The Politics of Naming a Field: Evolution, Controversies, and Strategies around What We Call “Women’s Studies”

Sydney Lemire
M.A. FINAL PROJECT

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Abstract: The name “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies,” WGSS, is a name rooted in politics and the academy, evidenced by the evolution of the phrasing even in the field’s relatively short history. In an environment where WGSS is under attack from both neo-fascist policies and neo-liberal budget cuts, we must be certain to put our best, most representative foot forward. This project explores (1) the state of the field’s name today and how it has evolved, (2) why this nomenclature is unstable and contradictory, and (3) what the politics of naming reveal about the changes in the field, the challenges it has faced, and, perhaps, the opportunities that might be available for the field to not only survive but thrive within the academy.

Keywords: academia, nomenclature, departmental politics, women’s and gender studies

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“We all know that when there’s no name for a problem, you can’t see a problem, and when you can’t see a problem you pretty much can’t solve it.”

— Kimberlé Crenshaw
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INTRODUCTION

The field of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, hereafter [WGSS], is under attack from all sides. As a field of study begrudgingly entrenched in the fabric of academia, there are certain standards and institutional demands that must be met. The neo-liberal academy expects certain tangible outputs from its programs and departments, and those under the [WGSS] rubric often find themselves in the uncomfortable — yet commendable — position of performing valuable educational work that is not merely quantifiable in terms of majors or the amount of dollars brought to the institution through grant funding. As such, even while institutions of higher learning pride themselves on fostering “diverse, equitable, and inclusive” learning environments, they spend a significant portion of their funding, for example, on artificial intelligence and biochemical engineering laboratories, but leave interdisciplinary programs that focus on social justice and marginalized groups underfunded and forgotten at best, shuttered and terminated at worst.

At the same time, the liberatory and progressive mindset of [WGSS] programs leaves the field poised to be attacked by conservatives and right-wing provocateurs. In an age of “transvestigations,” capitol riots, and growing anti-intellectualism, [WGSS] finds itself at the center of brutal attacks and mischaracterizations. As evidenced by conservative pundits’ assertion that universities are for the “objective truth” — a framework in which [WGSS], in their eyes, does not fall — there is a growing subset of the United States that does not believe women, gender, and sexuality ought to be studied at all, let alone platformed. Legislation such as the so-called “Don’t Say Gay” law in Florida challenges publicly-funded [WGSS] programs’ survivability as a whole and threatens to close departments entirely (Natanson, Rozsa, and Svrluga 2023). Attacks from the right often take a different form than the budget cuts and

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1 I will be using the stand-ins “[Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies]” and “[WGSS]” to signify any and all programs that fall under this umbrella, such as Women’s Studies, Women’s and Gender Studies, Gender Studies, Feminist Studies, etc. This stand-in abbreviation is used both for the sake of brevity and for the sake of understanding the field as intellectually convergent but nominally divided.

2 “Transvestigation,” a portmanteau of transgender and investigation, is an online-based eugenical conspiracy theory in which “transvestigators” use phrenology to identify people, usually but not always celebrities, who are “secretly transgender.” Transvestigators claim that everyone from Marilyn Monroe to Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson to former President Bill Clinton are trans (Lenton 2024).

3 This research was performed at a time where new bills were being introduced seemingly monthly to state legislatures across the country aiming to “ban” social justice-oriented scholarship from college campuses; in fact, between the time of the completion of this paper’s first draft and its final submission, the governor of Alabama signed into law a piece of legislation which “will, within public higher education institutions, limit so-called ‘divisive concepts’ plus diversity, equity and inclusion programs,” referred to by one director from PEN America as
departmental closures of the neoliberal academy — although sometimes these two strands intersect — which at least attempt to mollify the bad news. Yet both kinds of attacks jeopardize the survivability of [WGSS] and similarly social justice-oriented fields of study.

If [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies] is to survive within this minefield of an environment, under constant threat of both neo-fascist policies and neo-liberal budget cuts, we must be sure to put our best, most representative foot forward. How to name the field is a significant aspect of its representation, and debates about [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies]’s name — originally, Women’s Studies — are not new. As far back as the field’s initial institutionalization in the 1970s and 1980s there have been vibrant and frequent conversations about what to name departments and programs (Bowles and Duelli Klein 1983; Cott 1989). Today, many names are in use, with some of the most common being “Women’s Studies,” “Women’s and Gender Studies,” and “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies,” along with numerous others. Despite the nominal differences, the goals of these programs align: to study inequality along the vectors of gender, sexuality, race, class, nationality, religion, disability, and all facets of marginalization. But herein lies the problem: that is not what the name actually suggests.

This MA Final Project is an investigation of the evolution, controversies, and political strategies of department and program naming under the [WGSS] umbrella. The goal here is multi-faceted, but includes collecting information both on our current and historical naming strategies, and how they broadly apply to the way we construct ourselves within academic institutions. I do not romanticize this project as having some sort of universal impact on [WGSS] departments and programs, but I do hope that programs which may consider a name change in the future might look at this project while considering ways they may wish to change. I aim to reflect on the pressures and challenges that face the field as a whole, as well as the opportunities at hand today.

“the most restrictive educational gag order in the country” (Quinn, 2024; Young, 2024, as cited in Quinn, 2024). The interviews I conducted with researchers from Alabama came prior to this legislation’s establishment, so narratives on how this legislation will impact Alabaman [WGSS] programs and departments unfortunately cannot be included in this paper.
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The phrase “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies” does not entirely represent what scholars in the field actually study. We do not just study women; we study men and those crossing or outside the gender binary, too. We do not just study gender; we also study race and other systems of inequality. We do not just study sexuality; we study disability, ethnicity, class, (trans)nationality, and many other dimensions of identity and social hierarchy, too. It is this conglomeration of topics of study that embody [WGSS] but are unrepresented in the name itself that is, to me, a problem that we have come to face in this field. We are each studying what we believe is the nucleus of both women’s oppression, but also the oppression of people of color, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and all other marginalized peoples. Layli Maparyan describes this as the “liberatory impulse” that attracts each of us here from our individual yet interdependent movements and theories (2012, 19). This impulse brings us to [WGSS], but for many scholars, the phrase “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies” is not representative of what is really being studied. I believe that is what makes the naming structure of our field unstable and even contentious.

On top of this misrepresentation, there is perhaps no field with more accepted department names and naming styles. Programs that study history are under History departments. Programs that study psychology are under Psychology departments. There are numerous other examples, such as Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy, and so on. Programs that study women, gender, and sexuality are under Women’s Studies, Women’s and Gender Studies, Gender Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Feminist Studies, Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies, and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies — and many more variations with differing goals and aspirations, despite our collective beginnings.

The formal history of [WGSS] as a field begins in 1970, with the establishment of a Women’s Studies program at San Diego State University in California, but the story neither begins nor ends in San Diego (Ginsberg, 2008, 10). SDSU’s program was bore out of years of activism and relentless work from scholar-advocates and students alike who advocated tirelessly for the program’s founding, a department which today, over 50 years later, still goes by Women’s Studies and has seven degree, certificate, and minor options, including an MA program (Ginsberg, 2008, 11; Russell, Loftin, and Shayne, 2020). Following the founding of SDSU’s program, word quickly spread around the country that it could be done, and just over a
decade later in 1982 reportedly “over 300 women’s studies programs had been established on campuses throughout the United States” (Howe, 1982, as cited in Guy-Sheftall and Heath, 1995, 3). According to Marilyn Boxer, the second Chair of SDSU’s program, “[one] hundred and fifty new women’s studies programs were founded between 1970 and 1975, and another hundred and fifty were founded between 1975 and 1980” (1988, 73, as cited in Ginsberg, 2008, 15). This explosion shows that despite frequent backlash from conservatives and overall low levels of institutional support, the interest from students was there and continually growing.

Even in this first decade or so, conversations about what the phrase “Women’s Studies” meant or signified were already unfolding, particularly about what “kind” of woman the title was referring to. Non-white scholars in particular took issue with the way that many programs focused almost exclusively on or heavily prioritized the struggles of white women, as did lesbian scholars with the heteronormative curriculum (Ginsberg, 2008, 16–7, 19). As such, certain programs began to emerge which had an explicit focus on women of color, such as the University of New Mexico’s program, which held classes on Chicana women in its first year in 1972 and made “identifying ways in which ethnic issues could be incorporated into the women’s studies curriculum and the hiring of minority women faculty” a priority (Guy-Sheftall and Heath, 1995, 4). Discussions about the centering of white women in [WGSS] programs continued throughout the 1980s and 90s, and even to today (Guy-Sheftall and Heath, 1995, 7–8, 10–1, 14–5). Similarly, students and professors often debated the “activism vs. scholarship” so-called schism, another point of contention which continues at present (Ginsberg, 2008, 20–1). Despite these points of contention within [WGSS], the impact of the field was being felt in institutions beyond just [WGSS] classes. For example, a 1981 university-wide curriculum integration project at the flagship University of Arizona focused on design[ing] and conduct[ing] seminars for analyzing ‘major texts’ in feminist theory and discussing pedagogy in women’s studies … (limited for the most part to the writings of white women) … targeted to largely white, tenured male faculty because it was believed that this would have a more permanent impact on the curriculum. (Guy-Sheftall and Heath, 1995, 7–8)

Curriculum integration projects like these were common throughout the country, with the goal frequently being to “demasculinize” college curriculum and end sex and gender based discrimination on campuses overall. By one count, nearly 50 integrationist projects were in
process or completed in the early 1980s (McIntosh, 1982, as cited in Bowles and Duelli Klein, 1983, 3–4). These integration projects can in some ways be compared to the growth of diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI, initiatives on U.S. college campuses today.

[WGSS] continued to blossom throughout the second half of the 20th century. In the 1990s, attention turned towards the study of girls as well as the consideration of how and if “to include sexuality studies in women’s/gender studies” classes and degrees (Ginsberg, 2008, 25). Ginsberg continues by saying, “[a]lthough [queer theory] had always been a part of women’s studies and gender studies, it was mostly centered on two categories: lesbians and gays. It did not include to any great extent bisexuals, transsexuals, or transgendered people” (2008, 25). For many students, the incorporation of LGBTQ+ scholarship and queer theory into the classics of Women’s Studies was — and continues to be — crucial, and has led to additional conversations about further integrating Black, Chicana, Native, disability/crip, migrant, and other marginalized forms of feminist theory into the base curriculum. In the last few years, [WGSS] has become an even more critical part of the institution, as many universities turned to [WGSS] departments and programs for (often unpaid) assistance in formulating and incorporating DEI initiatives campus-wide. There is an argument to be made that [WGSS] has given more to the institution than it has received (Guy-Sheftall, 2020).

The rich and storied history of our departments cannot be forgotten, and in an era of heightened anti-gay, anti-trans, and anti-gender rhetoric and legislation, it is as paramount that we take retrospective action in reviewing our programs from top to bottom. As part of this project, I consider whether the field might benefit from a more representative nomenclature. This is important to me in particular as I have come to [WGSS] during this time of attacks from both neo-liberals and neo-fascists (forces that threaten not only [WGSS] but also the livelihood and survival of those associated with the field, and academia as a whole). Conversations about the field’s intentions, consequences, and futures can be entered through the gateway of considering our name, what it means to us, what it means to those outside the field, and what it means for those we study.

Discussions about what to call [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies] within the institution have existed for as long as there have been calls to institutionalize. Wendy Kolmar details a conversation she participated in at Drew University in the mid-1990s, in which every name suggested was commented on with “a dismissal of some past version of the field with
which the speaker would not wish to associate our program” and accompanied by “some preferred present version which was implicitly current, a better reflection of the ‘now’ of the field” (2012, 225). This need to stay with and reflect the “present” day is perhaps no more important than in the field of [WGSS], wherein perpetual forward progress is the implicit goal. How, then, can we be sure that our name reflects this goal? Does it reflect this goal? Is this even the real goal of the field?

There are many places in which this discussion can start, but I would like to turn to a few points to begin. There are some questions, often unspoken but hotly contested, within the boundaries of the field of [WGSS] that are at play here in this conversation. Namely, I would like to discuss the following:

- The Belonging Question
- The Institutionalization Question
- The Definition Question

The Belonging Question
Why do so many feminist academics not identify with [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies]? Why are so many [WGSS] courses housed within other departments but then offered to students with a [WGSS] label on top? Why do so many professors “see WGS[S] as a site of teaching” but “not a permanent residence or a professional proving ground?” (Braithwaite 2012, 220; Allen and Kitch 1998, 290). Why is it that so many students identify as feminists, enjoy taking [WGSS] classes, agree with the general progressive sentiments of [WGSS] faculty, and advocate for social change in their free time, but have never considered majoring or minoring in the field? This is the Belonging Question: who chooses to come to [WGSS], who does not, and why?

Perhaps the field’s lack of sufficient consideration about what it actually means to be a “discipline” partly relates to the question of who sees themselves as part or not of the field (Braithwaite 2012, 215–6). Braithwaite asks us to consider what is the ultimate goal of [WGSS]. Is it, as Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein posit, to become “incorporated into the disciplines so that eventually Women’s Studies as a separate entity will become obsolete?” (1983, 1–2). Are our intentions to ultimately [WGSS]-ify all other disciplines, such that Women’s History is just History, and Queer Biology is just Biology? Or do we want to be
separated indefinitely? We as members of the field must undergo these difficult yet critical self-reflections. We do not have to — and likely would not — all agree on the answer. But there needs to be wider conversations around what we aim to accomplish within academia and how that affects who joins the field as students and as faculty members.

Kolmar encourages [WGSS] as a whole to find a way of thinking that leads us “toward a WGS[S] worth fighting for,” consisting of “histories of multiple locations, of multiple voices speaking, histories as complex, messy, and undecided as the present” (2012, 237). [WGSS] has and can continue to have something for everyone; as Piepmeier puts it, “WGS[S] is an exciting enterprise, academically cutting-edge, popular, and influential” (2012, 130). I suspect that the name itself is one of the factors that might be driving some people — both scholars and students alike — away from a feeling of belonging within the broader [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies] field. For one, as Braithwaite points out, the name itself is not used anywhere outside of academia, “where ‘feminism’ usually does that work instead” (2012, 212). This discrepancy makes it unlikely that those who have never received collegiate education in [WGSS] would feel any sort of allegiance toward the field, despite the fact that almost every population is discussed within [WGSS] classes. This difference in name between academic settings and activist circles also continues to widen the philosophical and interpreted divide between “ivory tower” scholarship and “boots-on-the-ground” fieldwork, a distinction that is at the heart of conversations about [WGSS] institutionalization.

The Institutionalization Question

The Institutionalization Question is a conceptually easy question to understand, but its roots stretch deep: should [WGSS], under any name, be a formal discipline or field of study within academia, and why or why not?

To be a feminist or scholar of [WGSS], one must inherently look to challenge the status quo of institutionalized power.4 There is no more classic example than fighting the structure of patriarchy, which influences how people can gain and receive status and shapes what statuses within society are desirable and which are not. Feminism in its various forms looks to challenge — and “dismantle” — the patriarchy and all patriarchal structures within societal institutions. If

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4 It is important to not conflate “all” feminists with “all” [WGSS] scholars, or vice versa; feminism and [WGSS] as a whole are not interchangeable, nor, as Braithwaite contests, should they be (2012, 210–1).
[WGSS] is to be an institutionalized form of feminism, does that not go against the very tenets of feminism itself given the oppressive underpinnings of various institutions? This question is beyond the scope of this project, but it is important to consider how we as feminists and scholars of [WGSS], who have always criticized institutions of power, deal with the fact that we are institutionalized within positions of cultural and intellectual power (Carrillo Rowe 2012, 294–5).\(^5\)

With this institutionalized power, [WGSS] scholars have gained a position of privilege as they are able to determine the formal academic study of numerous oppressed and marginalized groups. For starters, since the “studies” portion of the field, in its various instantiations, is only used within academia, those who are within the academic space of [WGSS] have inherently become the producers of the culture and ideology of the broader field. [WGSS] professors and scholars can determine what is taught, whom it is taught to, and therefore what information is replicated by students and future scholars. Academics within the field in this way mold both academic and activist practice and what their students know and care about. We still hope that a [WGSS] department — no matter its scholars’ compositions in terms of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or nationality — would teach Black feminist thought and the Combahee River Collective statement, or queer theory and the scholarship of Jasbir Puar, or transnationalism and the work of Chandra Mohanty, but we cannot be sure. Even when these pieces and this “canon” is taught, we cannot be sure that it is done so “correctly.”\(^6\) When it comes to academic research, again this institutionalized power rears its ugly head. [WGSS] scholars, and the funding sources that support them, determine who, what, when, where, how, and for how long specific marginalized groups and facets of marginalization are studied. Certain groups can and will receive more or less attention depending on the scholar, and we as a collective field can determine when the study of a topic has run its course and is therefore no longer worth studying, or when new ideas are worthy of being included.\(^7\) Without even

\(^5\) As British scholars in the 1990s posited, “do we have a viable alternative?” (Aaron and Walby 1991, 1–2).

\(^6\) This is to say, even when the “fundamental” piece(s) of a specific “branch” of feminism — such as Black, Chicano, disability, queer, Marxist, transnational, etc. — are taught by people who do not belong to the group in question, how can we be sure that those teaching are doing the piece(s) justice? If they were taught by someone who was misguided, how might they replicate this harmful rhetoric? How might this cycle repeat itself indefinitely?

\(^7\) To be clear, this is perhaps a point of contention within all institutionalized fields, but in one as closely tied to the (in)justice and livelihoods of people as [WGSS], we ought to be careful tenfold when considering these issues.
conceptualizing it as such, even the idea of performing research within [WGSS] has become a political statement of what is deserving of our attention and what is not.

Institutionalization is also a double-edged sword. Restraints, constraints, and expectations are placed on [WGSS] programs within the academy — both by the institution as a whole and by ourselves as a self-preservation tactic. Scholars in [WGSS] are compelled to publish articles and books, apply for grants, and bring prestige to the university, leaving less time for service and community work with and for marginalized groups which is not as shiny but (in)arguably more important. Time that could be spent taking direct action to reduce oppression is reallocated to budget meetings, marketing, and fundraising to keep the department alive. This widens the gap between the scholar and the activist, making the “ivory tower” ever taller. It must be considered that in this academic environment, some names will never be accepted broadly, as they may be deemed “too ideological” or full of “political baggage,” but time will certainly tell. It was not that long ago that [WGSS] programs themselves were considered this way.

As with the naming debate itself, this conversation is not new. It is the spiritual and intellectual descendant of the activism vs. academia arguments of early [WGSS]. Perhaps there is a middle ground, where [WGSS] can both stay within the formal halls of the institution, but also eschew its power. As hooks writes in “Theory as a Liberatory Practice,” “no gap exists between theory and practice” when “theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation” (1994, 61). This ought to be a fundamental principle of [WGSS]; without it, the relationship between [WGSS] and activist movements will “become tenuous at best” (Carrillo Rowe 2012, 296). When so much power has been bestowed upon us as a group of privileged and (em)powered individuals, we must be mindful in deciding what is considered theory, who are considered theorists, and what we put forward as the focus of the field as a whole. This is made clear through the Definition Question.

The Definition Question
What do we mean when we name ourselves Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, Women’s and Gender Studies, and so on? Who is included and who is excluded, whether explicitly or not? While this is similar to the Belonging Question of who feels like they are welcomed and who does not, the Definition Question is different in that this is where and when we as a field must decide who and what we mean when we call ourselves these names. As Maparyan explains:
[T]o enlarge on a quote made famous by the Combahee River Collective, “We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us” (1983, 275). Given the trajectory of the field’s evolution over time, however, the question becomes “who is ‘us’?” … Where [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies] could serve as a forum for dialogue … it paradoxically becomes a site of exclusion that reproduces existing conflicts, polarities, and elitisms, all in the name of “liberation.” (2012, 25)

What does it mean to define ourselves as scholars of [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies], when we do not just study women, gender, and sexuality? Are (trans) men and nonbinary people not welcome, as neither students nor professors nor subjects of study? Are scholars of race and ethnicity, class, nation, disability, or other oppressed groups not welcome unless they dedicate their study to a subset of women or non-cisheterosexuals within these groups? What is the line between what is [WGSS] and what is not [WGSS]? To frame it more broadly, if the research at hand does not study women, gender, or sexuality, but instead uses a feminist lens to study an unrelated topic, can the research still be considered [WGSS] research? And, if this is the case, then what exactly distinguishes [WGSS] scholarship from that done in other critical fields? These are the invisible, yet omnipresent questions asked by our field within its name that have not been fully contested and answered yet.

There was perhaps some intention by the “founding mothers,” as it were, to leave these questions unanswered. But just because we as scholars have not formulated answers does not mean the blanks were not filled in. As Carrillo Rowe points out, who was in the room when [WGSS] programs were founded determines who has been “inaugurated” as part of the program (2012, 307). When the first programs were being institutionalized, an “ostensibly universal category [of] ‘woman’” was formed “around the identities and experiences only of particular women” — those who were included in the formation of the programs (Carrillo Rowe 2012, 296–7). As such, in many programs — especially those whose members have not, for one reason or another, undergone a cohesive and thorough self-reflection process since their founding — the eponymous institutionalized “women” in [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies] is white, middle-upper class, cisheterosexual, Western, and able-bodied (Carrillo Rowe 2012, 296–7).

By centering — and continuing to center — this privileged woman in our programs, we have ostensibly defined which “us” has become the implicit focus of [WGSS] research. We
continue to unknowingly draw a line in the sand over what research is centered at the forefront of our field. This is not to say that work on non-white, poor, transgender, queer, non-Western, and disabled people is not happening within [WGSS]; in fact, one could probably make the argument that most scholarship within the field is on people who fall into one or more of the categories listed. However, this tenuous relationship between the origins of the field, the name of programs and departments in the field, who holds the power and makes decisions within it, and who and what is being studied is nonetheless pertinent and, as Carrillo Rowe says, “must be interrogated” (2012, 307–8).

Conversations and disagreements about belonging, institutionalizing, and defining within [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies] are ubiquitous, yet there have never been resolutions to these questions. Braithwaite says we ought to examine our status as a discipline and decide how we want to be perceived within academic and non-academic communities, but examinations by Wendy Brown in the 1990s left her feeling as though Women’s Studies “under that name” is not “different or more than the sum of its other academic parts” (Braithwaite 2012, 217–8; Brown 2008, 23). Evidently, institutionalization has won, although departments and programs in the field continue to have a tenuous relationship to their institutions. Yet with often insufficient integration between scholarship and activism and no other alternatives clearly available, how can we be sure this is the right path to take? (Aaron and Walby 1991, 1–2). Lastly, the status(es) of the “inaugurated” and legitimized titular “Woman” of [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies] has never been truly contested in the modern field despite the diversity and ever-expanding scope of the discipline (Carrillo Rowe 2012, 307).

Perhaps most interesting to me, although not often spoken about (at least in the pieces I reviewed) is the tendency of the field to give legitimacy to a particular sub-field every 10-15 years within the nominal core. What I mean by this is that there seems to be a historical trend within many programs and departments of beginning as Women Studies or Women’s Studies, then changing to Women’s and Gender Studies in the late 1990s to late 2000s, and then changing again to Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies in the late 2010s to now. Of course, this pattern is not necessarily universal, and it is difficult to gain an exact understanding of each

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8 For example, Yale University’s program in New Haven, Connecticut began as Women’s Studies in 1979, became Women’s and Gender Studies in 1998, and later became Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies in 2004, one of the first programs to make the switch. More on their program’s history can be found at https://wgss.yale.edu/about.
department’s history over time, but this trend is observable when reading about department histories on various university websites. It begs the question: might other categories be added in the future, perhaps even ones that are not considered right now? What about Race/Ethnicity, Class, Nationality, Disability, etc.? Or should those have their own departments? Might other name options be available, beyond the strategy of adding categories? Information from departments across the United States may answer these questions, or perhaps open up new ways of naming ourselves that alleviate structural problems that we face as a whole.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This project is guided by the following questions:

I. How are various [WGSS] departments and programs at universities and colleges of diverse sizes, locations, and demographics within the United States named?
   - How have those decisions around their names been made over time?
   - Why and when were changes made?
   - Who was involved in those decisions?

II. How does a department or program’s name impact its sustainability in this politically charged academic climate? How do names positively or negatively impact our departments and the field as a whole? Could a name change, for example, drive an increase in both academic enrollment and institutional respect?

III. What do the politics of naming reveal about the changes in the field, the challenges it has faced, and, perhaps, the opportunities that might be available for the field to not only survive but thrive within the academy?

Answering these questions may point to potential changes and suggestions for naming [WGSS] programs and related organizations. Should we continue with the acronymic nomenclature, perhaps adding, removing, or replacing some of the current letters/words? Should we make a new acronym altogether? Is there a different structure that might be able to better sum up the field as a whole? How can a name empower us against attacks? How may a name help to better support the department’s initiatives and visions? To borrow Maparyan’s classification, what

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9 One example of a divergent path is that of Bates College in Lewiston, Maine: the program began as Women and Gender Studies until becoming Gender and Sexuality Studies in 2017. More can be found at https://www.bates.edu/gender/.
should we call this “yet unnamed, global [liberation] movement”? (2012, 31; see also, Hawken 2007).

METHODS
Identifying the institutions and programs
To address my research questions, I conducted research that involved both quantification and analysis of qualitative data gathered. To start, I needed to first identify all the universities that offered any sort of [WGSS] program. Collecting data on the existing programs in [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies] began with Joan Korenman’s webpage, “Women’s/Gender Studies Programs & Research Centers.” Maintained since 1994 and last known to be edited in 2021, Korenman’s database is perhaps the most thorough collection of [WGSS] programs to date. She has compiled nearly 1,000 programs and resource centers across the world, with information listed for some on what programs are offered and what names they go by, sorted alphabetically and linked to the respective department website or catalog. While this information was an exceptional starting point and critical to my ability to compile a list of programs across the United States, unfortunately, many of the names are outdated and links are broken. I supplemented Korenman’s database with similar lists of graduate programs, namely from the National Women’s Studies Association’s “Ph.D. Program List” and Indiana University Bloomington’s Department of Gender Studies’ “Women’s, Gender, + Sexuality Studies Graduate Programs” and “Queer + Sexuality Studies Programs” lists. I also went through the last three National Women’s Studies Association Conference booklets and added any missing institutions for individuals who had attended or presented at the conference. Compiling all the universities listed on these sites together into a spreadsheet gave me a great foundation, numbering around 600 distinct institutions. However, I felt as though there were likely many programs not captured by this data, namely regarding smaller colleges and universities, or those that had started a program recently. As such, I used the U.S. Department of Education’s College Navigator tool to sort schools in each state based on their status as public or private. I then combed through each school listed — starting with public first, then private — and checked their listed majors, minors, certificates, and graduate programs to find if there were any programs that might fall under the [WGSS] umbrella (National Center for Education Statistics). In total, 736 distinct universities
and colleges in the United States were identified as having a [WGSS] degree- or certificate-granting program of some kind.

Once a sufficient — albeit, perhaps incomplete — list of 736 institutions was created, I then went to each institution’s program or departmental webpage and searched around to find what specific program degree or certification levels were offered at each school. The possibilities are listed in Table 1 and range from undergraduate certificates to doctoral degrees. Some institutions only had one program.\(^\text{10}\) Others had as many as eleven.\(^\text{11}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Possible degree or certification level(s) offered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2-year degrees</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate of Arts (AA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate of Science (AS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4-year degrees</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Arts (BA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of General Studies (BGS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Science (BS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduate degrees</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Arts (MA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Laws (LLM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Science (MS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Undergraduate certifications</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate (Undergrad)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor (Undergrad)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduate certifications</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate (Graduate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor (Graduate)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While collecting this data, I also gathered the contact name and email listed on the webpage, along with any additional department-wide emails that might be of use to someone either looking to apply or gather more information. If available, I also wrote down any information I could find on the website about the program’s first year either offering classes, degrees, or as a full department.

It should be noted that much of this data is limited to what is available on the university or college websites. Larger universities had dedicated webpages for their [WGSS] programs with departmental histories, newsletters, event calendars, and biographies on professors and even

\(^{10}\) Such as Alma College in Alma, Michigan, which has an undergraduate minor only.

\(^{11}\) Such as the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which offers a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Science, four undergraduate minors, three Doctorate of Philosophy, and two graduate certificates.
graduate students, while many smaller programs at smaller universities only had so much as a mention on a page about minors within other departments such as Sociology, English, or Political Science, or had numerous outdated or broken links and no listed program coordinator or contact. This may be as much of an issue with keeping information up-to-date online as it is a funding issue. Perhaps there is a hidden feedback loop here, where [WGSS] programs struggle to recruit new students because their information is hard to find on university websites, but their information is hard to find online because they do not have the resources to keep a webpage running and up-to-date. More data analysis would need to be performed to confirm the presence of this loop, but it is worth mentioning as an aside here.

Next, I looked to find the institution’s city and state and classify each location as either rural, suburban, or urban. These categories are surprisingly vague when viewed through the reference of raw numerical data, but I used a combination of classification values from the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Justice to create a chart that allowed me to assign each location a value based on their area by square mileage and population density (“About Geographic Areas: Urban and Rural”; Anderson 2020, 2–3; Table 2). For locations that fell in areas of the table where two possibilities are listed, such as an area with a size of under 25 square miles and between 1,000 and 2,500 people per square mile, the determination as to which categorization to list the location came from the total population of the municipality. Data on the square mileage of municipalities was taken from the Census Bureau’s 2020 “Gazetteer Files” and the “2020 Census Qualifying Urban Areas and Final Criteria Clarifications” notice (U.S. Census Bureau 2022).

12 For example, Murray, Kentucky, home of Murray State University, is 11.65 square miles in area and has a population density of 1,485.58 people per square mile. This puts Murray in the box within the table that reads “rural/suburban.” Because the population of Murray was over 10,000 people total, Murray is classified as suburban. On the other hand, South Bend, Indiana, home to numerous universities, with a total square mileage of 41.98 and a density of 2,464.57 people per square mile was classified as urban over suburban because the total population of South Bend is over 100,000.
Table 2. Determining a location’s status as rural, suburban, or urban

\[ ppsm = \text{people per square mile (population density)} \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>under 25 sq mi</th>
<th>rural</th>
<th>rural/suburban</th>
<th>suburban</th>
<th>suburban/urban</th>
<th>urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 - 40 sq mi</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>suburban</td>
<td>suburban</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over 40 sq mi</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>suburban/urban</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>urban</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again using the College Navigator, I went through each institution and marked it according to its governing authority, as either public 4-year, public 2-year/community college, private and secular, or private and nonsecular. I chose not to gather information on the specific religious affiliation because many colleges have become open to students of all faiths and do not actively enforce religiosity in their students. However, noting that the university does act on or is guided by faith-based principles in general is important in understanding how these institutions might treat [WGSS] differently from other disciplines or other institutions of similar size, location, demographics, etc.

I also wanted to see how different minority-serving institutions (MSIs) might name their programs differently. MSIs take many forms, and I specifically looked to track the following: Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Native American Non-Tribal Institutions (NANTIs), Alaskan Native/Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions (ANNHSIs), and Asian American/Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs). There is no overarching legislation in the United States over what classifies any given school as any specific MSI, and definitions vary based on cabinet department. I used the definitions laid out in Chapter 28 of Title 20 of the United States Code. More information on these criteria and how they are classified within the U.S. Code can be found in Table 3. For each applicable university or college, I would mark their status as a minority-serving institution. Again, it is important to note that funding disparities may lead to fewer MSIs offering [WGSS]
programs than predominantly white institutions (PWIs), or to MSIs having less money to dedicate to website upkeep. This should be kept in mind when viewing the final data.

Table 3. Classifying minority-serving institutions (MSIs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MSI Type</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Reporter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs)</td>
<td>Institutions founded prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with the intention to educate Black Americans</td>
<td>20 U.S.C § 1061 (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominantly Black institutions (PBIs)</td>
<td>Institutions that are not HBCUs, but more than 50% of students are receiving financial aid and more than 40% of students are Black</td>
<td>20 U.S.C § 1059e (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs)</td>
<td>Institutions where more than 50% of students are receiving financial aid and more than 25% of students are Hispanic</td>
<td>20 U.S.C § 1101a (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs)</td>
<td>Institutions governmentally controlled or charted by a Native American tribe</td>
<td>20 U.S.C § 1059c (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American non-tribal institutions (NANTIs)</td>
<td>Institutions that are not TCUs, but more than 50% of students are receiving financial aid and more than 10% of students are Native American</td>
<td>20 U.S.C § 1067q (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaskan Native/Native Hawaiian-serving institutions (ANNHSIs)</td>
<td>Institutions where more than 50% of students are receiving financial aid and either more than 20% are Alaskan Native or more than 10% are Native Hawaiian</td>
<td>20 U.S.C § 1059d (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American/Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions (AANAPISI)</td>
<td>Institutions where more than 50% of students are receiving financial aid and more than 10% of students are Asian American and/or Native American Pacific Islander</td>
<td>20 U.S.C § 1059g (2008)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lastly, I collected information about institutions’ statuses as women’s-only or formerly women’s-only colleges. Considering that these institutions’ current or historical guiding mission included furthering the education of women and other minority groups, having knowledge on
how they construct their [WGSS] programs and how successful these constructions are would be critical to understanding naming patterns as a whole as well. In this variable, each institution was classified as being one of the following:

- “Never women’s-only” — institutions which were at no point in their history women’s-only institutions.
- “Formerly women’s-only” — institutions which were at one point women’s-only but have since become co-ed, such as Radford University in Virginia, which began as a women’s-only college in 1910 and became coeducational in 1972 (“Our History”).
- “Merged women’s-only” — institutions formed from the merger of a women’s-only and men’s-only or coed institution, such as Harvard University in Massachusetts, which merged with the women’s-only Radcliffe College in 1999 (“History”).
- “Actively women’s-only” — institutions which continue to be women’s-only, such as Cottey College in Missouri.

With all of this data gathered, I was then able to move on to collecting departmental and institutional histories from the programs themselves.

**Department/program questionnaire**

Throughout the data collection, I was able to find contact emails for people associated with the [WGSS] program or department at 664 of the 736 institutions that had [WGSS] programs. Most commonly these individuals were department or program directors. I developed a simple questionnaire that I would send to these contacts, along with a short message about myself, the project, and an invitation to respond either via email, Zoom, phone, or another communication method that worked best for them. This questionnaire, which contains five questions, asks generally about the history of the program as well as specifically about the program’s name. Contacts were also encouraged to send archival documents when possible. These questions can be reviewed in Appendix 1.\(^\text{13}\) Responses to the questionnaire were collected from the beginning of January until around early March 2024. 173 of 664 departments and programs responded. Among the responses received, 70.1% were email narratives, 25.5% of responses were collected

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\(^{13}\) The questionnaire and general research approach was pre-screened by the University at Albany Office of Regulatory and Research Compliance/Institutional Review Board (IRB) and it was determined that no further IRB review was needed for this project per regulatory definitions 45 CFR 46.102(l) and (e).
via Zoom and Microsoft Teams meetings or phone calls, and the remaining 4.4% of responses were links to further information provided through email, such as websites, documents, or informational YouTube videos which contained the department or program’s history.

RESULTS

Institutions offering [WGSS] programs

As stated previously, 736 institutions in the United States offered some sort of degree- or certificate-granting program in [WGSS]. The specific characteristics of these institutions can be found in Table 4. These institutions were largely urban (43.89%) and suburban (43.48%), public 4-year schools (55.30%), non-minority-serving institutions (70.79%), and never women’s-only (85.73%). States with the largest number of institutions included New York with 71 (9.65%), California with 63 (8.56%), and Pennsylvania with 57 (7.74%). The number of institutions in each state can be found in Table 5.

In reference to minority-serving institution status, the number of each kind of MSI must be taken into account. For example, hearing that only 6 Native American non-tribal institutions (NANTIs) have [WGSS] programs may at first seem like an extremely low amount. However, once it is understood that there is only a total of 34 NANTIs in the United States, meaning 17.65% of NANTIs have [WGSS] programs, the lower number of institutions can be put into perspective. As such, the number of each MSI and the relative percentage of each MSI that had a [WGSS] program or department can be found in Table 6. The MSI totals were taken from the Rutgers Center for Minority Serving Institutions, using data most recently published in 2023 from the U.S. Department of Education (“MSI Directory”). Unfortunately, no tribal colleges and/or universities (TCUs) in the United States had [WGSS] programs, so these institutions cannot be included in the discussion of results. There is obviously a lot that can be said about why this is, but it might be partly influenced by the fact TCUs are chronically underfunded and struggle mightily with faculty retention (Al-Asfour and Young 2017, 46–7). TCUs often focus on job skills training, language preservation, and mentorship as a focus of their educational strategies, which leaves little room for many fields in their budgets (Ward et al. 2014, 2). There

14 These will be referred to as “[WGSS] institutions” from hereon.
is obvious budgetary need at TCUs in general, especially if there was a desire to start formidable [WGSS] programs among them, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Table 4. [WGSS] institution characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Characteristics</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>93 (12.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>320 (43.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>323 (43.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public, 2 year</td>
<td>35 (4.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public, 4 year</td>
<td>407 (55.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private, secular</td>
<td>133 (18.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private, nonsecular</td>
<td>161 (21.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MSI status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-MSI</td>
<td>521 (70.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>12 (1.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBI</td>
<td>7 (0.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSI</td>
<td>110 (14.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCU</td>
<td>0 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NANTI</td>
<td>6 (0.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANNHSI</td>
<td>5 (0.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AANAPISI</td>
<td>75 (10.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women's-only status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never women's-only</td>
<td>631 (85.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formerly women's-only</td>
<td>47 (6.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merged women's-only</td>
<td>38 (5.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively women's only</td>
<td>20 (2.72)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5. [WGSS] institutions by state

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution State</th>
<th>( n ) (%)</th>
<th>Institution State</th>
<th>( n ) (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>7 (0.95)</td>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>3 (0.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>2 (0.27)</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>6 (0.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>4 (0.54)</td>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>4 (0.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>5 (0.68)</td>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>6 (0.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>63 (8.56)</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>22 (2.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>13 (1.77)</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>3 (0.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>13 (1.77)</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>71 (9.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>2 (0.27)</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>17 (2.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District of Columbia</td>
<td>5 (0.68)</td>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>3 (0.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>14 (1.90)</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>28 (3.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>21 (2.85)</td>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>5 (0.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawai‘i</td>
<td>4 (0.54)</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>9 (1.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>4 (0.54)</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>57 (7.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>28 (3.8)</td>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>4 (0.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>20 (2.72)</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>10 (1.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>10 (1.36)</td>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>2 (0.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>7 (0.95)</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>10 (1.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>14 (1.90)</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>35 (4.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>7 (0.95)</td>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>9 (1.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>8 (1.09)</td>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>4 (0.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>18 (2.45)</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>20 (2.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>37 (5.03)</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>17 (2.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>21 (2.85)</td>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>5 (0.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>20 (2.72)</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>21 (2.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>5 (0.68)</td>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>2 (0.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>11 (1.49)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6. MSI and [WGSS] institution status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MSI Type</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>12 (1.63)</td>
<td>12 (5.58)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>12.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBI</td>
<td>7 (0.95)</td>
<td>7 (3.26)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>9.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSI</td>
<td>110 (14.95)</td>
<td>110 (51.16)</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>20.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCU</td>
<td>0 (0.00)</td>
<td>0 (0.00)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NANTI</td>
<td>6 (0.82)</td>
<td>6 (2.79)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANNHSI</td>
<td>5 (0.68)</td>
<td>5 (2.33)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AANAPISI</td>
<td>75 (10.19)</td>
<td>75 (34.88)</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>37.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[WGSS] programs offered by institutions

At the 736 [WGSS] institutions across the U.S., a total of 1,464 different degrees and certificates are offered. This means that, on average, each [WGSS] institution offers 1.99 degrees or certificates. Specific numbers of each degree and certificate offered throughout [WGSS] institutions can be found in Table 7. Of the 1,464 total degrees and certificates offered, more than half (52.12%) are undergraduate minors. About one-fourth (23.43%) were Bachelor of Arts degrees.
The three most common names were “Women’s and Gender Studies” with 383 programs (26.16% of all programs), “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies” with 326 programs (22.27%), and “Women’s Studies” with 113 programs (7.72%). The top twelve most common names across the United States (listed under “Unique Ideas”) can be found in Table 8. These twelve names account for more than 87% of all programs in the US.
Table 8. Most common names for [WGSS] programs in the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unique Ideas</th>
<th>ID #</th>
<th>Different name concepts</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women’s and Gender Studies</td>
<td>GW.02</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>383 (26.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies</td>
<td>WG.04</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>326 (22.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's Studies</td>
<td>WO.01</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>113 (7.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Studies</td>
<td>GE.01</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>110 (7.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and Sexuality/ies Studies</td>
<td>GS.02</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88 (6.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and Women's Studies</td>
<td>GW.01</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>88 (6.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies</td>
<td>WG.01</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>46 (3.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies</td>
<td>WG.02</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>37 (2.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ Studies</td>
<td>LG.11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27 (1.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer Studies</td>
<td>LG.15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25 (1.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality/ies Studies</td>
<td>LG.18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17 (1.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Studies</td>
<td>FE.02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15 (1.02)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the 1,464 degrees and certificates, 181 different names were used. Many of these were similar variations of the same concept,\(^{15}\) while other names were the same words in different orders.\(^{16}\) Each of these names, no matter how slight the difference, were counted as unique, as it was hypothesized that there may be specific, strategic reasons why one program would choose to go by “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies” while another chose “Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies.”

**Coding the names**

In order to understand the results, I classified the vast amount of name variations through a two-step coding process. In Step 1, the names were grouped into unique concept groups. In Step 2, each name was given an ID number that corresponded to its concept group.

The first step consisted of defining the individual concepts for each name. Some were simple, such as the groups that were created for each specific iteration of the words “Women’s,”

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\(^{15}\) For example, “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies,” “Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies,” and “Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies” all reference the same concept despite their name variations. These were all paired under the same code.

\(^{16}\) Such as “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies,” “Gender, Women’s, and Sexuality Studies,” or “Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies,” which contain the same words in various orders.
“Gender,” and “Sexuality.”\textsuperscript{17} Other concepts were developed for names that contained different elements for them, including a group for degrees and certificates focused on ethnicity or race as well as a group for those with feminism in the title. A full list of these concept groups, their descriptions, an example of each, and how many names and programs belong to each group can be found in Table 9. For each group, a two-letter code was assigned to differentiate the groups and allow for discussing the concepts in a more abbreviated fashion.\textsuperscript{18}

In the second step, each individual name was alphabetically given a two-digit code as an addendum to the group abbreviation.\textsuperscript{19} This made each unique degree or certificate name have a unique identifier that also signals its overall concept group.

Using these unique names made comparing the individual name concepts with each other much easier. It also allows for the broader grouping of names with similar concepts to be compared to each other as a whole rather than individual name comparisons.

\textsuperscript{17} For example, some concept groups include: Women (exclusively), Women + sexuality (exclusively), Gender (exclusively), Gender + sexuality (exclusively), Gender + women (exclusively), Gender + women + sexuality.
\textsuperscript{18} AP for the “Applied lens” group, AM for the “Art and media-focused” group, and so on. These are also listed in Table 9.
\textsuperscript{19} The first name under the “Ethnicity and/or race-focused” group, Africana Women's Studies, received the code ER.01; the second name, Black Women's Studies, received ER.02; and so forth.
Table 9. [WGSS] degree and certification name concept groups

SGD = sexual/gender diversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept groups</th>
<th>Abbr.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example name</th>
<th>Unique names</th>
<th>Total degrees/certificates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applied lens</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Shows an applied lens</td>
<td>Applied Gender Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art and media-focused</td>
<td>AM</td>
<td>Includes a focus on art and/or media</td>
<td>Gender and Media</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative lens</td>
<td>CO</td>
<td>Shows a comparative lens</td>
<td>Comparative Women’s Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development lens</td>
<td>DV</td>
<td>Shows a development lens</td>
<td>Women and Development</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity studies lens</td>
<td>DI</td>
<td>Shows a diversity studies lens</td>
<td>Gender and Diversity Studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity and/or race-focused</td>
<td>ER</td>
<td>Includes a focus on ethnicity and/or race</td>
<td>Africana Women’s Studies</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist lens</td>
<td>FE</td>
<td>Shows a feminist lens</td>
<td>Feminist and Gender Studies</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (exclusively)</td>
<td>GE</td>
<td>Exclusively includes gender</td>
<td>Gender Studies</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender + SGD (exclusively)</td>
<td>GS</td>
<td>Exclusively includes gender and SGD</td>
<td>Gender and Queer Studies</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender + women (exclusively)</td>
<td>GW</td>
<td>Exclusively includes gender and women</td>
<td>Women's and Gender Studies</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender + women + SGD</td>
<td>WG</td>
<td>Includes gender, women, and SGD</td>
<td>Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls’ studies-focused</td>
<td>GI</td>
<td>Includes a focus on girls’ studies</td>
<td>Girls’ Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global perspective-based</td>
<td>GL</td>
<td>Shows a global perspective basis</td>
<td>Global Women’s and Gender Studies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health-based</td>
<td>HL</td>
<td>Shows a health and healthcare basis</td>
<td>LGBTQ Health and Wellbeing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History-based</td>
<td>HI</td>
<td>Shows a history basis</td>
<td>Women’s and Gender Studies and History</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity studies-focused</td>
<td>ID</td>
<td>Includes a focus on identity studies</td>
<td>Gender and Identity Studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersectionality-focused</td>
<td>IN</td>
<td>Includes a focus on intersectionality</td>
<td>Gender and Intersectionality Studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, justice, and public policy</td>
<td>LJ</td>
<td>Shows a law, justice, and/or public policy basis</td>
<td>Women, Gender and Public Policy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership-focused</td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>Includes a focus on leadership</td>
<td>Women, Gender, and Leadership</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ/SGD (exclusively)</td>
<td>LG</td>
<td>Exclusively includes focus on sexual/gender diversity</td>
<td>Queer and Sexuality Studies</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration studies lens</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Shows a migration studies lens</td>
<td>Gender Studies and Migration</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural-focused</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>Includes a focus on multiculturalism</td>
<td>Multicultural Women’s &amp; Gender Studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power studies lens</td>
<td>PO</td>
<td>Shows a power studies lens</td>
<td>Gender, Power, and Difference</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion and/or spiritual lens</td>
<td>RL</td>
<td>Shows a religion and/or spirituality lens</td>
<td>Women’s and Gender Studies in Religion</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science, tech, and STEM</td>
<td>ST</td>
<td>Shows a science, tech, and/or STEM basis</td>
<td>Technology, Gender and Diversity</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social justice lens</td>
<td>SJ</td>
<td>Shows a social justice lens</td>
<td>Gender and Social Justice</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women (exclusively)</td>
<td>WO</td>
<td>Exclusively includes women</td>
<td>Women’s Studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women + SGD (exclusively)</td>
<td>WS</td>
<td>Exclusively includes women and SGD</td>
<td>Women’s, Transgender and Queer Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questionnaire responses
When the collection of departmental questionnaires finished in early March 2024, I had received 173 responses, equaling a response rate of 26.05%, and over 15,000 total words on naming politics and histories around the United States. Responses came from rural, suburban, and urban institutions in forty-six of the fifty states.20 Additionally, every kind of funding status, MSI status, and women’s-only status were represented. While the response rate and sample type (non-probability sampling) do not allow for generalization, the answers gathered in this still substantial sample stand to provide a wealth of information to understand the politics of naming our field.

Email narratives and audio recording transcripts were compiled to create a document of qualitative responses. These responses were then coded using an eighteen-point coding system in the QDAMiner Lite software then transposed into a corresponding text document that allowed for sorting responses by assigned code. This software allowed me to quickly select sections of transcript and use a combination of keys to assign certain quotes with different IDs corresponding to different trends I observed throughout interviews.

It must be stated at this point that for many of the individuals I spoke with at institutions across the country, the information requested was either difficult to find or had been lost to time. I would hear frequent stories of program founders who had retired or passed away and taken the departmental, historical knowledge with them. Apologetically, these contacts would say, “I can’t answer that, I’m sorry,” or, “The only person who could have told you that answer was our founder, and she died three years ago.” The programs and departments with these narratives were often small, located in rural or conservative areas, and/or lacked the capacity required to create comprehensive departmental histories that could be kept on file at the office, on websites, or in the college library. The people I spoke to are correct — there is not anything we can do to recover this information once it has been lost. But it is my view that we owe it to future scholars and students to capture our history as it is now so that we are better able to understand where we have come from and where we are going. However, because there are gaps in what information each institution could provide, I do not include these “unknowns” where they exist, for the sake of consistent data that compares just the variables that we are certain of.

20 The only states which I did not receive any responses from were Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, and Wyoming. I also did not receive any responses from Washington, D.C.
A wide variety of program lengths were also represented in the collected questionnaires. Institutions reported having first held classes relating to “Women’s Studies” as far back as 1968 and as recently as 2022. Similarly, institutions reported their programs being established as early as 1971 and as recently as 2023. The average date of first classes was late 1980, with the average date of program establishment being late 1987.

Among those that answered, 84.09% of institutions reported having held a different name at one point in their history, meaning more than 5 out of every 6 programs have had a name change. The reasoning behind why or why not a program decided to change its name will be discussed more broadly in the following section, but to begin, I turn to analyzing the numbers behind these changes. Of programs that had changed their name, 89.19% had at one point in their history held the name “Women’s Studies” or “Women Studies,” and had since taken a new name. 18.31% of programs reported having changed their name twice in their history, with all but two having started as “Women’s Studies.” In total, 80.77% of programs that had gone through a name change twice began as “Women’s Studies,” then became either “Women’s and Gender Studies” or “Gender and Women’s Studies,” and then at a later point changed again to their current name.

Most commonly, faculty affiliated or housed within the department or program were the deciding force involved in decision-making around name changes. 61.8% of programs that had changed their names reported that faculty were the only ones involved or that students were only invited to give feedback on name suggestions rather than contribute to the discussions or vote on possible changes.

DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT THEMES

Why we have not changed

1. Budget or size restrictions

Near universally, social justice-oriented programs in this study have been experiencing budget squeezes, hiring freezes, and/or the cold shoulder from deans and provosts. [WGSS] departments and programs have faced these issues for decades, and have developed numerous strategies for survival within the institution. However, these strategies for survival often pertain to just that — only surviving, not thriving, nor expanding or proverbially “dreaming big” for the program as a whole. There just is not space for dreaming when even the slightest misstep or error could lead to
the dissolution of the program as a whole. These sentiments were reflected by those who I spoke to. One Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program located in Minnesota said it best: “We are really a survival project at this point.”

All across the country, in both conservative and liberal areas, at universities and colleges alike, [WGSS] programs spoke of their unease and the precarity of the relationship they had with their administrators. When asked if they were considering any name changes in the future, a Senior Lecturer from a Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies program in the Northeast replied:

To be honest, no, and it’s nothing about, like … it’s nothing about, how do I say this? … I think in a different world, we would absolutely be having those conversations. [But] our program is so, like, we’re just bare, like we’re barely holding on, like we have no resources, we have no faculty, and so, I think it’s like we don’t even really, like … we can’t even get faculty for enough classes to offer most of the time. So I think it’s, it’s almost just from that, like, pragmatic survival thing that it’s just like, we’re not thinking about changing the name. … From my own standpoint, I could definitely see a time in the future, if our program was stronger, that we might, like, revisit a name change. … But yeah, honestly, it’s just, like if I have, like, a priority list, it’s just, I don’t … it’s just like not even on the list right now.

This Senior Lecturer was able to capture the feeling of hesitancy, trepidation, and nervousness that often fills those responsible for a [WGSS] program’s future. Her pauses, the cautiousness with which she chose her words, and the urgency in her voice as she described the desolation that has befallen her program reflect the sparse conditions of many [WGSS] departments that leave us without the resources or energy to devote to create any further changes, regarding the name or otherwise.

One reason why some programs, despite budget restrictions, do change their name is to help boost enrollment and hopefully spark positive momentum within their institution. But for others, this still is not possible despite the desire. The director of a Women’s Studies program and Center for Women’s Studies in suburban Alabama outlined in an email to me a series of conversations that had been had to no avail:

Several years ago, there was a new coordinator for the Center for Women’s Studies, and we had discussed with them a proposal for changing the name for the Center, but not for
the minor. We have really low numbers in our minor and are struggling with keeping it. We tried adding some other classes to it but couldn’t find a department that would cross-list the WS [Women’s Studies] class with them. We do not have dedicated faculty for the WS minor. All the classes are cross-listed with another department.

Despite the desire from the program and the Center to both add classes and possibly coordinate a name change, a lack of institutional support from other departments to cross-list their classes or from the university to provide the program with dedicated faculty funding lines made the expansion of the program impossible. This inevitably creates a feedback loop in which the university will see the minor as having few enrolled students and will therefore not provide additional funding, while students see the minor as having no resources and therefore not desirable to pursue or take classes in. Unfortunately, this cycle can rarely be broken without either an understanding and charitable administration or a large surge in student enrollment in the program, both of which are unpredictable and unreliable.

II. Institutional bureaucracy

Even in universities and colleges where there is some widespread support for growth and change of [WGSS] programs, institutional bureaucracy and “red tape” stand in the way. For [WGSS] faculty who are already supporting extra classes, a large service burden, numerous outside professional affiliations, and continually bearing the load of the program’s survival on their shoulders, the additional weight of a name change is far beyond what can be handled by just a few faculty. A Women’s and Gender Studies program at a private religious college in urban Wisconsin described their hesitancy as follows:

To be honest, the reason we have not changed the name is because of the work involved. At our college - especially in recent years - the administration has continued to increase our workloads, with no reduction in other work and no additional pay. Everyone who teaches or is involved with [Women’s and Gender Studies] is overworked and has too many responsibilities. So a name change and the work it would entail is very low on the priority list to put our energy into.

Responses like these can easily be tied back to the previous section: when budgets are small and workloads are large, there is no space left for change, only for preserving the status quo, no matter what that status quo looks like. A similar sentiment was echoed by a lecturer from a
Women’s and Gender Studies program in suburban New Jersey, who remarked: “Changing the name of the program is probably not in the cards, on account of how much hassle it was to add ‘Gender’ fifteen years ago. Maybe someday we’ll all have the energy to push it through the curriculum process! But today is not that day.”

For others, the red tape involved in a name change required not only additional unpaid labor but also additional eyes on the work being done by academics who are usually left largely to their own devices. A Women’s and Gender Studies department at a suburban Hispanic-serving state school in California wrote of the process: “As part of the CSU system in California, a department name change requires going all the way up through the Chancellor’s Office, which is a high bar — so we are not interested in going through that level of state-wide scrutiny any time soon” (emphasis mine). A similar process — and hesitancy with said process — was described by a professor of Women and Gender Studies in urban Colorado. While the nature of [WGSS] scholarship leads to programs and departments being looked over in budget discussions, it also allows for some level of autonomous functioning, shielding departments and programs from greater surveillance within the university system. For some programs and departments, the protection of this shield was understandably more important than any real or perceived gain that might come from a name change or other structural reorganization.

**III. Not enough degree options or relevant classes**

For Women’s Studies or Gender Studies programs, the interest in adding “Sexuality” or some other similar derivative to the title was often hampered by the relevant classes being offered. Here, of course, budget problems once again rear their ugly head. A Gender Studies program in suburban Mississippi simply stated that despite the desire to do so and relevant non-academic programming in the area of Sexuality Studies sponsored by the program, “we do not yet offer enough courses on sexuality to justify changing the name to Gender and Sexuality Studies.”

A dean at a religious private school in suburban Iowa who was previously affiliated with the Gender Studies program at the institution described the process of deciding which name they would select when changing from Gender and Women’s Studies in 2023:

When [we] were looking at the possible name change, there was a possibility of putting Sexuality Studies in as well. That was one of the options to go to, ‘Gender and Sexuality Studies.’ But that ultimately ... [w]e decided not to include Sexuality Studies, mostly
because when we looked at the courses we actually offer as part of the minor, maybe only one or two of them talk about sexuality directly and so by including it in the name, it’s kind of false advertising. If we say that it’s a Sexuality Studies minor people who sign up for that might be expecting it to be more representative of sexuality, like that there might be more biology in it or something like that, and it- there’s really not. Ultimately, the inability of the program to offer sufficient classes on sexuality resulted in the decision to change to Gender Studies instead of a more expansive name. Again, we see the desire to provide more for students reflected in the statements made by department contacts, and, again, we see that the full extent of these desires could not be met.

For other universities, Sexuality Studies was “outsourced” to other departments to ensure that it would be offered, such as a Women’s and Gender Studies program in the Northeast. There, a Queer Theory certificate program is being started in a department of philosophy and religions, and “not in [Women’s and Gender Studies], in part because [the program] is not [Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies].” This is another example of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which Women’s and Gender Studies programs cannot offer Sexuality Studies-related degrees in certificates because they do not have “Sexuality” in their name, but they are not able to change their name to include “Sexuality” because they do not offer relevant degrees.

Sometimes, however, even having the relevant certificates, minors, and degree programs was not enough: a professor emerita from a Women’s and Gender Studies program in suburban Michigan wrote that there had been some “discussion of changing the name to Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies” following “the launch of our LGBTQ Certificate,” but that nothing had ever come of the conversations. A Women’s and Gender Studies department in urban Pennsylvania gave a similar remark: “We have talked once or twice about adding ‘Sexuality’, especially since we added a Sexuality Studies minor a couple [of] years ago. I’m not hearing that as a priority, though, at this point.” These statements could also be seen to reflect, once again, how academics within and affiliated with [WGSS] programs face overburdened schedules and strenuous workloads. Both the program in Michigan and the department in Pennsylvania implied desires to change which faded away or were backgrounded by other priorities or responsibilities, despite the addition of minors and certificates which might have permitted or even necessitated a name change.
IV. Surrounding conservative political environment

While neoliberal budget cuts impact the survivability of programs on the inside, external forces often play just as big, if not larger, of a role in determining the extent to which [WGSS] departments and programs can grow or thrive. Perhaps there is nowhere that is more impacted by these conservative policies than Florida, where anti-intellectualism, sexism, and neofascist ideals collide to snuff out any state-funded initiatives focused — or perceived to be focused — on diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI. The previously discussed “Don’t Say Gay” law in Florida, in conjunction with similar legislation that, among other goals, aims to weaken and dismantle [WGSS] programs, has already begun to cause some institutions to shutter or remove funding. I received questionnaire after questionnaire from universities and colleges in Florida, all desperate to have their stories heard and relayed beyond their circles. For one university in particular, the legislation had completely halted planned changes to the program:

I was working with some other faculty and trying to figure out how we could make the program work … [S]o we were actually going to incorporate a lot more classes with race and diversity, so we were thinking of calling it “Gender and Diversity Studies,” and so keeping the gender and sexuality aspects in there, but bringing in courses, like, on African-American writers and civil rights history, and bringing those in, too, as options for students. So we actually tried to do that and were told to leave it alone. … If our enrollment was higher in the major, that would probably change things. We were told the reason not to change the name was because “Diversity” is worse than “Women” … so that was what put that on hold, and then we’re like, “Well, can we make the other curriculum changes anyway and keep the name [as it is]?” And they were like, “no”, so … at this point we can’t really offer an effective degree program, and so that’s a lot of the reason why we are just going to shut it down [temporarily], hoping we can bring it back in an improved form in the future. [Following the closing of the degree program,] none of the horses are going away, so I mean, we’re still gonna teach Black women writers, and we’re still going to teach, you know, it doesn’t matter. And, again, hopefully we will be able to bring it back …

While many [WGSS] programs around the country experience a day-to-day struggle with survival, programs in Florida discussed feeling like they were, at times, in active war zones. Contacts shared tangential experiences of having individuals who were not university students
enter their classes to yell at them about how they were engaging in “indoctrination” or
“grooming,” making both professors and students fear for their safety inside the classroom. In
environments like these, survival is about more than just continuing to keep a program alive. For
the university mentioned above, which has had to shut down its degree-granting major but has
been allowed to keep the undergraduate minor, this meant coming up with new strategies for
institutional survival before semesters even begin:

[O]ur dean has supported us as best as she can, and is just like, you know, “we’re gonna
try to keep going.” There’s certain things we can’t do that are too obvious. We kind of,
like, hide things in [documents]. Like now our syllabi for classes, we don’t give [the
students] the real syllabus that we have to turn in. Like, we keep all of our themes and
course schedule separate… The syllabi we turn in [to the state] is like “here are these
basic learning outcomes, here you go” … We will give [the state] what they ask for, and
that is the bare minimum.

For this program, which has had to shut down its major and contend with little resources, it is
imperative that all precautions are taken to ensure the continuation of the minor, even if that
means submitting a syllabus that omits the information not required by the state. Despite all of
these burdensome precautions, members of this program felt that they were one of the lucky ones
in the state due to their positioning within the broader political climate of the state as a whole:

I will also say that we are in a better location than other schools. First of all, we’re
smaller, and second of all, we’re over here … in a very conservative, Republican area, so
we’re harder to attack. It’s way easier to attack the schools in [liberal] Miami or
Gainesville. … We’re kind of in a little better situation.

Indeed, schools located in more liberal cities did describe situations of all-encompassing
surveillance. For one Women’s and Gender Studies program, this meant removing all
programming on anything social justice or “DEI”-oriented from the campus:

Essentially what we’ve been told is that as long as we’re not getting, we’re not using state
funds to [host events], it doesn’t matter. So we can use student money, anything- students
can do anything they want, they’re completely free. So the only thing we have to be
careful with is, like, are we giving a talk that is, you know, on [DEI-related subjects]
during work hours in work space. But if it’s 7 o’clock, downtown, that doesn’t matter. So
there’s all these like, basically … we just try to go around things and do the best we can
to keep doing what we’re doing and to keep supporting our students and to keep teaching what we need to teach, without calling attention to ourselves.

Regardless of the difficulties faced from government, administrative, and individual pressures, survival strategies had been employed by [WGSS] departments and programs all throughout Florida to ensure that they were still able to provide equitable and instructional environments for their students to learn in. This is yet another example of difficult and additional, unpaid, unrecognized labor done by the faculty of [WGSS] departments for the betterment of their marginalized students who are living and learning in conservative environments that look to disenfranchise them — and that is an experience not unique to Florida.

In neighboring Georgia, a Gender and Women’s Studies program at a public university has experienced pushback when trying to add a major to their program, regardless of the major’s name, despite high enrollment in the minor:

We have written three different majors because we’ve been asked by upper administration to, but Georgia politics … the climate here has never allowed it to go down [to Atlanta] and get approved. So it has been put forward as “Gender and Sexual Diversity Studies,” “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies,” and then we had “Applied Gender Studies.” None of those went through. So now it’s still just “Gender and Women’s Studies.” [We’re] a big program, we have tons of students but we don’t, it’s not … it’s not the climate for us to add things, unfortunately.

This department Chair also described how graduate programs at larger universities in the state had experienced direct attacks that had also made her hesitant to expand or change outward-facing aspects of the program, such as its name or curriculum:

[A]t one point when we were [looking into] changing it to “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality” and we were putting forth the major, there was a call from [the Georgia] legislature: “Anything that mentions sexuality in the curriculum, you have to come and defend in front of … the legislature.” And so there were people from [larger institutions], because they had graduate programs, who were having to go and defend their classes on Gender and Sexuality Studies. So it’s not a good climate.

This surveillance harkens back to the fears over governmental and/or institutional scrutiny that might arise from a name change discussed in the “red tape” section. Even for programs with high enrollment, dedicated faculty, administrative support, student interest, and large endowments, the
benefits that might come with a name change do not justify the toll that would come with having every syllabus, course reader, and pedagogical method analyzed in depth for political reasons, and these problems are even more exacerbated at departments that lack sufficient funding or wider support from their institutions. At one public university in Mississippi, keeping the name as “Gender Studies,” despite the evolution of faculty work and interests was as much a political decision as it was a way to ensure that already dwindling resources were put to good use: “The political climate in Mississippi is such that the external backlash [from becoming Gender and Sexuality Studies] could potentially threaten an already under resourced program. I prefer to keep the program focused on doing important work in the areas of gender and sexuality, even if our name remains the more generic Gender Studies.”

For other [WGSS] departments and programs, the name “Gender Studies” is in and of itself a shield from legislation that would aim to destroy their programs. At a suburban HSI in Texas, a Gender Studies program said that they could not change their name even if they wanted to, because

in Texas under Senate Bill 17, we HAVE to keep it Gender Studies or we could lose the ability to have [the program]. SB 17 is an anti-DEI initiative for public schools in the state that says if anything is diversity-oriented and NOT open to all students on campus that it is illegal to have such a program. So if it had “women” in the title, as I understand it, the program would be cut. But because everyone has a gender, Gender Studies doesn’t violate this bill.

Despite the fact that classes under any iteration of the Women’s Studies moniker are open to all students regardless of gender identity or any other personal characteristics, Texas’ Senate Bill 17 has deemed [WGSS] programs as “exclusionary” to men if they include the word “women” in the title (McGee 2023). This Gender Studies program, which was established in the mid-2010s and has never held any other names, is able to skirt some of the ire of the Texas legislature simply by having a name that is seen as less political than names that include “women” in the title, regardless of what the original goal of the program’s name was.

In political climates such as these where there is little opportunity for [WGSS] professors or students to discuss with lawmakers what is actually being taught and why these classes are important and necessary, strategies for survival are numerous and often pertain to specific
environments and external factors. Regardless of the situation, departmental contacts continued to voice their combined exhaustion and determination to keep up the fight.

V. Other complicated political environments
While some programs face conservative politics that aim to erase all education perceived to be “DEI”-related, other programs find themselves in more complicated and varying political environments that require their own analysis. In suburban Virginia, for example, a Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program at a private college is hesitant to remove the word “Women” from its title due to the mix of students they see enrolled in the program:

[This institution] is a fairly conservative-leaning liberal arts college and that means that we get essentially two types of students. … We get the students who … many of them are queer students, many of them are students of color, and for them, the kind of “Gender and Sexuality” [aspect] is often really important. But we also get some students who are, I would say, fairly conventional, and for whom, you know, they are kind of- they’re drawn by the more Women’s Studies thing, which is to say that … the students who’ve said like, “I’m a Women’s Studies minor”, they’ve been often quite conventional, sometimes from quite religious backgrounds, … not necessarily politically on the left, whereas the Gender and Sexuality students tend to be a little more, you know, I would say, a little more kind of leftist [in] politics and [have] more marginalized identities, and I think that I want to kind of make sure that we’re serving the students who want to be here because I think we really offer tremendous value to that wide spectrum.

For this professor, serving both types of students — both those who identify with Women’s Studies and those who identify with Gender and Sexuality Studies — was an important reason behind keeping the name as is. For conventional students, who announced themselves as “Women’s Studies minors” instead of with the full title, the inclusion of the word “Women” in the title of the program was a necessary element for them to continue their affiliation with the program. At the same time, some of the more progressive students would not have felt like they could align with the program if it bore only the name “Women’s Studies.” In situations like these, a compromise where both aspects are kept in the name despite the length continues to be the best way to make sure all students feel valued and welcomed.
At a community college in rural California, maintaining the name Women’s Studies was important to continue student support and continue focusing on important dialogues as well. The department Chair wrote that “[q]uite frankly, given the current state of the world and especially the political situation in the United States, I suspect that a suggestion to change the name would be met with concern. The students in my classes have been very clear that they want the focus to be on women.” Although not explicitly stated by the department Chair, I imagine that having a singular focus in this Associate’s program was doubly important given the shortened degree time to completion. With so much to discuss and so little time, keeping “the focus on women” would allow for ample time to be put on the issues of Women’s Studies without diluting the issues of it or Gender and Sexuality Studies, and also provide students with the necessary baseline skills to move on to a Bachelor’s degree in [WGSS] or similar disciplines.

Some programs that were not considering changing their names to this point noted to me that my inquiry sparked discussions that were not happening before. Others said they were not considering name changes as of yet due to being relatively new programs or having recently gone through name changes. Regardless of the situation at their institution both internally and externally, many contacts echoed the sentiment presented to me by the director of a rural Wisconsin Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program: “It is important to me that our program reflects the changing field, so I fully expect the name will change … at some point in the future.”

**Why we changed**

I. **To reflect changes in the broader field and similar institutions**

All across America, [WGSS] programs and departments are feeding off of each other’s momentum. As a relatively self-reflective field, it should come as no surprise that numerous [WGSS] programs reported months or even years of internal discussion about how their name compared to programs at institutions of similar size or in neighboring areas. In Maine, a rural public university changed its name to Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies in the early 2010s to mirror the names of [WGSS] programs at other public schools in the state. A program in Utah that formed in 2023 went with the name “Gender Studies” to align with what other [WGSS] programs in Utah were named. A private college in Minnesota was renamed to Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies in 2008 to reflect the state-wide University of Minnesota model.
Anecdotes like these came from Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin as well. Regardless of location, [WGSS] departments looked to peers to ascertain naming trends. A Hispanic-serving community college in rural California described the reasoning behind an upcoming change from Women’s Studies to Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies as “to keep in line with national trends,” while an urban university in Wisconsin said a document outlining a 2014 name change from Women’s Studies to Women’s and Gender Studies included the desire “to be in sync with national and state trends.” The desire to be seen as a united front — and, perhaps, the fear of being left behind if a program was seen as not progressive enough — was a paramount reason for these institutions to undergo a name change.

Even when other specific institutions were not the guide, the evolution of the field as a whole provided a roadmap for those looking to evolve their program. For a private university in urban Georgia, one of the “[m]ain reasons/arguments in favor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies” was “[i]ncluding ‘Gender’ and ‘Sexuality’ in our name accurately reflects shifts in the field over the past four decades.” Similarly, an urban university in Maryland stated that “[i]n fall 1998 the Women’s Studies Program was renamed the Program for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality (WGS) to remain current with developments in feminist scholarship and queer theory, and to integrate the more wide-ranging fields of gender and sexuality studies.” A private religious university from urban Illinois wrote that a name change to Women’s and Gender Studies “was based on just the field itself,” while a suburban university in Massachusetts said that a 2009 name change to Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies was spurred “after years of discussion” once “[a]ffiliated and core faculty recognized the fact that the field had changed since the program’s founding.” These numerous stories, from departments and programs of all different shapes, sizes, and environments show a clear, collective inclination of the field to move forward rather than stay stagnant. However, it also shows that there is some belief in the broader field that programs that continue to be named Women’s Studies are prone to being left behind.

II. To better reflect the courses and course material being taught

Similar to the reason why some departments could not or would not change their names, aiming to be reflective of the work being done was important for departments that changed their name after curriculum changes. An HSI in Rhode Island which recently changed its name from
Women’s Studies to Gender and Women’s Studies said that their “courses have increasingly focused on sexuality over the past decade or so” and that the recent addition of a Queer Studies minor made it “appropriate” for the program as a whole to shift its title in accommodation. A previously discussed community college in California also wrote that an upcoming name change to Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies was in part “to reflect our actual curriculum which uses a feminist intersectional lens.” Here we can see a desire from program heads to make sure their departments and programs are advertised correctly, and ensure that their names accurately reflect the work being done. For students who are surfing lists of majors and minors offered at a college, the inclusion of words like “Gender” and “Sexuality” in the title can make all the difference when deciding what to choose.

While many programs with little institutional resources or widespread support felt the lack of classes in a discipline was a reason to limit the addition of words like “Sexuality” into the name, one program in urban Indiana took its name change as an opportunity to challenge themselves to add more courses with time. Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, commonly referred to as IUPUI, had its Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program featured in a 2022 book on Indiana University women’s history. In it, the authors describe the program’s journey towards including “Sexuality” in its name:

Including sexuality as the final descriptor spurred some discussion about the offerings, or lack thereof, in the current program. Most were won over by the two-pronged argument that first, sexuality was a central issue in many, if not most, of our course offerings; and second, this final term could be seen, in former director [Dr. Nancy] Robertson’s words, as “aspirational,” providing a broader umbrella as we expand course offerings in years to come. (Dobris, Turner, and Wilcox 2022, 356)

For Robertson and the others involved in naming the IUPUI program, providing themselves with an “aspirational” umbrella to work under allowed for their future course material to be reflected in the already present name.

One Gender Studies program also wrote of discussions around the name when the program was being established: “We wanted to make sure it wasn’t Women’s Studies because we had faculty working on masculinity studies and sexuality studies we wanted them to be

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21 This institution is referred to by name due to its history’s inclusion in a published book.
include in courses and programming.” Here we see how the desire to reflect curriculum meets with the desire to make sure faculty interests are showcased, an interest of many programs.

**III. To reflect changes in faculty and department research interests and areas of expertise**

A Women’s and Gender Studies department at an HSI and AANPISI in urban California informed me in the simplest terms that the reason they changed their name from Women’s Studies “was for the name to more broadly reflect the work that we are doing,” with “we” referring to the faculty of the department. For this department, like with the Gender Studies program discussed above, making sure that faculty work was recognized, in part, by the name of the program under which they worked was critical not only for the way the program was reflected externally but also for faculty retention. A program can demonstrate the importance of an individual or group of individuals’ work through a name change which accommodates and creates space for that work. As one urban university in Maryland put it, “[r]enaming the program … reflects the program’s deep commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship [and] the capacity to respond to changing faculty interests.” Similarly, an urban university in Wisconsin said that a change to Women’s and Gender Studies was necessary as the new name “better reflected our broader disciplinary agenda/purview because it included gender and sexuality research and teaching, not restricted women.” Other programs reported that evolving their name was to “better reflect the work of questioning gender binaries and hierarchies” being done by faculty in the department. These departments saw the name as a tool to both mirror the internal work being done to outsiders, as well as praise and recognize the work of core faculty.

**IV. To become a more sustainable and viable program within the institution**

Even when change was desired or seen as necessary, it was, at times, still predicated by the need to be seen as a viable investment by administrations and “higher-ups” and to increase student enrollment. In rural Kentucky, a Women’s Studies program decided to become Gender Studies in the mid 2010s in the hopes of “appealing to” and “pull[ing] in more LGBT students.” Similarly, other institutions saw the name “Women’s Studies” as too restrictive in who it appealed to, and discussed their hopes that name changes would “increase enrollment by attracting a wider variety of students.”
In some cases, the changes made to increase viability went beyond or in tandem with name changes. A Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program in suburban South Dakota wrote that they felt that they were unable to keep their minor afloat without broader institutional support, which spurred a 2022 decision to move the minor to “become housed in the School of English and Interdisciplinary studies to provide greater visibility and stability.” The affiliated faculty had deemed the move a success, since enrolled “minors have increased from 7 to 20 in a year and a half,” a nearly 200% increase in students. Changes like these, which are often hidden from or not acknowledged by students, can have widespread positive impact on programs. For a private, formerly women’s-only college in suburban Michigan, proposed budget cuts to both Gender Studies and Ethnic Studies led to the creation of a merged Ethnic and Gender Studies program. While the optimal situation would, of course, have been able to keep both programs autonomous, a merger allowed for the pooling of collective resources — both monetary and personnel related — that allowed for all faculty to stay with the institution. Strategies for survival like this one employed in Michigan are perhaps another tool to keep in the [WGSS] director’s toolbelt.

V. To reflect changes in the student population and their interests
In many areas of the country, it can be hard to find students who are interested in minoring or majoring in [WGSS], especially among students who are not women or are not queer. But that trouble is not always necessarily a result of the institution’s location; in the case of one university in suburban Missouri, the name seemed to have been the culprit. Throughout my conversation with the director of the program, I learned that at this university the program now known as Gender and Sexuality Studies had gone through a recent name change, completed in 2023. Previously known as Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, the director told me that they had seen declining enrollment in the minor, as is the case for many [WGSS] programs across the nation, and had been doing some internal reviews to assess why and what could be done. She said that having both “Women” and “Gender” in the name was always confusing to me, even as a student of [Women’s and Gender Studies] in undergrad. So I wanted to drop [“Women”] from the name to emphasize that everyone has gender and we’re not just talking about women. … We did a couple of focus groups on campus and one thing we found with the name “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality
Studies” is that cis male students were really ... nervous about it and were ... not interested in taking our classes. We then showed them a syllabus or showed them some descriptions of classes and then they were like, “Oh, that sounds really cool, I think I would like that.” But they had been really scared off by the name.

The results of this focus group led to the program reconsidering its name, and was a deciding factor in the ultimate decision to remove “Women’s” from the title. In this particular case, it is perhaps too soon to tell what sort of long-term effects this name change might have on enrollment in the minor, but there is hope that the change will pull in more students who are interested in the relevant areas of study who would not have considered the minor under the previous name. Similarly, in suburban Washington, a Women’s Studies program polled its enrolled students in 2018 about a possible name change, and “they chose Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies” because “it was already a national signifier in use around the country, and it was a good umbrella name which could encompass both feminist studies and queer studies, as well as the arguably less overtly political gender studies.” While not always possible, including students in the decision making as was done at these schools in Missouri and Washington is a great way to stay up-to-date with the preferences of the students at a particular institution. Additionally, it allows for students to have a say in a process which often excludes them and is usually seen as largely undemocratic. Even if students cannot be directly interviewed or surveyed, other means can be used to keep them involved.

In urban Colorado, the affiliated faculty of a private university’s Gender and Women’s Studies program “voted last spring [in 2023] to add the word ‘Sexuality’” to their name, and are currently “awaiting administrative approval, but hope to have it changed officially by the fall [2024].” This change, they say was prompted by “students and exit interviews/surveys,” which pointed towards an interest in an updated name to reflect their interests. While this program may not have been looking for suggestions on name changes, they received enough comments from graduating students on the name to conclude that a change was needed.

At other institutions, the students’ suggestions have even overtaken the preferred names of faculty. At a private religious college in suburban New York in 2016, considerations were being made around what to rename a Women’s Studies program, involving both faculty and students. They eventually settled on Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, but this
conclusion was not reached unanimously. When asked whether any other names besides the one settled upon were considered, I was told:

[We considered] Gender Studies. This was actually my preference, and the preference of a few other faculty, but students — three fabulous minors in particular — argued strongly for Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, to keep women in the name but also recognize gender (diversity, fluidity) and sexuality.

Here we see how this program centered student preference first, allowing for the constituents of the minor to have their voices heard. This allows students to feel a greater connection to the program whose name they helped to influence. The former director of a program that was contemplating a name change in suburban Iowa told me that when they “polled the current minors and said, ‘If we had called it Gender Studies, would you have been less likely to choose this minor?’ … every single one unanimously said, ‘I wish it were called Gender Studies.’” This data allowed them to feel comfortable making the switch, knowing that no students would feel disenfranchised or “cheated” by the name change.

There can sometimes be hesitation when students are involved in decision-making that has a level of importance that are perhaps not accustomed to, especially around decisions that will last long beyond when they graduate or leave the institution. But the results for those I spoke to who involved their students in name changes have been overwhelmingly positive. At a public ANNHSI and AANAPISI in urban Hawai’i, embracing the student-led change has paid off:

My reservation about it was that students already knew us as Women’s Studies and I was worried we might lose some name recognition that way, but I also feel like that in retrospect I’m glad we did it. [My worries have] been more than outweighed by that, the currency of the new name. The new name has a currency in the lives of our students.

VI. To become more inclusive and/or intersectional in focus

More often than any other reason, department contacts said their [WGSS] program had changed its name to create a more diverse, welcoming, and inclusive environment for students and their academic and research interests. Fostering inclusive spaces for learning and growth is/should be a paramount tenet of [WGSS] academia, and numerous programs felt that it was important that the name reflect the changing culture of what is considered inclusive vernacular. For a university in urban Illinois, that started with re-examining what it meant to include the word “women” in
the title. The interim Chair of the department told me that when they were considering changing from “Women’s Studies” in the early 2000s, they interrogated the idea that by only including women in the title, they left out a larger subset of marginalized individuals being studied:

[The faculty were] recognizing that the term “women” could often be seen as really limiting in a way. Because often when people think “women” [or] “Women’s Studies,” they think white women. So a part of [our self-examination process] was [considering] the term itself, the idea that everybody is the same, women were all the same. But also that a lot of feminists’ work is also interrogating masculinity, also race, class, gender, nation, ability … [W]anting to add on gender [was] a way of signifying … the idea of social constructionism and multiple identities and I don't think we were thinking right then of, like, gender non-binary and trans folks, [or] genderqueer folks, but I think all of that was kind of part and parcel of a conversation saying we needed to broaden out to gender.

At this Midwest university, the aim during their renaming process was to make sure that any new name they chose was all-encompassing of those in their department and classes. This meant reconsidering whether the word “women” was really inclusive of those it claimed to be, and they came to the conclusion that no, “Women’s Studies” alone did not lend space to those who were studying many kinds of feminisms. In the end, this department chose to become Women’s and Gender Studies. Similar conversations were had in the early 2010s at a university in rural Indiana, where members of a Women’s Studies, where the decision to become Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies came to fruition because

the members of the steering committee were eager to move from a limited focus on “women” to a more intersectional analysis of the production of genders in relationship to other axes of difference (race, sexuality, class, nation, dis/ability) and openly make more room for courses on masculinities and on sexuality studies and queer theory.

In suburban Minnesota, a name change from Women’s Studies to Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies was born out of “a desire to be more expansive, more inclusive” by “including queer work [and] work on masculinities,” as well as remove the “stigma” that Women’s Studies was “very narrowly concerned with only women and not sexuality and/or gender, more broadly” that they felt was associated with Women’s Studies. A university in urban New Jersey chose to become Women’s and Gender Studies rather than remain Women’s Studies since, plainly, “it
sounded more inclusive,” and in urban Maryland changes were made to a program’s name “to integrate the more wide-ranging fields of Gender and Sexuality studies.” A department in Massachusetts became Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies to indicate that “rather than a singular focus on women’s experiences and oppression, women and gender should be studied in relation to race, class, and sexuality,” in part because these “categories are now conceptualized as dynamic, historically specific, and mutually constitutive, [not to be] understood in isolation from one another.” The Executive Committee of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan’s official letter to the University’s Regents cited “growing concerns about inadvertent ‘signaling’ in the current name (i.e., the possibility that ‘Women’s’ alone risks appearing non-inclusive)” in the September 2019 proposal for a name change to Women’s and Gender Studies (Curzan 2019).  

For programs and departments that have started more recently, such as the previously mentioned program in Utah, names like Gender Studies were chosen because they were seen as “broader, more inclusive designation[s] than Women’s Studies.” These numerous examples are just a drop in the bucket of the ocean that is the responses I received relating to name decisions focused on inclusivity and intersectionality. Program and department directors continually relayed to me that they and their colleagues had made the decision to use or add the word “Gender” to their titles as a result of growing sentiment that “Women” alone was not inclusive, or did not truly reflect what the goal of the department and field actually was.

Considering there are over 180 different names used by programs across the country, there are no doubt hundreds of different stories as to why one name was chosen above another. One unique program I had the chance to speak with is located at a public university in rural Maryland. Here, just this year, the faculty were preparing to go through renaming from the “Women’s Studies” title which had been in place since the 1980s. For them, the decision came down between Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and the name they ultimately went with: Critical Gender and Sexuality Studies. The coordinator told me, “the way that [my co-worker] described it was like, [‘Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies’] would get us to like, where the baseline is, where you should be moving to now, and the new one puts us as progressive, ahead of the curve.”  

This understanding, that Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies would put the

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22 This institution is named directly due to this document being publicly available online.

23 Emphasis mine.
program “at the baseline,” was not enough for these faculty. They felt as though if they wanted to keep pace with or even overtake programs and departments at bigger or more well-funded institutions, they needed something that made them stand out.

Everything revolved around basically whether we put “Women” in or not. Why we settled on “critical” is because we wanted to signify that like, this was part of our honoring the tradition of Women’s Studies without necessarily having to keep “Women” in [the title]. We still wanted to honor that and part of it was that, like, Women’s Studies has always been — should have been — a feminist discipline … aiming to be progressive … and so we wanted to, like, preserve that legacy and make sure that people know that it’s not just anyone who talks about gender fits in here, it’s anyone who’s talking about gender in a critical way fits in here.

This was an important distinction for this program. [WGSS], to them, means going beyond the status quo. It means a constant, considered dedication to examining systems of power with a critical lens. To this program, the name “Women’s Studies” alone did not capture this critical nature, and “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies” was seen as not progressive enough, so therefore they carefully — and critically — changed their name.

Simultaneously, however, many departmental contacts I spoke with were concerned with reflecting or conserving their or the field’s history in some way. Considerations around history at large will be discussed at length in a following section, but these conversations were often relevant in relation to whether or not to remove the word “Women” from the name of a program looking to become more inclusive. For example, the following statement came from a professor in a department in suburban Pennsylvania that reckoned with how the name “Women’s Studies” might sound to a student who had never engaged with the field before, while still looking to keep the rich history of a discipline which has always looked to subvert the academic norm:

Part of [the name change] had to do with the recognition that queer and trans studies has become such an important part of the work that we’re doing and that there’s a number of folks who don’t identify as women … Women’s Studies, unless you really know the history, the history of how inclusive the academic department was intended to be, it can feel very off-putting and not very inclusive and welcoming. At the same time, we wanted to keep the “Women” in there as the signifier of the historical importance of Women’s Studies as a discipline, but adding “Gender and Sexuality Studies” to also, you know,
note that we’re also interested in masculinities and various sexual identities and expressions. So that was part of it, just becoming more inclusive.

For this department, keeping “Women” in the name was seen as important to preserving their history, but using “Women’s Studies” alone was no longer sufficient to encompass everything being studied. A program in urban North Carolina had a similar line of reasoning when considering a name change from Women’s and Gender Studies in 2020. While there was a collective interest in adding “Sexuality” to the title, there was some disagreement as to what to do with the rest of the name.

We wanted to add the word “Sexuality” to the title to recognize the field’s (and students’) growing interest in issues of sexuality. Some of the older faculty felt it was important to retain the word “Women” for historical reasons. In the end, we opted for Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies as the most inclusive.

Here, we once again see how “Women” gains a historical status which makes it important to keep cemented in program names, while allowing space for the evolution of “Gender” and “Sexuality” into the name. In suburban Michigan, similar conversations were had when considering “Women’s and Gender Studies” or just “Gender Studies.” The longer title was decided on, as many of the faculty wanted to keep the focus on women — whose experiences and accomplishments were still being ignored and/or distorted across most of the rest of the university’s curriculum at that time — while still making space for these other issues — masculinity studies, gender studies, inclusion of LGBTQ issues in the curriculum.

Gender Studies was indeed decided against by some programs due to the fear that using it might once again exclude the women whose original disenfranchisement led to the creation of Women’s Studies. A university in suburban Virginia said they had “debated” using Gender Studies during a 2009 name change, but they worried that it might be construed as leaving out women. They decided on Women and Gender Studies as “it was still important to the constituents [of the program] that we name our history, but … still in the spirit of inclusion.” An urban community college in Minnesota relayed a similar path to the name Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies, stating that the “department opted to not use [Gender Studies] as it wasn’t inclusive enough and we wanted to honor the origins of the program. The focus of the program still wants to center itself on women’s lived experience across gender identity and sexuality.”
This focus, they believe, could be added to the name Women’s Studies, without erasing or subjugating any part of the discipline above or below another. The associate director of a [WGSS] center at a private university in urban Texas likewise said that choosing to add “Gender and Sexuality,” in that order, to the name “Study of Women” was a conscious choice aimed at signifying historical progression in the field:

There was an ordering — a word ordering — question, because when the name changes people get the opportunity to reconsider, “are we the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality?” And there was a very considered conversation to keep “Women,” and to keep “Women” first in the name. One version of an argument supporting that was that it signals the historical sedimentation of these critical terms over time in that order: women, then gender, then sexuality. It was meant to forbid us from subsuming women under gender, and it was also meant to not hide [that] sexuality was part of what we do.

This pattern of naming based on a “historical sedimentation” is one that is increasingly being reflected in names across the country. As previously stated, “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies” and the grammatical variations of it in that order have become the second-most common name for [WGSS] programs in the United States, after only “Women’s and Gender Studies.” While it is impossible to conclusively say when these two names overtook the classic “Women’s Studies,” I was able to plot the historical progression of the names for the institution profiles I received. This graph is attached as Figure 1. Of note, “Women’s Studies,” identified by “WO,” encompassed more than 80% of the names until the early 2000s; today, less than 10% of the programs I received data from were still called “Women’s Studies,” while “Women’s and Gender Studies” (GW) and “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WG) each make up about one-quarter of today’s names. These numbers accurately reflect the field as a whole, as can be seen when comparing the collected data to the most common names list in Table 8.
In reality, every program’s history and name change choices are unique, no matter how similar their stories are to one another. There are pages upon pages of further comments and notes I received about every facet of naming and renaming, far beyond what could feasibly be included here. However, I wanted to turn to how the concept and consideration of history commonly weaved itself into conversations around name changes in one final section of the discussion portion of this paper.

**Why we have changed and why we have not: Considering our history**

As has been observed in the previous sections, many conversations around name decisions revolve around the inclusion or exclusion of the word “Women.” For some programs, there exists a long and rich history of scholarship in a discipline strictly named “Women’s Studies” which spans decades, connects to the life’s work of dozens of women scholars — often including
those who have passed on — and is a thoroughly entrenched and well-respected part of its respective institution. Here, “Women’s Studies” as a standalone means more; it points to the founders of the discipline, the fundamental texts, the struggles of the first classes, and the women who made it happen. Here, the phrase “Women’s Studies” — to borrow from a professor emerita from the urban Hawai’ian institution mentioned earlier — has currency. At some institutions, this means “Women” will never be removed from the title, at least not for the foreseeable future; at others, it means the name will never change from “Women’s Studies” alone.

Stories from the latter kind of department or program were few and far to come by in my analysis. My theory is that perhaps they saw my email, read that it was on history of naming decisions and changes, and believed that they did not fit into the research, or that perhaps I was only interested in those programs who were moving to more “modern” or “progressive” names. It is also possible that programs with this story just did not see my email; I might never know, and there is certainly more room for future research into this subset of programs.

However, more frequently, I received replies from contacts who emphasized to me why they continued to have “Women” in the name, and why they felt the need to defend the word’s continued inclusion. Their reasoning was to pay homage to a history that they feared would likely otherwise be forgotten. For many, this history included an understanding that while the term “Women’s Studies” might feel limiting or exclusive by today’s standards, that has not always been the case. This was the case for one public university in suburban Pennsylvania, where the department head told me about why she feels hesitancy around removing “Women” from the title of her Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department:

I think it’s important to note that names matter and, you know, I was one of those people who was originally not excited about doing any of the changes at [my previous institution] — and if I had been part of [my current institution] at that time, I would have done the same thing here — but that’s because I have a PhD in Women’s Studies and I’ve been doing this work for so long, I know that it has always had the intention of being inclusive. So I felt like it was almost a slight to not acknowledge that history by adding additional categories.

For this professor, adding qualifiers like “Gender” and “Sexuality” felt in some ways like an insult to the original name, as if saying, “We all know ‘Women’s Studies’ alone does not
actually include the study of sex, sexuality, and gender.” In urban California at an HSI and AANAPISI, similar conversations were had during discussions in the early 2010s.

[T]here was one faculty member who wanted to, like, get rid of “Women’s” and have it just be “Gender and Sexuality Studies” and I kind of pushed back and was like, “well, there’s a history in this name, you know? I’m not saying it should only be Women’s Studies but we should at least honor the history of Women’s Studies.” So that’s why we went with “Women, Gender, and Sexuality” instead of “Gender and Sexuality.”

This sentiment and verbiage, specifically the word “honor” and its synonyms, appear frequently in the notes I received regarding history. The University of Michigan mentions “preserving [and] honoring local institutional history” in the aforementioned letter to the University Regents as one reason why there has been resistance within the department to a name change (Curzan 2019). A North Carolina public university wrote that many older and retired faculty “felt it was important to retain the word ‘Women’ for historical reasons, and a private school in urban Illinois wrote that they decided to keep “Women” in their title following a 2022 name change because “there were those faculty … who had created the program and had [the name include] ‘Women,’ and they didn’t want to lose it.” A community college in Minnesota noted that “Women” was kept in their name in order “to honor the origins of the program” which “still wants to center itself on women’s lived experience across gender identity and sexuality.”

Specific university circumstances also, at times, contributed to the importance of keeping “Women” in place, such as at a NANTI in suburban Oklahoma which has had the name Women’s and Gender Studies since its founding in 2010 explicitly “to pay homage to the history of our university, which was [a local Native American nation] National Female Seminary.” This university’s status as an institution which serves a large body of Native American students and was born from, in part, a seminary for women of a local Indigenous nation meant there was particular care and delicacy in keeping “Women” in the title of its [WGSS] program. Similarly, in rural Mississippi, the Chair of a Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department at a formerly women’s-only university said that, “[g]iven our historic mission, we felt it was necessary to continue to highlight women in our name.”24 These stories surely reflect the

24 “Our historic mission” here refers to the institution as a whole.
sentiments held by many more programs around the country, which owe their name and place in
the institution to the actions of women’s groups in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Other departments saw “Women” as an umbrella term, the inclusion of which signaled to
the broader academe that the examination of intersections between [WGSS] and other disciplines
was welcome here. The director of a program at a public university in an urban center in
Louisiana told me that “Women” in their Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program
served as “the big tent,”

which is to say that an economist, for example, might feel comfortable working under the
rubric of women, [but] doesn’t necessarily feel comfortable working under the rubrics of
gender and sexuality. … [B]ecause our unit has a lot of people who might not operate
well under the ambi of “Gender and Sexuality”, it was important for us to, you know,
maintain … both the historical name and then to, kind of, add these additional terms.

Members of this program felt that maintaining a proverbial open-door policy to scholars in other
disciplines through the inclusion of the word “Women” in the title was important. This was
perhaps induced, in part, by the fact that this program felt they were relatively “late to the game”
for an institution of their size, having started their degree-granting program in 1991. To cement
themselves in the institution formally and grow as a program, it was necessary to leave space for
non-[WGSS] scholars to feel like they could work under the program’s name. At a suburban
Maine public university, a similar line of reasoning was employed to justify the name “Women
and Gender Studies.” A professor emerita told me that the “desire to keep ‘Women’ was mostly
among those of us who do historical work.” She continued:

The work of reclaiming women’s lives inside and outside of various roles in history has
never been finished. Some of us found the idea of women as a historical construct
important for doing that work. … Professions and disciplines are very different in terms
of where they are in this process. For example, some social scientist[s] have been doing
work about gender and constructions of gender for a very long time. English departments
have included the work of women novelists for much longer than philosophy for
example. So in [the philosophy department], there is still very little recognition of women
and women’s work, let alone complex constructions of gender and sexuality. There are
people working in these areas, but the majority of philosophers consider it marginal and
not necessary to much philosophy. You can see this by the fact that their work is frequently not cited or even considered.

This professor was clear that the continued use of the word “Women” within the title of Women and Gender Studies was not indicative of a lack of “reclaiming diverse gender ideas” and other marginalized individuals, but was rather a demonstration “that some of us still consider the category of ‘Woman’ helpful in looking at history and specifically misogyny.” The distinction at the university — that “Women” ought to continue to be included in the title as a recognition that some other disciplines continued to ignore or subjugate women scholars, but that did not mean there was no space for the inclusion of “Gender” in the title — was one reflected by programs in urban Illinois, suburban California, suburban Vermont, and urban Georgia. Across the country, [WGSS] programs and departments are holding tight to their history, well aware that if they do not continue to tell it, it will surely be lost forever.

**Where to go from here?: There is no perfect solution, only imperfect estimations**

If you desired to finish reading this project with a clear answer of what the one name we should all have is, I will have surely let you down by this point. There is no one “correct” name, and in many ways, it is perhaps admirable that, as a discipline, we have continued to have our unity in spirit and direction with such a divided nomenclature. I would argue that one name has never been the goal, and to believe that a cohesive name would fix any or all problems unilaterally is probably a bit too optimistic.

However. Names do matter. I believed as such coming into this process, and it was clear to me that it was true from the very first response I received. A name alone cannot increase enrollment, stop fascist attacks, balloon a budget, or retain faculty. But a name can — and does — signal the intentions of a program, focuses what direction a program is moving in, and implies a lot to those who view it while saying very little. It is because of this that programs must be intentional with their name choices.

I have had many departmental contacts I spoke with ask me what my chosen, universalizable name for [WGSS] would be. I would, of course, relay to them what I have just written above, that there is not and probably should not be one name, that one name would not and does not fix our problems, and that the intention of our discipline should not and likely will not ever be to force cohesion or conformity on those who study within it. “But,” they
nevertheless ask, “what would you do?” With hesitation, and the knowledge that I am young and 
bright-eyed, and that no one name is perfect in every way or for every situation, I provide my 
thoughts on this below.

If you want the simplest answer I can provide, I would probably say my favored name is 
“Gender and Sexuality Studies.” But I am of the firm opinion that, as it reads on paper, 
“Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies” does not accurately portray what it intends to. Nor do 
“Gender and Sexuality Studies,” “Feminist Studies,” “Women’s and Gender Studies,” 
“Women’s Studies,” or many of the nearly 200 other iterations. These may have been names 
which were accurate depictions in previous decades, but, as has been relayed by many programs 
which have elected to change their names in recent years, these names are no longer accurate to 
the ideas and situations of today’s students and culture. Beyond just that, the names are often 
long and unwieldy and lend themselves to being truncated, despite the fact that they often do not 
even encompass everything being studied by their constituent academics. Within [WGSS] as a 
whole, we find scholars who may not say that women, gender, or sexuality are any of their 
research foci, but instead focus on climate justice, Indigenous rights, decolonization, Marxism, 
or any other number of topics; we find ourselves, as Maparyan says, as “an attractor point, an 
energy organizer” for a broader liberatory impulse without a name (2012, 32). My worry, and 
one reflected by Maparyan, is that “there is so much ‘going on’ that [WGSS] … is very close to 
becoming an empty signifier” (2012, 19).

So, what to do about all this? Even if we could solve all our problems with a name, the 
answer is surely not to add more words. We cannot be Departments of Women’s, Gender, 
Sexuality, Race, Disability, Queerness, Ethnicity, Feminism, and Multiculturalism Studies. But 
what does it mean that today we privilege the categories of women, gender, and sexuality above 
all others? Again, I mirror Maparyan in my fear that we might “paradoxically become a site of 
exclusion” in our quest to include as many people as possible while deliberately choosing those 
who can and cannot be given the honor of a place in our title(s) (2012, 25). Is it time to move 
beyond the [WGSS] nomenclature? If so, what might be the implications?

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25 This was also a fear I heard from some departments I spoke with; namely a suburban public university and rural 
public university, both located in Pennsylvania. The professor emerita I spoke to who was affiliated with the rural 
institution told me that “[t]he problem that we’re trying to address is in ‘Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality and Queer 
Studies,’ but it is also in Race Studies, and Africana Studies, and Latinx Studies,” yet none of those names capture it 
all.
I have been reflecting on stories which I have heard from many departments I contacted that in some way mirror the situation occurring at my own institution. In many places, [WGSS] programs are struggling due to institutional disinvestment. And our sister programs may be struggling even more. Programs and departments of Africana Studies, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Disability Studies, you name it — if it fits that liberatory impulse, it is likely facing budget cuts at best, or dissolution at worst. We feel helpless, both for ourselves and for those who we work closely with. We know we cannot give up, but we might also feel as though there is not much we can do. We fight, knowing it is likely a losing battle, and then we lose (and sometimes win), and then we have little energy left to keep going. I do not claim to have the cure for this cycle. But I wonder if we are perhaps trying to go at this the wrong way. We might need to think bigger.

There is power in taking control of decisions before they are made for us. The dream for many in academia and institutionalization, of course, is to have fully fledged departments for each discipline that focuses on marginalized and oppressed people, with a growing number of tenure track lines, full funding for graduate students, and technology that is up-to-date. But that is simply not the world we live in. Perhaps in this dream there is a separate department for Gender Studies, for Race Studies, for Disability Studies, and so on. It is my opinion that we need to take control of the decisions affecting our programs, and that means that, in some cases, the best path forward may be through consolidation. In others, taking control may mean organizing, seeking allies where they can be found — both external and internal to the institution — and forming a plan to keep departmental autonomy intact.

To be quite clear: **consolidation is not ideal;** few compromises are. Perhaps a “Department of Social Justice and Global Liberation Studies,” or a “Department of Equity and Intersectionality Studies,” can provide a home to some [WGSS] programs, Latin American and Caribbean Studies programs, Black and Africana Studies programs, Environmental Justice programs — various programs which face removal on their own. Perhaps, a combination of programs can support each other via the pooling of resources, bringing allied academic disciplines together with a truly global and intersectional lens.

I want to again reiterate that this is not a perfect solution, and many in the field would rather fight for autonomy. It does not solve our problems universally, and it does not allow us to have the situation under the auspices of the institution that we might desire. In some places it
might never work, and in others it will add even more to the strenuous workloads of those who aid in the project’s completion. Even personally, I question how I would manage to justify using terms like “liberation” in a name of a formally institutionalized department if someone were to challenge me on this, and truthfully I am not quite sure. However, I do believe that there is something that must be done, not only to save [WGSS] programs, but also in solidarity with our sister programs which might face worse fates than us. A cohesive name change alone is not the answer (and it may not account for different fields’ specific genealogies). Some advocate for departmental restructuring — in order to keep some units afloat — focused on the collectivization of resources into one stronger structure.

It is important to note that merging departments or programs may cut down on some administrative costs, but the needs of those within and served by those programs are not reduced. The excess burden still remains on the faculty of these programs to find funding, support disenfranchised students, and perform the chronically unrecognized emotional labor frequently required of [WGSS] scholars. We do need continued and revived institutional support for any of our programs and initiatives to be maintained, in whatever formats and under whatever names they might take. We cannot let institutions take our programs for granted; as I stated earlier, there is an argument to be made that [WGSS] has given more to institutions of higher education than it has ever received in return (Guy-Sheftall, 2020).

Numerous strategies will need to be employed by [WGSS] scholars and programs over the next coming months and years to continue our work, no matter the organizational structure. A recent report published by the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) similarly surveyed [WGSS] departments and programs across the country about what challenges they faced as well as what steps they have taken that have or have not been successful in sustaining their program. In their conclusion, they write:

Gaining institutional support from senior leaders, leveraging national and local networks, and navigating institutional and national politics emerged as necessary strategies for sustaining and growing WGSS. … While we know WGSS scholars know there is no one-size-fits-all solution, we want to encourage you to try approaches that may have not been employed previously. Whether that be a collaboration with a local non-profit to work on a state policy issue, hosting a gathering for regional WGSS departments, or creating an annual report for your institution and local community, we know this is added labor to
already busy schedules. By taking one step at a time and proactively engaging with stakeholders, building a strong network of support, collecting and maintaining data, and developing a compelling messaging strategy, institutions may work towards sustaining and growing valuable departments like WGSS. (Clark-Taylor, Regan, and Rotramel, 2024, 11)

Wholeheartedly, I agree — regardless of situation, the burden is (unfortunately) on [WGSS] to ensure its own survival. So, ensure it we must, through whatever creative means necessary.

Decisions will be made by those in charge about how social justice-oriented programs will proceed within the academy when times are tough, with our voices or without. We need to do what we can to get ahead of these decisions, and take charge ourselves.

**CONCLUSION**

In 2009, Alice E. Ginsberg, editor of the 2008 collection *The Evolution of American Women’s Studies: Reflections on Triumphs, Controversies, and Change*, said that deciding what to call [WGSS] in the 21st century was “perhaps the toughest question facing women’s studies today” (Jaschik, 2009). Calling ourselves Women’s Studies — or any of the 180 other names we have chosen, for that matter — means something. Sometimes, to some people, that meaning is specific. For others, the meaning is more implied or abstract in nature. At some institutions, it means coming last in alphabetical role calls at faculty meetings or lists of courses by department. All of these examples are not accidents. They are meanings formed as a result of deliberate decisions over the last five-plus decades of [WGSS] scholarship, and surely, in another fifty years, the meanings will have evolved and changed once again.

The responses I received from programs about what their name meant, why it had or had not evolved, what they feared they might lose or hoped they would gain from changing, ultimately convey a silhouette of the state of [WGSS] today. In these responses I heard about threats to program existence and student safety; stories of triumph against all odds; dialogues about gender and sexuality but also race, class, ethnicity, and nationality, and where these intersecting identities are situated; important and often overlooked narratives about histories; plans and expectations for the future. In short, struggles and successes alike, which create a picture of the past, present, and future of [WGSS]. If nothing else, I hope that you have taken
something away from those accounts which were shared herein — about our nomenclature, yes, but also about the field as a whole. I know I certainly have.

A name is more than a name. A name is a political statement, both to those who study in the discipline and those who view its scholarship with suspicion. No matter what we decide to call ourselves, we must remember that when making our decisions.
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APPENDIX

Department/program questionnaire

1. When were the first women’s studies classes taught at [Institution], even if they were not part of a department or program that referred to itself as such?

2. When was the department or program formally incorporated into [Institution] and able to grant degrees or certifications?

3. Has the department/program ever used a name other than [current name]?
   a. If yes, when did the program’s name change from the original to the current name?
   b. Why did the program's name make that change?
   c. Were any other names considered when the change was made, and why were those names not chosen?
   d. Who was involved in the decision-making related to changing the name? For example, were students or alumni included?

4. Did the program hold any other names between the original name and the current name?
   • If so, please provide the answers for questions 3a through 3d above for any interim name(s) as well.

5. Are there any name changes in consideration for the future? If so, what and why? If not, why not?