good time. But if you asked them why they were going to college they would tell you about all the benefits to be gained for their children, their husbands, their community:

"I am going to college so that I will be able to talk to my husband. He's so much smarter than I am and I never have anything interesting to say to him."  
Betty

"I am going to college so I'll be able to understand my teenage kids better."  
Sheila
I want to get a good job so my husband and kids can respect me.

Joyce

These women would not focus on personal joy.

The women at NCNW did not make up out of whole cloth this notion that education, for them, means primarily education for the benefit of their significant others, and only secondarily for their own well being. Except in special cases (prodigies, geniuses, and the like) the form and content of the feminine learning experience have, historically, been structured to reinforce otherness.² And class does not seem to matter in this case; for even upper class girls in America used to, and perhaps still do, go to "finishing schools," while their fortunate brothers went to "prep schools." It is hard to deny that being "prepped" sounds as if one is being prepared for bigger and better things, while being "finished" sounds as if all choice is being shut off.

The more one explores the function of schooling in our culture, the more one sees it as a methodology whose aim is to separate the superior wheat from the not so worthwhile chaff. And, as in Dr. Seuss's parable about the Sneetches,³ who fits into which category appears to be arbitrary.

However, one technique for maintaining exclusivity is time and space. Higher education discriminates against the returning wife and mother by operating under assumptions about time and energy which are, in fact, inimicable to the particular life style of working class family women. As I have already noted, these women do not have the luxury (either economic or psychological) of household
help nor do they any longer, for the most part, have that mixed blessing, the extended family, which once sustained the mother of small children. In fact, where the extended family continues, it often functions to exacerbate the guilt already present, as this comment by a student's mother-in-law indicates: "What if that kid gets run over by a car when you're out? Do you want that on your conscience all your life?"

Compounding the guilt is the conflict arising between maternal accomplishments and self fulfillment. In the past there was little conflict since these two goals were, more often than not, congruent. Today, however, the increased awareness of alternative roles for women, together with the changing nature of the family unit and the recognition of the importance of proper parenting, means that mothers are now expected to do more with less.

Moreover, the burden of success and failure for the marriage, the children, and the family rests squarely on the woman. In the words of one NCNW woman: "If the kids are on the street using drugs, or the daughter gets pregnant, or if her husband fools around, the woman is the one who gets blamed if something goes wrong with the family." Although her motivation for going to school is to better fulfill her role as wife and mother, she is still often perceived by family and friends as taking something away -- her undivided attention. And indeed, she is.

The person who is learning particularly needs mental space wherein new ideas and feelings can be measured against old perceptions of the self and the world. This kind of reflection requires
detachment and withdrawal from the mental clutter of daily routine and responsibility. And it is precisely this space that working class women, with the multiple demands made on their time and energy, are most in need of. Joy in learning is difficult to experience by someone who is fretting over where the kids are or if there is enough food in the house. To be the most important source of domestic coherence in a household is enervating.

The important thing about the NCNW college program was that it was to be different: able to utilize the available time and space and flexible enough to deal with the inevitable conflicts that women so committed to their roles as wives and mothers would experience in taking on a new way of being. We hoped to capitalize on the energy generated by these conflicts and, for a while, thought that careful planning would help alleviate our students' burdens and free them to learn. I think that we had not reckoned with shame and guilt.

Otherness: Shame and Guilt

Shame and guilt are paralyzing emotions. Of the two, guilt appears to be the more up to date, having been secularized by the media and popular psychology. However, shame is not even listed in those emotional guidebooks for mass audiences that have recently proliferated. Perhaps we have nothing to be ashamed of anymore, since late twentieth century society no longer has rigid rules of social behavior. Shame is, in a way, a quaint old fashioned concept, rather like chivalry, that depends for its reality on the existence of a stable social order, formally hierarchical and more or less lasting. The NCNW student lives in what she would like to believe is such a
world. Therefore, shame, as well as guilt, is an important component of her identity.

The experience of being ashamed is real only to the degree that there is a coherent, somewhat fixed world view and a definite picture of a self about which one can be ashamed. Helen Merril Lynd, in her book, *On Shame and the Search for Identity*, distinguishes between shame and guilt. Guilt, according to Lynd, who draws widely from literary and anthropological sources in her analysis, stems primarily from the transgression of some rule or law. One feels guilty, quite literally, for doing something wrong, bad or naughty, however it is characterized. Shame, on the other hand, results from one's failure to live up to one's image of oneself. To experience guilt is painful and unpleasant but to experience shame is to have one's very identity in question and profoundly shaken.

Related to guilt and shame is the desire to conform, not to stick out from the group. To be different is to set one's own rules of acceptable behavior while denying one's own roots. How, then, do guilt, shame, and the fear of non-conformity operate to hamper the learning of the NCNW students?

As our students have repeatedly articulated, their families come before their studies. However it is expressed, the women of NCNW, not unlike their middle class sisters, define themselves primarily in terms of their families. Thus, every time an NCNW student is told that she must neglect her familial duties for her school work, she experiences this demand, as she perceives it, as an assault on her sense of self. As one student described the problem:
You better be home because, god forbid, one of the kids might get sick and you know darn well that the babysitter can't do for him what you can. You're not home enough. Whose raising those kids? They're raising themselves. Sure you like what you're doing but when those kids wind up getting sick, you're going to cry.

Since her picture of herself is as a wife and mother, to fall short of perfection is to be different, to be a self that one might well be ashamed of. Frequently, guilt and shame are manipulated by women against other women as a way of managing envy, fear and feelings of inferiority. Sharon observed:

We women oppress each other. Maybe there's a woman in the neighborhood who would like to be out doing things but she's not because of her kids. Her best thing is to get at me by making me feel ashamed because I'm not a good mother. When I first started working at NCNW I used to go home for lunch. One day this neighbor told me she saw my baby (she's 18 months old, my mother was taking care of her) looking out the window like she wanted to be outside. Now I know she's not being neglected or anything but that remark cut through me like a knife.

By constructing an inter-disciplinary program organized around activities in the community, the NCNW college did, in fact, minimize the tension caused by potential role conflicts. Where families were supportive, guilt and shame were even further diminished. However, to eliminate struggle entirely might be impossible within existing social structures.

During the course of the program, the distinctions between this teacher, Laura Scanlon, and her students, disappeared as we came to recognize the shared elements in our lives. We discovered that we were all in the process of coming to terms with who we had been, who we now were, and who we might be.
FOOTNOTES

1 For a statistical study of the NCNW college population see Dr. Harold Beder "The NCNW Women's College Program: A Descriptive Analysis." Rutgers University, August, 1976.


3 "The Sneetches" is a children's story about a group of fantastic creatures whose status symbol is a star in the belly. There is no logic in who gets a star or how it comes to be there.
THE CURRICULUM

History

Curriculum, finally, is the center of any educational program. However successful an institution, or an anti-institution, might be in removing emotional and physical barriers to learning, the success of such a venture depends on the strength of the curriculum, by which I mean the content, the process, and the aim of education. That is, what exactly are we, students and teachers, to do together? How are we to construct a curriculum that enhances both personal growth and social awareness? What are we to learn from our past that will enable us to enjoy the present and enrich the future? What experiences, hopes, dreams, aspirations, and needs do we share? Finally, what are the realities of structures within which we do these things? How did they get that way and how can we make them better?

Discussing the importance of curriculum, Charles Silverman wrote in *Crisis In the Classroom*:

> The content of curriculum cannot be left to chance; education is a process that cannot be separated from what it is that one learns. The transcendent objective, to be sure, is not mastery of a body of knowledge per se, it is, in Jerome Bruner's formulation, "to create a better or more happy or more courageous or more sensitive person...". Society's ultimate justification for creating a separate, formal educational institution is the conviction (the faith, if you will) that, as Bruner also puts it, "The conduct of life is not independent of what it is that one knows nor of how it is that one has learned what one knows."

What follows is an impressionistic account of the NCNW college's attempts to teach and learn in such a way as to diminish our sense of otherness, that feeling of being "less than."
The NCNW college is clearly an experimental program. However, our group never achieved a curriculum which could be described and duplicated by other community groups, our journey through the quagmire of academic disciplines, departments, bureaucracies, and our own minds and hearts was more meaningful than any packageable commodity might have been.

Because curriculum is the externalization of what is essentially an interior dialogue about possibilities, it has been the issue that has aroused the most passion among faculty, staff, students, counselors -- in short, anyone who is at all involved in the college program. Although the actual courses our students have taken would look, if listed, like fairly standard fare at any reasonably modern inner city community college, the "other curriculum," that creation of their own particular learning community, was the content of their true education.

Because of the intensity and involvement shown by our students, who come from a social group traditionally perceived as apathetic by professional educators, as Charles Silverman observes, I am now surprised by students who do not care deeply about what, how, and why they learn. I overheard one student complain in exasperation:

Honest to God! I am sick and tired of hearing about the curriculum. There are some women in this college who don't ever want to talk about anything but curriculum.

We at NCNW did not find the magic formula and therefore have none to pass on. But in coming to grips with curricula, we learned a great deal about ourselves and about education.

Who "We" Are

Our "curriculum committee" actually consisted of all the stu-
dents (though, naturally, some were closer to the deliberations than others by their own choice and not because of any desire to be exclusive), and a stable committee of "professionals" who have college degrees. These are myself; Christine Noschese, director of NCNW; Jan Peterson, community organizer, UGS student, and founder of NCNW; Terri Heywood, Ph.D. candidate at the New School for Social Research. Our attitudes toward education have been shaped by our graduate experiences: Jan and I are students in a program which is student-centered; Christine at Goddard-Cambridge has also been engaged in independent, self-motivating learning; and Terri, disgruntled by the traditional structure at the New School, is interested in alternative education. Not only are we all emphatically committed to student-centered education oriented toward positive social and personal change, but we also come from working class families and are strongly feminist, believing in the importance of organizing working class women as feminists.

From the beginning of our curriculum our primary concern was for personal growth. To insure that development we established certain principles upon which everyone agreed. Foremost among these was the idea that the curriculum should be community oriented. We agreed, too, that the curriculum should be, as far as possible, interdisciplinary and sensitive to race, ethnicity, and class. And we also assumed, quite wrongly as it turned out, that anyone who taught and learned at the NCNW college would be sensitive about gender.

The tasks before the curriculum committee were to make concrete these concepts. However, our work was complicated by the institution-
al restrictions insisted upon by La Guardia Community College. Because La Guardia was to be the accrediting institution, we labored under the handicap of fitting whatever innovative ideas we might generate into already existing academic structures. During early negotiations with La Guardia, we believed this to be merely a formality. But, as it turned out, we were extremely naive about the institutional intransigence and dogmatism regarding those inviolate academic categories called "disciplines." Later in this study I will explore further the issue of the use and misuse of bureaucratic power. However, NCNW's relationship with La Guardia is important if the program's curricular history is to be understood. While it is true that La Guardia was happy about such an affiliation because of money, possible prestige, and jobs for their faculty during hard times, we also wanted what the institution could give -- credits and, eventually, the A.A. degree for our students. Early in the summer of 1975, we began to tackle these knotty problems, attempting to find out what we wanted to teach/learn and trying to fit these ideas into La Guardia's framework.

Our first step in what was to be, in fact, a saga, was to meet with people who had engaged in similar educational ventures: Stanley Aranowitz of Staten Island Community College Center For Community Education; Ron Schiffman who had run a neighborhood college program in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn out of the Pratt Center for Community Development; Barbara Wertheimer and Ann Nelson of Cornell University's Trade Union Women's School; Florence Howe and other women from Old Westbury, SUNY, and the Feminist Press. From
each of these individuals, as well as others, we received advice and encouragement. There were, however, no exact models for what we were trying to do. Consequently the task of creating curriculum was a much more complex one than we had originally anticipated. We had imagined that there existed, somewhere, a sensitive combination of courses, materials and people that could generate the exact "experience" our students should have.

We decided to begin the course sequence in September with two basic courses, Introduction to the Social Sciences and English Composition. With these two courses began the NCNW experiment, the first time working class women have created their own educational institution.

The Curriculum: What We Wanted

As I have indicated, we who worked on this curriculum were a diverse group, an unusual mixture of academicians and community activists. Together with the students of NCNW college, we comprised a group that cut across racial, class, and ethnic lines, so that the issues we had to grapple with were fundamentally related to the sub-groups of the larger society. Below is what amounts to a manifesto, which I prepared, in order to articulate our notions about curriculum.

THE NCNW CURRICULUM GUIDELINES

The following are the goals of the NCNW college program as put forth in the proposal prepared in conjunction with La Guardia Community College. The aims of the college program are to:

1. Upgrade the self-image of working class women by developing their potential talents and
changing their status both in the family and in the neighborhood.

2. Enable the women to act as agents of change in their own communities. In order to do this the college should:

   a. provide students with technical knowledge and an understanding of urban problems and solutions.
   b. strengthen their skills in leadership so that they can use those skills to develop and carry out political projects for the direct benefit of the Williamsburg, Northside, Greenpoint communities.

In order to best achieve these goals we feel that certain guidelines regarding curriculum should be followed. These are:

1. Course material should be community oriented
2. Studies should be interdisciplinary
3. Content should be selected with sensitivity towards sex, ethnicity, race and class.
4. Cooperation and collective effort should be stressed in the classroom.

The features enumerated above are the innovative aspect of the NCNW college curriculum. Working class women, as we pointed out in our original proposal, are suspicious and alienated from traditional college programs. They have characteristically experienced inferior schooling, low societal expectations, and burdensome family responsibilities which inhibit them from continuing their education. Those who do attend college find that it typically reflects a white, middle-class, male bias, demonstrating an insensitivity to the concerns and cultural heritage of working class women. Such students are caught in a double bind.
To "succeed" in college, they must dismiss their background as "unsophisticated." However, to function effectively in the family and neighborhood they need to maintain their ethnic and class ties.

In developing these guidelines we have been governed by a desire to alleviate the kind of alienation described above. We hope to do this through careful selection of materials and faculty so that the NCNW students will have an affirmative educational experience. Moreover, since so many of our students fulfill multiple roles, raising families, working full time, and attending college, we feel it is important that courses be interdisciplinary and complementary, for not only is such a pattern pedagogically sound, it should minimize the added pressure of class time and homework.

Community Orientation

Community orientation has several different meanings in regard to curriculum and teaching methodology. Broadly speaking, the program is indeed a community program, since it arose from the community itself and not from an external source that thought it would be a good idea. Furthermore, the program is physically located in the Williamsburg-Northside-Greenpoint area where the students live, and, for the most part, work. Classes are held in the Swinging Sixties Senior Citizens' Center, a neighborhood facility which, incidentally, many of the students were influential in getting
for the community. Most of the students are active in neighborhood affairs and are in the college program to learn how to work more effectively toward the revitalization of the area.

In reference to actual curriculum, "community oriented" means that students learn how "society" operates by exploring themselves in relation to their own families, each other, and the institutions and political structures of their own neighborhood. A fundamental part of any liberal education, traditional or innovative, is the analysis of oneself in relation to one's family and to the institutions which comprise the larger society. In most academic programs, the student makes a leap from self and family to the larger structures that make up "the society" without encountering and examining his/her own immediate environment. Thus she may emerge from a liberal education knowing about the system of checks and balances in the Federal Government but not who her local district leader is and what power he/she has over the community in which the student lives. We, on the other hand, believe that students must learn how power is allocated on the community level in order to become effective citizens, and that such an examination of community political structures and institutions is a significant part of, and could be the focal point of, a liberal education.

In the social sciences particularly, rich opportuni-
ties exist for the analysis of community. Since students in social science courses learn a specific method of inquiry, we require that teachers prepare materials and procedures utilizing that methodology so students could practice by analyzing those social structures which most immediately affect their lives. From this starting point, relying on his/her community experiences, the student should be able to make connections with the larger society. How this and other aspects of community orientation could apply in actual practice is spelled out at the end of this paper, with reference to English Composition and Introduction to the Social Sciences, the first two courses scheduled for the NCNW students.

A second aspect of community orientation in curriculum has to do with the actual usefulness of the results of most academic work. The women who started the college program conceived of it first of all as a way to gain the education and, therefore, the credentials they felt they needed to improve their lives economically as well as to enrich themselves culturally and intellectually. But, like many other working class people, academic work which has practical consequence is more valuable to our students than that which is completely abstract. The women want to learn theoretical material, but they want to apply what they learn to real situations and problems.

In summary then, "community oriented" means that the
student learns about herself in relation to her family and her immediate neighborhood as well as broader societal structures, that community issues and institutions are explored and analyzed from the multitude of academic perspectives or disciplines, and that whenever possible, course work should result in the realization of actual goals.

Interdiscipline:

In the context of a liberal arts education, the term "interdiscipline" refers essentially to a philosophy of curriculum in which the organization of knowledge is based on relationships established between and among the academic disciplines. Such a philosophy rests on the assumption that learning does not occur simply when information has been organized into discrete categories. Indeed, rigid disciplinary divisions often do not make sense if the aim of the education is to produce a human being who can think about information and make new connections. For the purpose of a general education, knowledge ought to be perceived as unitary. In the NCNW program we envision a curriculum in which courses would be interrelated. A total interdisciplinary approach, using, perhaps, the technique described by Paolo Friere in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, whereby knowledge from the various social sciences and the humanities is brought to bear upon a given social issue or concern, might be desirable for a program with goals like ours. However, since we are attempting an innovative educational
program within the context of an existing academic institution where credits are allocated through traditional disciplinary departments, we hope we can achieve a great deal of interrelatedness.

As indicated, the community orientation of our program provides a unifying factor that renders the program, in effect, interdisciplinary. We feel it is important to maintain and extend this unity because we do not wish learning to become a fragmenting experience for our students. We see the NCNW college program as a way of integrating knowledge and experience for our students, one in which their realities will be utilized as well as enhanced. Most liberal arts students undergo a piecemeal kind of education. The continuing process of making connections between seemingly different kinds of information and methods of inquiry does not occur naturally. The ability to make those connections and to synthesize information and experience must be consciously nurtured. We feel that theory and practice can best be melded in interdisciplinary courses.

Correlation of courses is, pedagogically sound, but there is also a practical benefit to this approach. Most of our students are mature women who fulfill multiple roles as mothers, wives, workers, and students. It is important that the NCNW program be one in which their existences with families and within their community are enriched. College must not be a burdensome experience which divides students
from other aspects of their lives.

Because the students are expected to remain together for the period of time that they are studying for their A.A. degrees, this proximity will create a certain amount of spontaneous integration of material. In other words, the students will, in each of their courses be building on commonly shared academic experiences. In a way, such academic sharing coupled with their shared community life and with their active participation in the National Congress of Neighborhood Women constitute a series of learning activities in which there is automatically a high degree of continuity. The only ones, in fact, who might stand outside this pattern of continuity are the teachers, who will be the specialists in specific academic disciplines. The faculty will be the only ones who come and go because of the nature of their institutional affiliation.

Such integration as exists because of the NCNW college program itself should be deliberately strengthened by careful planning of the courses through pairing skills and content courses. Among the required courses are those which can be called "skills" courses, in which the priority is the acquisition of certain skills through practice -- writing, speaking, mathematics, and those which can be called "content" courses, in which the primary objective is the mastery of a body of information or a specific me-
method of inquiry -- social sciences and humanities courses. With careful pairing of these two types of courses, an integrated academic program can be achieved. How this might be done with the first two courses is spelled out in a memorandum at the end of this paper.

Correlation might be strengthened, in addition, by pairing courses in such a way that the same theme, problem, or issue is approached through the perspective of various disciplines. For this approach as, indeed, for any other pedagogical approach, we urge that prospective faculty not make specific plans regarding textbooks and other materials until they have met with each other and with their students. It is important at all times that the expressed wishes of the students regarding what they deem of academic and intellectual importance, finally, what they want to learn, be seriously and respectfully considered. We believe that the faculty should be willing to serve as resource persons who translate the wishes of the students into curriculum.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning, in the context of the NCNW college program means that learning/teaching activities are structured so that cooperation among students is not only encouraged but is strengthened. This can be achieved through group research projects, group community action projects, group study projects. Students should not be made to feel that they are in competition with one another.
The women at NCNW are committed to working to improve their communities. As a group, they are diverse in terms of ethnicity, age, religion, race. We feel strongly that the manner in which they learn should be such that what they share in common is emphasized rather than those aspects of their experiences which divide them. Thus, through the use of group activities, individuals can acquire the mutual respect and responsibility necessary for effective group functioning. Moreover, we believe that judicious use of group work in learning will help students to acquire the group skills they will need to function well in the community. Finally, because the NCNW women are working to educate themselves under unusual handicaps, group learning will help students to support one another. Such cohesiveness will enable students to try out new ways of thinking and learning and even being in groups which they might not feel confident to do if learning occurs in the context of the usual student-teacher relationship.

While this was the philosophy of curriculum from which we began, the actual experience taught me much about my own assumptions as an educator. In the next section I will examine some of the lessons learned.

What I Learned

Lesson 1 - Traditional and Innovative Education: A Lesson in Communication Problems

In planning curriculum we deliberately sought the "non-traditional" learning experience, a concept that requires some definition.
For me there is no precise referent for the term "traditional" when applied to education because I believe education to be an inexact art as well as an inexact science. However, I do think that certain specific characteristics can be isolated.

A learning program can be called "traditional" when the following occurs: the transmission of information from a teacher to a student through lecture or lecture-discussion, and the use of textbooks as the primary mode of learning to supplement the teacher’s lectures or classroom discussions. Moreover, the designation "traditional" in higher education usually means that the subject matter is organized into distinct categories or disciplines and courses are taken within those disciplines. The material to be learned is selected by the teacher, and often this selection is determined by what the teacher was taught in those very same courses or disciplines. The students' "mastery of the material" is evaluated periodically through tests and written papers which are produced according to specifically proscribed restrictions regarding their form and content. The bright student is the one who most closely adheres to the rules. Tests are given and evaluated by grading and competition is keen for good grades. Indeed, competition, whether it be for marks or approval, is built into this educational model.

Students are grouped together in traditional classrooms for reasons of economy and discipline, not necessarily because of any philosophical commitment toward collective learning. Although students in such classrooms spend an enormous amount of time together, they are encouraged to carry on as if their co-students did not
exist. "They learn how to be lonely in a crowd," as Charles Silverman put it,² using David Rieseman's concept.

As I review the project's curricular history, I see that we had a much clearer notion of what we did not want than what we did. Furthermore, we felt that traditional education, with its emphasis on the theoretical, was not the way to educate for social change. Our commitment was to the concept of innovative education. As I have already indicated, we, the professionals, came to the project with a strong predisposition toward alternative learning models, born of our own disillusionment with what the traditional had failed to accomplish. I mention this to make clear that our concerns about new educational options were not only responses to the problems of open admissions or the needs of the specific NCNW student population; we desired to innovate because of our belief that traditional education, with its emphasis on competition, individualism and teacher-centered rather than student-centered learning was limited as a way of enhancing human growth.

We were particularly eager to avoid the hierarchical student-teacher relationship because it encouraged, perhaps even demanded, passivity on the part of the students. In this type of learning situation, the teacher knows what the learner ought to know and it is his/her duty to see that the learner takes in that specified body of knowledge. Paolo Friere, who calls this the banking theory of education, asserts:

For the anti-dialogical banking educator, the question of content simply concerns the program about which he will discourse to his students and he answers his own question
by organizing his own program. For the dialogical, problem-posing teacher-student, the program content of education is neither a gift nor an imposition -- bits of information to be deposited in the students -- but rather the organized, systematized, and developed "re-presentation" to individuals of the things about which they want to know more. (Freire p. 82)

Traditional education then, is based upon assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the nature of the student-teacher relationship and, ultimately, upon an acceptance of society as it is rather than how it might be. Margaret Mead, in an essay on obsolescence in the educational system, drew a distinction between the vertical transmission of the tried and true from a mature to an immature student and the lateral transmission of what has just been discovered or invented or created to every sentient member of society. "Schools by their very nature," she indicated, "emphasize the vertical transmission of knowledge; and hence, in a world of rapid change, they are forever doomed to obsolescence."³

While Paolo Freire is concerned with education for revolution, and Margaret Mead with education for sane survival in a rapidly changing society, we at NCNW are concerned with education for personal and social development and growth. We want to provide people with the tools for examining their own real condition in the society and what they can do to improve that condition. Educational "business as usual" does not work when one looks beyond a fixed social order and wishes to learn not only what is, but what can be.

We at NCNW wanted a curriculum which built on existing student strengths. In addition we wanted the students to shape their own learning experience. It seemed to us that in forcing the students
to confront themselves as the primary source of what was to be known, we were giving them a chance to practice self-determination. This practice at molding the form and content of their learning we hoped would carry over into their personal lives and their community work. It is this kind of education, relying as it does on the student as the center of creative energy, that is perhaps the most truly innovative, because it allows the student to become a grownup by learning to count on herself.

Lesson 2 - Beginning Where People Are

No student comes into any school or educational situation uninformed or without experience. The most important thing for those working in the area of curriculum is to utilize what the student knows, to begin where the person is.

The log entries that follow, concerning the students' responses to problems arising in their early course work, reveal the complexities of attempting to put into practice the idea that the students' world is a valid basis for learning.

Log - September 15, 1975

The Introduction to Social Science Course is being taught by Paul Carroll. Paul is a former priest who has a strong background in community work. He was one of the first people to help organize rent strikes in Brownsville during the mid-sixties. I find it strange to have run into him in this NCNW context because I remember him from those days when I too was involved in social action within the context of the Catholic Church. A lot has
happened to bring us both to this new work.

He appears to understand our perception of the program and seems to be committed to education. He likes the women and they respond positively to him. He especially likes the idea of teaching in the community. Our meetings with him convinced the curriculum committee, and later the students, that he would fit well into the NCNW and be a fine teacher. We are lucky because La Guardia has insisted that we use their faculty for the first two courses.

Log - October 29, 1975

The situation in the Social Science class is getting out of hand. First, the class is too large. It has about thirty-five people in it already. Another problem is that it meets in the Swinging Sixties Senior Citizens Center. Although it is apt, almost symbolic that it meets there, a facility which was established through the hard work and political skill of many of the NCNW students, it is, nevertheless, a difficult environment for teaching/learning.

However, the class is delightful and the students love it. People are working in small groups, doing research on community issues. From my conversation with the students and with Paul, this is what they are working on:

School Board Elections: This project's goal is primary informational. Students have interviewed
the local school board members and candidates. So far they have learned about budgeting and procedures for allocating funds to the schools in the district. They have reported on this to the rest of the class. The members of this group are now in the process of preparing themselves and the rest of the class to participate actively in up-coming school-board elections.

Grand Street Betterment: Grand Street is the largest commercial street in the Williamsburg-Greenpoint neighborhood. The students are concerned because the area is deteriorating. Shopkeepers are closing their stores and shopping facilities are becoming inadequate to the needs of the community. The women feel that, as one person put it, "You just can't have a decent city life if people can't even shop in the neighborhood. One reason people like city living is because it's convenient. You take away good shopping and the neighborhood will lose more people." The students are convinced and convincing. A deteriorating commercial street is a bad sign for the future. Students have surveyed residents and shopowners to learn why so many merchants are leaving the area. They are organizing and conducting meetings of shop owners and residents to spark interest in the problem so that steps toward improvement can be planned.

Day Care: Students in this group are organized around the problem of day care with specific reference to the impact of current cuts on working class women with young children who use day care so that they may work and/or attend college. This group undertook the task of lobbying against pending state legislation which would have rendered families in the $10,000 income range ineligible for day care services subsidized by the state. They have met with Lieutenant-Governor Mary Ann Krupskak to discuss the issue and they have a good chance of keeping their center, Small World, open and accessible to women of the neighborhood, even if their families have a combined income of over $10,000 per year.

This is a particularly significant learning experience for the women because they are being forced to confront the contradictions in existing social structures involved in the community groups. Also, it seems that the kind of projects that they are doing require that they develop the analytical skills and verbal abilities that we had imagined as being the academic part of the curri-
culum. From this point of view, things are going well; the desired integration between theory and application appears to be working. But there is another side and that's what is getting out of hand.

THE BOOK: John feels that in order for the women to get credit for taking Introduction to Social Science and because this is a prerequisite for other social science courses that they will surely want to take, the students should be introduced to the language and concepts of the discipline. In order to do this he had chosen to use a book called *An Inquiry Into the Human Prospect* by Robert L. Heilbroner as a vehicle, just as he does in his regular course at La Guardia. The students have been wary about textbooks and did not think that John would be using one. Everyone is getting an intensive education about education. Why does John want "the book?" Because, in addition to the reasons indicated, he is also accountable for what happens in this course to the head of the department of Social Science at La Guardia. The department must have evidence of academic learning; a specific book must be visible as the one from which everyone in the class is learning. Besides, the head of the department will be out to the Center (so dearly won by the women of the community through their admittedly ad-hoc, pragmatic understanding of the social sciences) to see that everyone is learning/teaching properly.
When it comes to the book, the women are incredibly angry, and frustrated, feeling incompetent about their abilities. While they seem clearly to grasp the concepts when they are expressed in language which they can understand, it is the confrontation with the text which baffles them. This situation is dangerous because the students regard the book-learning as the real college and the community task work as not directly a function of education. If they can't understand this book, then they really don't belong in college. Even while I'm writing this I am struck by the absurdity of the expression. Who in the world "belongs" in college and who in the world says so? This incident of the book is bringing out a lot of insecurity around the issue of belonging. From the beginning of the program, the students have questioned the appropriateness of college for them. All they need is this kind of negative reinforcement.

Paul gave a "make believe" test on what has come to be invidiously referred to as "the book." In order to pass, the students must understand the concepts as expressed by Heilbroner. The women were shattered by this experience. The grades ranged from 7 to 70. It was the kind of test that required short answers. I looked at it later, and would have "given credit" for many of the answers, but students were actually penalized for using their own words and ideas rather than those in the book.
Much dismay and anger followed. People have even talked of dropping out of the college program because of their feelings of failure. (I catch myself being critical of how the teacher is handling the situation, but I am uncomfortable about my own self-righteousness). In the English Composition class I am having a hard time translating the philosophy of the program, which I think I understand thoroughly, into the realities of the course and our semi-traditional context. At the moment, we are all floundering.

Paul, it turns out, has known all along about the problems everyone was having with the book. He thinks the students might have severe reading handicaps. I disagree. I myself have trouble with that book because the language is terribly abstruse. To deal with the problem, Paul asked that the students select a committee to talk about possible alternatives; maybe to talk about eliminating the book altogether.

A few days later, the result of the meeting between Paul and the class planning committee filtered through the NCNW grapevine. When the group met to discuss the pros and cons of dropping the book, it was clear that to a woman, the students on and off the committee hated the book. They were convinced that it was in their own best educational and personal interests to drop the book. Apparently at the meeting, another issue emerged: whether
or not abandoning the book meant settling for a second-class, second-rate college education. The meeting ended with an agreement to continue using the book because, as a member of the committee said, "The students certainly don't want a watered-down curriculum."

On Wednesday, when I arrived, everyone in my class was upset because on that day they were to be tested "for real" on the book. They wanted to use class time to study. I suggested that we work together to help each other overcome their problems with the material. We went through their class notes, and as I suspected, they knew far more than they thought they did. There were even a few in the group who were very much in command of Heilbroner's material. As they worked, those that knew helped the rest.

This process was frequently interrupted by a discussion of the politics of education. Some of the students even talked about boycotting the test, a position which emerged as they tried to clarify the possible meanings of the term "radical" for one another. The class ended with the social science test, the Heilbroner book, and the college, being examined from a new perspective.

Finally, faces were saved all around. Although Paul bent a great deal, and the test-takers all passed, the issues raised by the book incident remain unresolved.
The incident raises real questions about who selects curriculum material and, as Freire put it so eloquently in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, who is, finally, going to name the world? The women in college do not trust themselves to make that decision as yet, and, even though their instincts told them that the book's content was not more worthwhile than their own sense of the world, they acceded to what they perceived as authority and to their own anxieties about learning. It is worth noting, however, that in spite of their insecurities and their hostility the women discovered that by working cooperatively they could cope with and master difficult and complex information.

But the concept of authority for both teacher and student is filled with ambiguity. In fact, had the students insisted that the book be abandoned, Paul would have honored their request, since, as a teacher, he was not overtly authoritarian. It is how authority is perceived and then dealt with that is another lesson to be learned.

Lesson 3 - The Ambiguity of Authority

The student-teacher relationship is invariably fraught with ambiguities, whether one is working in an institutional or an anti-institutional setting. As the NCNW program revealed, simply declaring that the educational mode is primarily student-centered, rather than teacher-centered, does not answer the problems that arise because of certain socio-cultural predispositions which reinforce the need for authority, security, and assurance given by another. Probably this need to surrender autonomy is nowhere
stronger than among working class women.

Initially, the students involved in the NCNW program, accustomed as they were to acting as grownups, to making decisions, and to functioning as leaders within their community, became, in the context of an educational situation, like children -- dependent, passive, fearful, non-committal and unsure of themselves.

From the beginning, the students confronted difficulties as they redefined who they were in regard to their education. What occurred in the preparatory classes in basic skills during the summer of 1975 serves as an illustration.

The women, divided into two sections, were taught by Mary and George. Although George's educational philosophy did not coincide with the aims of the program, he was asked to teach because he was a member of the community. Jan Peterson felt that it was important to include community people at all levels of the project. Having previously taught at Penn State, George carried on his classes with rigor. He seemed enamored of standards and rules. Papers were thoroughly combed and minutely evaluated. In the face of his criticism, the women's confidence plummeted.

Mary, on the other hand, was more nurturing and gentle. She put the women at their ease and gave them a sense that their work had value.

What is significant however, is that the women preferred George. His authoritarian manner and air of finality about matters grammatical, mechanical, and logical made them feel secure. They were certain they were learning a lot because at that point, early
in their involvement with the NCNW college, they wanted school to be the way it always was for them, rigidly structured, with most of the learning consisting of the memorization and application of rules.

Mary's approach was less formal, less threatening, and more supportive of the students' own abilities. But because it was a technique through which they were asked to acknowledge their own competence, they were uncomfortable and insecure. In this instance, although George's authority diminished their self esteem in a particularly sensitive area, it was preferable to Mary's demand for independence and autonomy.

As the program evolved, so did the students. They became increasingly assertive and much less willing to accept hierarchical authority as the only way to organize an educational situation. That the teacher had information and experience from which they could benefit was not the question. Rather, the issue was how that information and experience was to be presented and utilized. The students did not object to Paul's concern that they learn about the methodology of the social sciences. Instead, they rejected the vehicle — Heilbroner's *An Inquiry Into the Human Prospect* — he had chosen. The incident of "the book" is significant because the women were able to articulate their disappointment and disapproval directly to the teacher, even though they could not as yet insist that such an inappropriate textbook be dropped.

The ambiguity that any student feels regarding the teacher's power in a classroom seemed to be complicated by two additional
factors: the sex and the class origins of the authority figure. In classes taught by males, such as Paul and George, the women tended, as I have tried to indicate, to replicate the responses they were conditioned to in the world; that is, they deferred to masculine judgments of events and situations. It is also important to note that the students were acutely sensitive to women faculty members whom they perceived as different in class. Once again the response was deference -- this time to the middle and upper class instructors' conviction regarding the rightness of their positions of authority, a manner and demeanor that suggested that they were entitled to be where they were.

My vague impressions about the students' reactions to faculty acquired sharpness, clarity, and justification as I established my own relationships with the students in the quasi-academic setting of the program. In my class the students proved to be far more willing to accept informality and flexibility because they recognized we were much alike. I shared with them a working class background, a familiar ethnic identity, and a family of growing children.

They talked more openly about their feelings. They revealed their insecurities about college. And I believe they were willing to risk exposing the ordinariness of their lives because they sensed that I would affirm rather than denigrate what for them was the central fact of their identities -- their families. Soon after my teaching quarter ended, Christine, as director of the program, commented on how real she felt the students were in the writing done in my course. "I felt like they were really talking about them-
selves and not somebody else," she said.

It is now Spring, 1977. The program approaches its second anniversary. The students have come very far intellectually and, in their understanding of power-relationships, they have moved from insecurity to strength. The turning point came in February, 1977, when they had developed sufficient confidence in their own competence to take their educational destinies into their own hands, completely restructuring the curriculum to suit themselves rather than the professionals. The curriculum of the second year, an integrated American Studies program, had been organized and planned, for reasons of expediency, without extensive student participation, a factor which in itself produced hostility. But they also rejected a curriculum that they perceived as too intellectual, too remote from their own experience, and finally, too ideological. Utilizing the very skills developed by the program, they restructured it to suit themselves and did so against the advice of the professionals.
FOOTNOTES


2David Reisman as quoted in Silverman, p. 130.

THE BUREAUCRACY

Introduction

Because the NCNW wanted credentials for their own self esteem as well as for increased job opportunities, our program needed institutional affiliation in order to provide recognized degrees. Although the program could have been absorbed by such four year colleges as SUNY Westbury, Brooklyn, or Marymount, we decided that a college able to grant a two year terminal degree would be more suitable. Since the women's time was limited and valuable, they felt there were more advantages in a two year program. Such a program also offered them the option to transfer to a four year school if they so chose. La Guardia Community College, a two year institution within the City University of New York, was selected because of its reputation for being progressive and innovative.

However, we were to discover that no matter how innovative or progressive the school's reputation, or how agreeable and amenable the administrators, the institutional bureaucracy generated unforeseen difficulties. Complicating the relationship further was the anti-institutional, feminist orientation of the NCNW itself. That is, our belief in collective decision making and a horizontal organizational system frequently clashed with the rigid hierarchy of La Guardia's own bureaucracy. Perhaps it is inevitable that the demands of an entrenched will run counter to a grass-roots, community-based group whose trust is in people rather than institutions.

The confrontation between inflexibility and innocent optimism revolved around the following areas:
Course Requirements. Since ours was a special program, we had assumed, naively perhaps, that the standard plan of courses would be modified, or that when specific courses could not be waived, they would be tailored to meet the desires and the needs of the NCNW students. However, because of a traditionalism bred of bureaucratic intran- sigence, such modification proved difficult at best.

Interdisciplinary Courses. In light of the program's aims (see Appendix A), we had hoped to be able to integrate a number of courses in order to better utilize the community as a learning base. Once again, it was the very nature of La Guardia's departmental structure that created the problems we had to deal with.

Grading. In order to avoid reinforcing competitiveness instead of cooperation, we would have liked to develop an alternate grading mechanism. Although La Guardia faculty and administrators promised flexibility within the existing system, little experimentation was done because the system did not encourage it.

Selection of Faculty. Through our contacts with UGS, the Feminist Press at Old Westbury, and individuals concerned and involved with innovative education, we had a large pool of potential faculty to draw on. However, the basic economic needs of La Guardia required that their first concern be with placing their own faculty.
Accountability of Faculty. Whether the teaching staff would come from La Guardia or from NCNW's pool, we opposed the use of conventional modes of evaluating faculty performance. Nevertheless, there was a tendency on La Guardia's part to use traditional classroom observations as a way of controlling faculty.

Attitude Toward Students. At NCNW we believed in a student centered curriculum in which those who learned participated in what they were to learn. Moreover, our students, working class women who were returning to school, had very particular needs to be considered. La Guardia, on the other hand, with its traditional organization of education into discreet disciplines and departments, often treated our students (as well as their own) as products to be neatly packaged.

We at NCNW learned the hard way that an institutionalized bureaucracy very often exists as an independent entity with no overt philosophical commitments, except to its own preservation. As I will attempt to show, the well-meaning efforts of the administrators themselves were often stymied by the very machinery that existed for the implementation of such efforts.

We were also to discover that many of the issues that at first seemed to us so easily soluble turned out to be major philosophical questions about the nature and purpose of education in a democratic society. Therefore, any discussion of these issues was
fraught with ambiguities and complexities that our initial optimism could not have anticipated.

Finally, if we could have articulated and structured a carefully planned anti-institutional bureaucracy (paradoxical as that may sound), we might have had the machinery and the power to better enforce our goals and aims for the program. As it was, the lack of such a structure made solving some of these problems impossible.

Bureaucracy and the Institution: The Relationship with La Guardia College

While it is true that the NCNW program needed La Guardia College, it is equally true that La Guardia College needed the program. For the institution, the prestige to be accrued from sponsoring such an innovative experiment would be considerable; moreover, a community based college for women appealed to the school's perception of what constituted relevance. La Guardia also regards itself as a true community college, and, in fact, it has made numerous efforts to reach out into the surrounding neighborhood.\(^1\) Another factor was that La Guardia was reputed to be particularly interested in tailoring programs for given urban ethnic populations, a growing educational market.\(^2\)

In a more practical sense, the program would be a way for La Guardia to place faculty and maintain enrollment during a time of severe economic retrenchment, with little or no cost to the institution.\(^3\) In addition, La Guardia received federal funds for placing students in their cooperative work-study component. And the NCNW students, given the very nature of the program, helped to increase
co-op enrollment and therefore increase the supply of much needed money.

When we approached the administration of La Guardia Community College and began our negotiations with them, they seemed more than willing to give us what we asked for, including a great deal of flexibility in monitoring and running the program. However, as I have already noted, the bureaucratic machinery, with its vertical structure and its organization into discrete departments, made much of what we wanted to achieve difficult to accomplish, notwithstanding the sincerity of the administration.

Course Requirements

The major problems we encountered in this area stemmed from the bureaucratic need of the institution to impose its own requirements as a way of managing students and faculty, even though the only way of creating a truly innovative program would have been to grant it curricular autonomy. As it was each course that we wanted to institute had to be negotiated department by department and approved department by department. And we could never be quite sure which departments would be flexible and which would be intransigent and which would jealously guard their own perogatives.

Because of the clash between La Guardia's mission to reach more students and their desire to maintain an often arbitrary notion of academic standards, we had to fight the institution's impulse to track our students into remedial programs. It was not that we didn't realize that some of our students might require extra practice in basic skills, but rather, we felt that so obviously
quantify their initial academic inadequacies would be demoralizing.

Indeed, La Guardia's Language and Culture division even wished to impose very strict requirements regarding not only the type of writing to be done but also the length. Frequently such demands undercut our attempts to implement the integrated academic goals of the NCNW college. Even such things as textbook selection could be controlled, not by what the students wanted or needed, but what the bookstore had already ordered.

Ironically, however, one of our most unexpected problems in the area of curriculum arose because of La Guardia's inflexible commitment to a concept of relevance left over from the nineteen sixties. Although one might well be sympathetic to any attempt to deal with the sense of alienation felt by students during that period, La Guardia's concept seemed at times, to be rooted in the belief that the teacher knows better than the student what is good, worthwhile, and academically sound for him or her. The intransigence with which certain La Guardia administrators and faculty held to this principle often ran counter to the expressed wishes of the women in the program.

Because of the women's community activity they wished to have a formal course in effective speaking, and they had a clear idea of what they meant by effective speaking. The women all wanted to learn how to speak better and more effectively in public situations. One woman said:

—I don't think there's anything wrong with the way I talk, but I know that if I want to get up at a community meeting and talk about something I'm in favor of, I have to know the right rules for doing that. You don't know what it's
like; they can decide you're out of order and you just don't get your chance. You might not be out of order; they might be just using that to keep you in your place. And the men in these groups really know how to use it and run things their way.

They also pointed out that they needed to know the rules of parliamentary procedure because such knowledge represented a power that they lacked. Their local power outlets -- block associations, church groups, political clubs, district school boards -- operated under these rules. It is not surprising, then, that the women felt and expressed the need to know how to get an idea on a meeting's agenda, how to argue for or against a proposition, how to chair a meeting effectively. These skills would be acquired in the "traditional" public speaking course.

The trouble was that La Guardia, as I have said, had the final vote in educational decisions. And their speech course was not what the women wanted; instead, it was "sensitivity training." Without denying the possible value of this kind of group work, one can see the irony of the situation. Our women, who wanted old-fashioned public speaking, were forced into accepting what, in effect, was a fad of the sixties. Although sensitivity training might be a good way for individuals to learn how to get in touch with their feelings and each other, it was not the training these community women needed to enable them to fight for better schools for their kids. Nowhere was the gap between what the learner wanted and what the institution felt she should want more obvious and less justifiable.

The greatest failure of La Guardia's institutional bureaucracy
was its inability to deal with the concept of and the necessity for a structured program of integrated or interdisciplinary course work. Because we at NCNWI felt that the notion of interdiscipline was an essential component of the kind of problem solving curriculum we had envisioned, it is here that La Guardia's inflexibility was most obstructive.

In a traditional institution of higher education, such as La Guardia turned out to be in spite of its progressive reputation, the power structure depends on the divisibility of knowledge into disciplines and departments because such an organization is manageable. In this kind of system, the educational analogue of the assembly line, the student is product, and the concerns are with quality control, accountability, and cost efficiency.⁴

The bureaucratic model of an academic institution like La Guardia seems to keep students in a relatively passive position as absorbers of information rather than as operators of knowledge. The separation of knowledge and skill into discrete and seemingly independent categories makes it difficult for students and faculty alike to see connections and relatedness.

One of the more negative consequences of such a learning paradigm is that it reinforces passivity and encourages apathy as well as acceptance.⁵ In addition it may also create a population whose ability to understand the uses of power, both on a personal and political level, is severely limited, if not dangerously controllable by others.

Another unfortunate side effect of such divisions is that the
bureaucratic machinery that sustains them becomes an end in itself, often establishing intellectual fiefdoms that preclude meaningful education. In such a context, a person's desire to know is often thwarted.

The women at NCNW, for example, wanted to learn more about the ideas upon which their national culture, religious tradition, and American social values were based. The curriculum committee had thought to integrate a philosophy course with an American History course in order to meet the students' expressed wishes. We believed the students could study the writings of Rousseau, Descartes and Mary Wollesonecraft, while at the same time learning about the nation's historical development. However, La Guardia Community College's philosophy department consisted of one person, and apparently he did not believe in teaching philosophy quite that way. In fact, he was even unfamiliar with some of the works that our curriculum committee mentioned. Instead, he felt it was more important that the students learn how to philosophize, whether they wanted to or not. And since he had the power to grant or withhold the humanities credits the students would need for degrees, we at NCNW were forced to accede to his definition of an appropriate philosophy course against our better judgment.

There were also practical difficulties in establishing interdisciplinary courses that La Guardia's bureaucracy seemed unable to handle. First, the money and time for the planning that these kinds of courses required was simply unavailable, given faculty workloads at a time of economic crisis throughout the university.
(Often, in fact, financial limitations are an excuse for education-
al conservatism.) Second, the foundation money that the NCNW col-
lege received was siphoned through the CUNY Research Foundation.
This meant more time wasted in dealing with yet another bureaucracy.
Finally, creative staffing, such as team teaching or the utilization
of guest lecturers from a variety of fields, became organizationally
impossible because of these factors.

Grading

Although we had hoped to be able to arrive at a grading pro-
cedure that was a felicitous balance between competitive grading
and an absence of standards altogether, perhaps through some vari-
ation of the pass/fail system or the learning contract, this turned
out to be impossible, in spite of La Guardia's promises of flexibil-
ity, for a variety of reasons:

1. Record keeping at CUNY for credentials and transfer is
organized on the basis of letter grades, an already
entrenched system.

2. Because of these particular procedures, there is a
tendency for the teacher to think in terms of the
normal bell curve thereby facilitating the whole pro-
cess of marking.

3. Most teachers, however flexible and innovative they
might be, have not thought through a more viable or
acceptable alternative.

4. The students, products of a system that stresses com-
petition, wanted to know where they stood individually
and vis-à-vis each other.

Perhaps, in the last analysis, there is always going to be an
inevitable conflict between student-centered, process-oriented edu-
cation and the grading system, whatever it is.
Faculty Selection

La Guardia's primary interest in selecting faculty for the NCNW college program was institutional survival and self-preservation. The exigencies of retrenchment produced by the university's severe economic dislocation made it necessary for La Guardia to keep as its first concern the maintenance of its own faculty.

There were times, of course, when choices had to be made between a La Guardia faculty member and someone drawn from the NCNW faculty pool who we felt was more suitable for the kind of program the NCNW college was. In such instances it was the La Guardia instructor who was chosen because, once again, the final decision-making power resided with La Guardia.

Another difficulty with faculty selection arose out of the departmental organization of the university. As anyone we selected had to be approved by the various departmental appointment committees, we were therefore drawn unwillingly into La Guardia's internal politics. It also became for NCNW a time consuming process to negotiate with each department separately. Not only were they unpredictable about their criteria for selection, but they were, as well, often fiercely protective of their own institutional perogatives.

Faculty and Accountability

Related to the problem of faculty selection was the whole concept of accountability. Although the NCNW program was clearly an experimental one, in order for the institution to maintain control
over the extent of innovation, the administration of La Guardia insisted that their usual procedures for faculty observations and evaluations apply. As it turned out these procedures were used on at least one occasion to remove a faculty member with whom La Guardia was dissatisfied. Indeed, one observer even found it necessary to criticize classroom order, an order that was dictated by the physical environment, a factor which could not be helped.

Another aspect of La Guardia's inflexibility regarding its own ideas about professional responsibilities was its adherence to the idea of strict syllabi. This occasional rigidity was particularly obstructive when dealing with the writing courses. Given student sensitivities about putting words on paper, this is an area which ought to have been especially flexible.

In my own writing course I was forced to utilize much time to modify their criteria in order to engage the students and retain the program's community focus. If I had been permitted to formulate my own syllabus from the outset, this loss of valuable time for teacher and students could have been avoided.

Both faculty selection and faculty accountability became two more bureaucratic devices used by the institution, albeit unwittingly, to maintain its own power and to retard the kind of educational experimentation we at the NCNW college were engaged in.

Attitudes Towards Students

Although La Guardia claimed to be enthusiastic about NCNW's plans for extensive student involvement in all areas of their education, they were in fact very much annoyed by the students' demands.
Such active participation becomes time consuming for the bureaucracy, organized as it was along hierarchical lines, and is an inefficient way to get things done. Perhaps because they were dealing with working class women, La Guardia expected passivity. Instead, they got fight.

Conditioned as the institution was by the often erroneous premise of unlimited student time, the faculty tended to be insensitive to the women's real difficulties. Because the women were so engaged and so articulate in the classroom, the teachers frequently assumed that their students would want to do a great deal of studying, and gave them assignments under that mistaken assumption. In fact, what made the women so alive and so eager were the ways in which they organized their very limited and circumscribed time.

La Guardia dealt with the NCNW women just as they had been dealing with their more conventional students. Such mechanisms as tracking, testing, grading, rigid course requirements and conservative notions of faculty accountability were employed, consciously or not, to limit the effectiveness of the NCNW college.

Even though the college had a reputation for innovation, the student was still regarded as a product because, in the final analysis, products are easier to control and to manipulate than people.

**Bureaucracy and the Anti-Institution: The Hope and Responses of the NCNW**

Many of the problems that the NCNW college itself confronted and was unable to solve adequately arose out of the very fact that we were a feminist organization with a very strong anti-institutional bias that made many of us automatically suspicious of structure
and hierarchy. In spite of the fact that we did have an organizational model, as the proposal indicates (see Appendix ), we made every attempt to decentralize decision-making procedures as much as possible. While this blurred traditional lines of power, it did produce a sense of intense cohesiveness and mutual responsibility. There is, of course, always the danger that some inappropriate choices will be made when an organization draws almost everyone into a collective decision-making process. But what is more important is that decisions are made.

Whether professionals or not, women who have been involved only in hierarchical institutions where decisions are made and enforced from the top down, usually do not have the experience or the skills needed for setting and implementing policy. What we had hoped to do, as feminists and as educators, by organizing the NCNW college along collective principles, was to learn, along with our students, how to make sound organizational decisions.

Our premises were admirable, and when applied to policy questions within NCNW, they worked moderately well. Here we were able to utilize effectively our tendency to think in personal and interpersonal terms because we were like-minded women. Indeed, much of our interaction could be described as familial, with all the positive and negative connotations of that word. However, these principles did not always serve us well in dealing with an entrenched bureaucracy more traditionally organized such as La Guardia Community College. Our seeming vagueness was met by power structures firmly and clearly defined. In other words, while we at NCNW were trying
to find out who we were within an organizational framework, La Guardia Community College not only knew who it was, but also how to wield that knowledge effectively.

Had we been less reluctant to institute some of the components of a more conventional bureaucracy, had we been able to more specifically articulate the educational goals we felt so strongly about, and, finally, had we had the time, the resources, and the people to explore alternative organizational models, we might have been more successful in dealing with the La Guardia administrative apparatus.

If we had been able to do these things, the NCNW college might have functioned more efficiently. But, on the other hand, the women might have lost the opportunity to use the variety of skills and talents they developed through the admittedly flawed but flexible process that was the program.

It is worth noting at this point that when we did construct a thoroughly delineated curriculum plan as was the case with the combined Foundations of American History course and the Greenpoint-Williamsburg colloquium package (see Appendix B), we were able to maneuver successfully within La Guardia's power structure. Because we had presented the social science department with an academically impeccable curriculum accompanied by a unique workshop component, we became effective allies and gained institutional approval.

This experience has taught some of us that an organizational middle ground between hierarchy and collectivity might be desirable. To this end we have been planning for the next group of NCNW col-
lege students by limiting their direct participation in curriculum planning. We realize that some will say that too much will be lost by such a movement toward partial centralization. However, the program's reorientation will provide students with a much clearer sense of what their responsibilities are, and of what they are in for academically. This new structure will also make for a better utilization of both faculty and student time as well as enhance curricular continuity. And it will control the tendency that some of the students exhibited to use collective decision-making as a way of avoiding what they regarded as too much work.

Paradoxical as it may seem, our particular experience revealed that even an anti-institution, its good will notwithstanding, must develop fairly sophisticated organizational structures if it is to successfully deal with those bureaucracies upon which its survival depends.
In fact, the NCNW community is in La Guardia's "neighborhood" since it is only a few minutes away by car or subway.

2La Guardia had implemented a neighborhood program called "Impact" in Long Island City, Queens, New York providing college credits in leadership training to Greek, Black and Hispanic community groups.

3The NCNW college was financed by a grant from the Rockefeller Family Fund which paid faculty salaries. The staff and counselors were paid under The Comprehensive Employment Training Act.

A COMMUNITY OF WOMEN

The NCNW college program began as an experimental educational program in which the surrounding community was to be the focus of an innovative curriculum. As I have indicated, this goal was achieved. The literal community did figure prominently in the literal curriculum. Much of the substance of course work was drawn from and organized around actual issues and situations of direct concern to community residents.

However, much of the learning that took place occurred beneath, beyond, around, and sometimes in spite of, the literal curriculum. It is within the community developed by the women themselves as they approached their formal learning tasks that a more profound kind of education took place and another kind of curriculum evolved. Forces were released and changes set in motion precisely because the women in the program were able to form themselves into a supportive group which established a context similar to what feminist women call consciousness raising.

The pattern of consciousness raising has been described as a climate of mutual support and nurturing, where women experienced and shared a strong love for the growth of one another. My own experience might help to clarify the nature of the consciousness raising phenomenon. Through consciousness raising, as my own participation revealed, women can grow into healthier, more independent and assertive human beings by exploring and sharing their personal realities and then transforming that personal recognition into
political awareness.

In my group, ten women talked about, argued over, and exchanged feelings and experiences. We learned that we were not unique, crazy or weird for some of our emotions. For many of us it was the first time that we had explored our personal lives and openly shared them with other women. Through this activity we learned to understand other women and we began to explore the political and social ramifications of some of our individual existences.

Through these discussions of our immediate personal experiences, we found shared perceptions and feelings about ourselves as women. In consciousness raising the exploration of the very dailiness of one's life can lead to the discovery of a whole dimension of oneself that might otherwise have been ignored.

However, there is an obstructive underside to this growth enhancing process. Often our ability to share was marred by what the group labelled "horizontal hostility," that is, the mutual mistrust that grows out of the self-hatred a woman feels because she has been made object rather than subject by her society. This frequently takes the form of petty jealousy, competitiveness, and an unwillingness to acknowledge painful realities, a dynamic which I call denial. In my group, we were all women well past thirtiety and the creation of new lives threatened many commitments dear to us. We were both drawn to and frightened of the possibilities for change. We wanted to learn how to keep the most positive parts of ourselves intact while we grew new skins. In short, through the complexities of consciousness raising, we journeyed in search of who we were.
Without planning, this same pattern of discovery, acceptance and denial, and the growth of cohesiveness and a sense of collectivity shaped the experiences of the students participating in the NCNW college program. It is interesting to note that while we feminist women who were working on curriculum with the students did not impose a consciousness raising paradigm, such a model evolved organically and spontaneously.

**Culture of Women: Acceptance and Denial**

True knowledge begins with experience. An individual learns by conceptualizing around and about the people, places and events which constitute his or her immediate life experience.

The NCNW attempted to utilize the actual and the ordinary in these women's lives as the base upon which the more abstract and theoretical curriculum could be built. Because they shared much of the dailiness of existence, married and bore children, attended the same churches, participated in community organizations, lived and worked in the same neighborhood -- they shared also a sensibility and a world view. These attitudes held in common provided a rich context for experiential education, a learning process necessarily rooted in the known and the familiar. It is here that true relevance began for the women in our program. Indeed, much of the student's pleasure in learning derived from the acknowledgment of their realities which were neither denied nor undervalued. It is at this point that the analogy can be drawn to a consciousness raising group where personal experiences are unjudgementally shared and analyzed.

The importance of such mutual experiences in the learning pro-
cess was revealed in a number of ways. The students loved fiction, poetry, and autobiography because they are forms that are both concrete and personal and they appreciated particularly those works which draw for their impact on what they knew as life. For many of these working class women, it was a shock and a surprise to see experiences like their own portrayed with dignity, seriousness, and artistry by such writers as Tillie Olsen and Alfred Kazin.

When they read Tillie Olsen's story, "I Stand Here Ironing," many of the students recognized their own analogous reactions and responses to the conflicts of motherhood. As one student said in class:

When I read that story I was amazed. First of all, it started with the main character ironing, which surprised me...but when that phone rang and it was the school guidance counsellor I felt like it was me talking to one of my kids' teachers.

It became obvious that the students identified strongly with this story of a mother's struggle to survive. Like me they cried about the way she felt strangled by the strong cords of guilt and self-doubt.

But their awareness became intellectual as well as personal and emotional when they were able to recognize that the iron was also a symbol of their powerlessness in a non-supportive society. The learning, in this instance, did not begin with their experiences and end with an intellectual recognition about the significance of the work of fiction under consideration. Instead the process was defined by interaction between the work and the life.

A work like Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City* provided the
students with not only an appreciation of locale as an artistic force but also offered a means of examining the immigrant experience, the sense of belonging to two perhaps contradictory cultures. Like "I Stand Here Ironing," Alfred Kazin's autobiography gave the women another opportunity to see the alienating quality of an impersonal bureaucratic society. Particularly important for these women was the harsh portrayal of those institutions entrusted with the care and education of children.

Having examined other people's versions of their experiences, the women became eager to present and to share their own perceptions in writing. At the beginning of the program, this took the form of autobiographical writings in the composition course. Later, when the staff and students designed the workshop curriculum, this same interest prompted the establishment of a creative writing workshop in which the students zestfully participated. That the women were able to see the substance of their lives used as the vehicle for art was, for them, an affirmation.

The opposite of affirmation is denial. And as I noted earlier, the reluctance to face the painful and the uncomfortable aspects of one's situation became a part of the NCNW experience. This unwillingness to come to grips with changing social patterns coupled with the personal anxiety felt when there is a discrepancy between what is and what one believes should be is what I call the mechanism of denial.

Paolo Friere describes this process in Pedagogy of the Oppressed: Not infrequently, especially at the point of decoding (or analyzing the political and social implications) of con-
crete situations, training course participants ask the coordinator in an irritated manner: "Where do you think you're steering us, anyway?" The coordinator isn't trying to steer them anywhere; it is just that in facing a concrete situation as a problem the participants begin to realize that if their analysis of the situation goes any deeper they will either have to divest themselves of their myths, or reaffirm them... The same retreat occurs, though on a smaller scale, among many of the people who have been ground down by the concrete situation of oppression and domesticated by charity. One of the teachers of "Full Circle," which carried out a valuable educational program in New York City under the coordination of Robert Fox, relates the following incident. A group in a New York ghetto was presented a coded situation showing a big pile of garbage on a street corner -- the very same street where the group was meeting. One of the participants said at once, "I see a street in Latin America or Africa." "And why not in New York?" asked the teacher. "Because we are the United States and that can't happen here." Beyond a doubt this man and some of his comrades who agreed with him were retreating from a reality so oppressive to them that even to acknowledge that reality was threatening. For an alienated person, conditioned by a culture of achievement and personal success, to recognize his situation as objectively unfavorable seems to hinder his own possibilities of success.

(Freire, p.p. 155-156)

Denial among the students operated in a variety of ways, superficial as well as profound. Initially some of the women simply did not want the learning to hit too close to home. Not only did they resist the use of Herbert Gans' The Urban Villages because to deal with an Italian community similar to their own was not real education, but they also vehemently opposed the use of the immediate community as a learning laboratory. "Who wants to read just about Italians?" they said.

A more complex variation occurred when one of the students wrote sardonically of her own "Memories of a Catholic Girlhood." The students' responses were, for the most part, angry and hostile towards the mild sarcasm of the essay. After all, Joanne had chal-
lenged the basis of their morality.

But the most profound example of the effects of denial occurred at a student meeting during a discussion of the American History curriculum. In the course the students had been reading much criticism of American culture and society, including primary source material such as *The Federalist Papers*. One student, a thirty-seven year old woman for whom the material represented a direct challenge and threat to all her beliefs burst into tears. She said that what was going on in the class was making her question everything she had believed about this country. Pointing to a black co-worker and friend she said "I don't even feel like our relationship can be the way it was before because I feel so guilty now."

What is crucial, however, is that by the very articulation of their reluctance to explore certain areas of their experience they were in fact able to overcome that desire to deny. The fact that the women's culture was placed in an affirmative context finally made it possible for the students to come to grips with aspects of their lives which had previously troubled them only privately, only secretly.

Cohesiveness:

Like any consciousness raising group, the NCNW students developed feelings of cohesiveness that transformed them from isolated individuals into members of a community. The college became the nucleus of a new kind of family. The very fact that only four people have dropped out of the program since its beginnings is an indication of its effectiveness. One woman said, "Look. We won't..."
let each other drop out. If one starts talking about it, everyone
gets on the phone and tries to convince her to stay in. We feel
that if one person drops out, the whole program is weaker."

Another woman said of such mutual support:

\[ I love going to school, even though I sometimes can't
stand doing the reading, because I just plain hate to
read, because we're all in this together. Are you kid-
ding? I'd never have gone to school on my own. For me
this is great because I get a chance to be out with other
grownups and to have a life of my own. It's like a whole
new social life. And don't get me wrong. I hate to read
but I love to talk about everything after we've read on
out own.\]

At NCNW we made every attempt to encourage this cohesiveness
felt by the students by avoiding hierarchial organization and deci-
sion making procedures. In our dealings with La Guardia, with pros-
ppective faculty, and among ourselves we emphasized that part of the
community orientation of the program, from our viewpoint, lay in
stressing collective work and encouraging cooperation.

We professional women, also from working class backgrounds,
were drawn to this concept of collectivity. Through our feminist
experience in consciousness raising, we learned in a more deliberate
way the joy and efficacy of collective work that our students were
beginning to share. The professional staff consciously sought to
encourage, if not to mandate, feminist principles of collective ef-
fort based on mutual trust and understanding. We assumed that these
principles could be easily applied to the learning process and that
group cohesion would automatically result from the sharing of indi-
vidual, personal experiences. I have already examined this phenom-
enon of sharing and acceptance. Now I shall attempt to deal with a
second question: How did the women grow from being an accidental group based on sex and class into a cohesive and supportive network for mutual growth and development?

To the degree that we could, we "institutionalized" our philosophy of collective work and study. Early in 1975 when it became apparent that our academic program was in danger of becoming a conventional college, we submitted guidelines to La Guardia. Among them was the statement that collective learning should be stressed because:

People who are struggling to redefine themselves and to keep a neighborhood alive must do so with mutual support. We feel that to make the NCNW college a competitive program would undermine one of the primary goals of the college: to help prepare women to function as community leaders. To do so the students must know how to work well in groups, how to collaborate effectively to accomplish tasks, solve problems, and provide needed community services.

However, as I have indicated, the bureaucratic difficulties with La Guardia made such a philosophy difficult to apply. In another context, I wrote the following which I hope would serve as a guide for the program's curriculum:

We believe that groups of people can survive best when they are mutually cooperative, that individual growth is best achieved through group strength and collaborative effort. Ideally, each person in a group contributes her strength and abilities towards the achievement of group goals. This concept underlies any effective community and political action. Therefore, we urge that all NCNW faculty include in their courses an emphasis on group learning through project work, through group research and writing activities and through group discussion within the classroom.

In a discussion of grades I also wrote:

The use of grades in the traditional manner is contradictory to the aims of the program. That is, because NCNW
seeks to encourage cooperation and communal activities, the grading, which suggests a quantitative labelling of success or failure, and which generates competitiveness, is not compatible with these goals. Furthermore, the students' desire for grades springs, not from the same motives of the mass of undergraduates (transfer to other colleges) but from a need for reassurance.

But the bureaucratic obstacles to the achievement of educational communality represent only one aspect of the problem. Equally important were the students' individualistic habits which made them resistant to the imposition of a value structure that emphasized collectivity and cooperation.

There were women in the program who had known each other for years and harbored smoldering resentments for wrongs real and imagined. Because many of the women are also in competing church and community organizations, they disagree politically and/or economically. In addition there are traditional ethnic and racial suspicions that the women must contend with. The college, therefore, also served as a place where old wounds, both personal and social, were reopened.

One of the students, afraid that she might appear too radical, and therefore unacceptable to the rest of the group, wrote about her fears of not belonging:

I like going back to school. The idea of going to college was more like a dream than a reality. The thing I want from this program is to be able to experience life knowledgeably. I want to react both intellectually and emotionally. Some of my classmates have social position goals. I have not yet decided what is my social position I would like to earn, but I'm sure it will not be a planned decision; it will be a process I will take rather than a goal. I worry sometimes what part I will take in my class. I already find myself being somewhat defensive. I'm a little afraid that I will come across being pessimistic and
radical. I know my beliefs are changing and it angers me when I can't even share these beliefs with my own peers. I feel the majority of my classmates are close minded people fighting to keep their set ways. I wonder will I have the courage to even discuss in my class my true feeling and can I do it effectively. I want to reach each student and teacher without a feeling of judgment coming upon me. I know I must be patient and understanding. I want to like and be liked by my classmates. If we could achieve a community in our class I would like to be an active member of that community.

In spite of her anxieties Marilyn emerged as a leader in NCNW, earning the respect and friendship of her colleagues.

Occasionally, the personal fears exploded into social and political hostilities, as the following incident indicates.

NCNW classes were held in the local senior citizens center. The day care center in the facility where many of the women leave their children while they work and study was in trouble because of the impending cutbacks in funding. The women were very angry, organized a demonstration, and wanted to leave their social science class in order to picket. Their instructor said that those who wanted to leave could, but he would continue the class. As it turned out, this solution proved divisive. Those who did leave were angry at those who didn't; and those who remained regarded the others as disruptive and selfish. Ultimately, however, the day care protest group was legitimized within the classroom as the nucleus of a special project which provided the impetus for successful political pressure to get their funding extended.

An ethnic dimension was added when Italian-American Congressman Mario Biaggi came to visit the center, which is run primarily by the Italian-American members of the community. It seems that the con-
gressman and his guide interrupted a class in progress. An outspoken member of the class from the predominantly Polish section of Greenpoint (which she feels is not given proper attention by Congress or the program) shouted something quite nasty to the men. The Italians were all mortified and furious at her behavior. The instructor was completely embarrassed. One of the Italian members of the class chewed out the director for precipitating the incident and the student for the lack of respect shown. She later said to me, "Nancy had the nerve to do this in an Italian neighborhood to an Italian Congressman." It is important to note that the feelings aroused by this incident caused no real damage to the community that the women were establishing. If anything, the trivial nature of the incident helped us all to recognize the irrationality of such resentments.

However, it became clear, as the program evolved, that for these women, given their backgrounds, a sense of mutuality had to grow out of repeated interaction rather than be imposed. By this point, March 1977, now that the program is nearly two years old, such a community does exist.

This kind of solidarity emerged strongly and was even reinforced when a group of us from the college went to see "Harlan County, U.S.A." This film, a study of working class survival, highlights in particular the effectiveness of the women of Harlan County and their unity with their men against the inhuman monopolies that attempted to control their lives. The film was shown at Cinema Two, Fifty-Eighth Street and Third Avenue -- right across the street from Bloomingdale's. Our presence in the line waiting for tickets raised eyebrows. The
uncomfortable truth is that there is a kind of cosmopolitan person who goes to movies (even those about the working class) at this particular theater and we were not "the type." In a way, we were a distinct and identifiable community in that sophisticated audience and that sense of togetherness we felt had grown out of the shared personal experiences at NCNW.

Our personal sense of community was extended, enlarged, and enhanced by an identification with the larger social and political community of Harlan County. The women were able to compare their own realities as working class people with the life situations of the women in the film even though they correctly perceived that their economic situation was perhaps better. They commented on the fact that the women looked so much older than they could have been to have such young children. They also noted the signs of poor medical and dental care and even malnutrition, the grim poverty of their existence. And they wept in recognition of their common struggles.

Another aspect of this shared perception emerged from viewing the film together -- an awareness about the dynamics involved when a group of people work together. A sequence occurs in the film where the women of Harlan County are arguing among themselves, quarrelling, over who was or was not doing enough work, who was or was not trying to steal someone else's husband. We all laughed at that point because of our realization that any organization works just like a family. As Lucy put it, "You have sibling rivalry, power plays, arguments and accusations, even secret plots and a lot of emotional outbursts of loving and hating."
The depth of this cooperative sensibility was movingly revealed on January 28, 1977, when twelve women in the program received their High School Equivalency diplomas. It was an occasion for communal celebration. There was food; there was music; there was dancing; there was joy. During this rite of passage, one of the board members, a noted lawyer who was going to Washington to work in the new administration, was honored along with the others for her achievements. As she spoke of her own struggles to succeed in a profession after eighteen years in the home, she too accepted her place in the community of women created by the NCNW.
FOOTNOTES


³See Appendix B of this study.
IMPACT

Many lives have been changed by their involvement with NCNW. Women literally moved out of their kitchens and into the world. Their personal lives, as well as their community existences, have undergone dramatic transformations, and the NCNW program has provided the means through which I, the students I worked with, and their community could grow together.

Impact: The Teacher

The NCNW program became central in my life, providing a new context for my professional and personal development. As I have previously observed, my earlier experience in community work was a response to the needs of my own children, specifically the need for pre-school education in the neighborhood. My participation in NCNW, on the other hand, developed out of my needs to re-establish a connection with my own class identity, and to do so in the framework of feminism and higher education.

Participating in the NCNW program gave me a choice to become close to women I would not ordinarily have encountered, not only because of my own upward mobility but my personal ambivalence concerning social class and ethnicity. Being with the women of NCNW in their homes, in their families, and in their communities, and in turn, opening my life to them, helped me to integrate my feelings about my own family. At a time when I was adult enough to have positive relationships with my mother and sisters, we were separated by geography. The texture of the relationships I established with
the women became, to a degree, like that of the family from which I was separated. Socializing together, celebrating holidays together, and working together became the ways for me to reconnect with my past.

Professionally, this kind of neighborhood college program gave me the opportunity to see that non-institutional modes of education were not only available but workable, the only catch being that professional women with working class backgrounds were needed to create such alternatives. And in Jan Peterson, Christine Roschese, and Terri Heywood those women existed. I saw the power of their vision and energy, and it was contagious.

Moreover, it was important for me, suffocating as I was under the weight of the CUNY system, to see that individuals could, in fact, create, albeit on a small scale, more humane environments for learning.

However, my life was not the only one to be reshaped by this experience. Let us see how Stephanie, Loretta, and Dolores were also changed.

Impact: The Students

Stephanie

Stephanie has emerged from her shell of withdrawal, a condition she described when I first met her as being in a box without doors or windows. She has learned to put her trust in other women, a remarkable step for someone who had been so hostile and belligerent. At this point, Stephanie is no longer afraid of her rebellion or of
being "different." The alienated woman who entered the program is now willing to risk speaking out in public situations. She is, in fact, even running for the community school board, a circumstance in which she is required to put her intellect, her personality, and her identity very openly on the line.

Loretta

Loretta, among the most outgoing, active, and perhaps brusque of the women, has learned, she says, to be more aware of and responsive to the feelings of others. She has said that to be around people who talk about their feelings has taught her this new kind of awareness. She also speaks of her changed attitudes toward her family and community. Whereas previously her community activities kept her apart from her husband and her children, she has now learned, because of this new sensitivity to people's emotional needs, to involve them more directly in the community work she does.

Loretta, once defensive about class, has developed a new found understanding for both herself and professionals because, in the NCNW program, she has been listened to with respect by just those professionals whom she would have once labelled "snobs."

Currently, she is running for vice-president of the National Association of Neighborhood Government, an organization comprised of urban planners and grass-roots activists dedicated to improving the quality of neighborhood life. More than any of the others, Loretta is emerging as a spokeswoman on a national level, perhaps because she has become comfortable with her own competence.
Dolores

Dolores, who came into the program deeply fearful of herself and the world, has, perhaps, undergone the most extensive change in the perception of self. The core of strength that others sensed in her, even as she did not, appears now to have emerged.

No longer living in destructive family circumstances, she is, at present, working as a counselor for the Battered Women's Project sponsored by the NCNW. She has also become a most eloquent spokes-woman for what the college has been able to accomplish. And it is Dolores who is planning to complete her B.A., and then to pursue her dream of becoming a lawyer. The only impediment to the achievement of these ambitions might be poverty.

For the students generally, the program has provided an entry into a world that they had originally been fearful of and hostile to; this world includes the feminist movement, institutions of higher learning, and political bureaucracies of all sorts.

Through the NCNW the women became acquainted with a kind of feminism that drew its strength from the very values of family and nurturance that the women themselves believed in. In a way, these women are a new direction in feminism.

Participating in the NCNW college program has taught the women that education need not be threatening but can be liberating because it can increase possibilities available for growth and change.

Finally, the NCNW has educated the women about power: where it resides, how it can be abused, and how it can be manipulated for constructive ends.
On a more personal level, the NCNW experience has provided 
the women with the self esteem and the confidence necessary to 
become risk-takers and survivors.

Impact: The Curriculum

In the course of two years, the program has undergone a number 
of changes in response to external as well as internal demands.

Students who now knew what they wanted out of a college edu-
cation altered the direction of the curriculum to more closely 
coincide with what they perceived as their needs. This occurred 
in February of 1977. Over the previous quarter the students had 
become increasingly dissatisfied with the American History-Philos-
ophy curriculum. They felt that the courses were too abstract, 
too esoteric, too remote from actual experience, and, ultimately, 
too demanding on their limited time to be valuable. While they 
professed much personal regard for the instructors, they neverthe-
less felt alienated from their overly intellectual, overly academic 
modes of teaching as well as the material itself. As a result, the 
students organized and voted to discontinue the course progression 
as it was then constituted. Instead they elected to study the 
sociology of the family and the history of immigration in America, 
subject matter that was more congenial.

Although some of the staff questioned the students' decision 
because it disrupted a hoped for continuity; it was apparent that 
the students' wishes had to be accepted if we were to maintain 
credibility as a student-centered program.

Certain external factors are changing the nature of the program
as well. While the NCNW does plan to begin a new cycle in the fall of 1977, some aspects of the educational program will have, in fact, been altered.

Because the students will now be paying, it is believed that a pre-planned curriculum package will be more likely to draw students than a process oriented or problem solving program. Students will want to know what they are buying into.

Second, La Guardia Community College, somewhat unnerved by the unexpected articulateness of the NCNW students, agreed to the affiliation only if the curriculum is planned in advance.

Finally, because it may be difficult to maintain enrollment in the NCNW college program, it is also possible that men may have to be admitted. This will surely change the nature of the program's orientation.

Impact: The Community

The impact of the NCNW on the community has been extensive but nonetheless ambivalent. The community, perhaps conditioned by the media's presentation of the women's movement, is still suspicious of the program because they seem to believe NCNW is undermining the family. Other elements in the area regard the NCNW as too politically radical, and, therefore, dangerous. There is even a certain amount of old-fashioned "red-baiting" going on. And still others in the neighborhood are threatened by what they see as Jan Peterson's success, particularly now that she has gone to work for the Carter Administration.

Yet the program remains in the community and derives much of
its strength from this relationship. The NCNW college has, in fact, become a multi-purpose center providing a variety of services as well as a rich cultural life. The extent to which the NCNW enhances community life will be graphically illustrated by the two-day Neighborhood Education Fair planned by the women for May 20 and 21.

This project will feature the work that the women have been doing in their college workshops. Using the local public library as their base, the women plan to present readings of their own creative work; provide information and materials about legal rights and offer information about community health problems, especially alcoholism. And the entire fair will be videotaped by the women in the visual arts workshop. It is particularly fitting that they are using the library in this fashion since the women are planning to use their sharpened skills to keep this threatened facility opened.

However, the ultimate effectiveness of the NCNW college as a force for positive social change is best symbolized by the work the women are doing with the problem of battered and abused wives. Many of the women participating in the program are themselves battered wives, and it was difficult for them to admit such a fact to themselves and to each other. But having found strength and support in the NCNW, they have been able to deal with their personal tragedies by transforming them into soluble legal and social problems. In this regard, they have been in the forefront of organizations providing help for the battered wife. When one of the first cases of wife-beating, traditionally a Family Court matter, was brought before a criminal court judge, the women of NCNW filled the court-
room as a gesture of support. As might be expected, their action brought media attention and helped activate public concern over this issue.

The organization is now working with others to establish a shelter for battered and abused women who have nowhere else to go. Along with the creation of this safe haven, they hope to provide both legal assistance and publicity to keep the problem before the eyes of the public.

Having faced this problem either first hand or in helping each other, the women of NCNW plan to reach out to their community during the fair and provide information and support for those who are still suffering this way.
Impact: Larger Implications

Personal and Political Power:

One of the most important results of the NCNW college program has been in the area of power. The women have come to see that the world does not simply exist as a hard, inflexible reality in which context they are powerless. They have learned that they do not have to acquiesce helplessly in their own oppression. This sense of inner power has been developed through the kinds of experiences the college program provided. And from this inner sense of power came an awareness about the individual's ability to participate in the political process. Quite simply the women have learned that politics is indeed everyone's business. Furthermore, the women have learned through action that by becoming part of an organized voice they are able to influence public life. This growth in awareness about personal and political power is evident in the fact that the women are emerging as strong leaders in the community (school board elections), the city (prominent role in battered women's project), the country (seeking active leadership in national neighborhood organization). It is evident by the skillful way they write press releases about NCNW affairs, write proposals and approach foundations for money for NCNW projects, and by the active role so many are now taking in organizing the program for the New York State International Women's Year Conference.

Social Action:

The NCNW is enormously significant as a model for grass-roots
social activism. The women of NCNW demonstrate how "ordinary people" can organize to improve their lives. Again, the importance of the Battered Women's Project is that it is a clear case of women redefining a personal family problem, in this case violence in the family, and seeing its social and political implications. Thus, while not all women are battered, the fact that some are affects the lives of all. The women of NCNW have been leaders in drawing attention to this problem by presenting their own cases, through speak-outs and various other means, to the public and the media. They are now in the process of helping to create model legislation which will provide new avenues of redress for women. Furthermore, while the women's shelter mentioned above is obviously important in itself, its larger significance is that it is a model for other cities to emulate. Also, the project has been designed with an important research component aimed at exploring the social roots of family violence and creating new institutions which will help women to deal with their family problems.

Education:

The NCNW college program is a model for community based educational programs for mature women. It is significant quite simply because it shows people that they do not have to be under twenty-one to get a degree and that "college" does not necessarily mean an ivy-covered Georgian building. Students and staff from the NCNW have, at education conferences, at neighborhood government conferences, at meetings with individuals and with community groups, offered their skills and experience to others interested in under-
taking similar projects. The response has been highly favorable and NCNW women have helped people locally and in other parts of the country to begin their own work. Finally, as existing institutions of higher education are redefining their mission, the NCNW college offers one possible direction. It serves as a model for the delivery of educational services to meet the special needs of people in a particular community, of mature students who might be uncomfortable in existing institutions, and of adult women whose unique educational and social needs are dramatic in this period of rapid change.