

## What Can You Do With A Women's and Gender Studies Degree?

Beverly Guy-Sheftall, founding director of the Women's Research and Resource Center and professor of women's studies at Spelman College, has increasingly seen students take women's studies into the public sphere. "In the early years, women's studies graduates tended to work on gender-specific issues, getting jobs in battered-women's shelters and rape crisis centers," she says. "But more and more we have students going into public health, international policy, journalism, electoral politics, film-making, K-12 education and other careers that allow them to effect large-scale change." (1)

Women's and Gender Studies graduates tend to follow three career paths as "change agents": sustainers, evolvers, and synthesizers.

**Sustainers** pursue career paths that involve working with gender issues directly and usually in types of employment where their degree is an obvious fit for the skills required for the position. Typically, sustainers are therefore involved in activist work and they often maintain an activist agenda outside of their employment as well.

**Evolvers** take women's and gender studies into arenas where it was previously was not, perhaps by finding or creating new opportunities. Evolvers are innovators and adapt easily. They are not afraid to take risks to follow their goals. For example, evolvers may get involved with sustainability work or agriculture or they may run their own socially responsible businesses.

**Synthesizers** move between the other two categories. For example, a synthesizer may be involved with a non-profit arts organization and then work to bring in women's and gender issues into the events run by the organization.

Whatever career path you take after graduation it is important to **stay involved**. Keep connected with local organizations, volunteer, or create your own grass-roots group. Not only will you build a network of possible career contacts this way, but your original commitment to social change will remain fresh.

### What sorts of skills do I have as a Women's and Gender Studies graduate?

There are many different skills and abilities you will have developed during your time at UMD. Here are a few to bear in mind when you are looking for job opportunities and writing application letters:

Your women's and gender studies training has given you **critical self-reflective skills** that help you **interpret** situations and your own assumptions about these situations and the people involved. Whatever work you do, whether it directly has an effect on oppressed communities or individuals, it has an impact on others. Your training has taught you to be **self-confident** and **empowered**. Self-confidence tends to lead to appropriate risk taking and is often a quality

looked for by employers, while a sense of empowerment bolsters your self-confidence. The emphasis on collaborative learning in the classroom leads to the development of **leadership** and **negotiation** skills. The feminist classroom also leads to a **sense of community** that allows graduates to listen to and work with others who have a wide range of perspectives and to build consensus among those perspectives.

**I have recently become a Women's and Gender Studies major or undergraduate certificate student. What should I do to prepare for my future career?**

Obviously, you should focus on your education, but you should also aim to get involved, whether it is through volunteering, on-campus organizations or formal programs like our internship. Plan ahead. For example, if you think you would like to work in a health-related career locally, then consider a minor in Spanish or Portuguese. Business communications and similar courses are also useful, both for your career and for applying for work opportunities. Finally, do not forget to develop connections with at least two or three of your professors. Have them get to know you so that they can write letters of recommendation when the time comes.

**Finally...**

Don't forget **to learn to talk** about Women's and Gender Studies to others, whether it is your family, friends or a future employer. You are a representative for both our program here at UMass Dartmouth and our discipline itself.

- Career paths nowadays tend to be fluid. The average person now changes careers about five times in their working lifetime. Women's and Gender Studies gives you a set of skills that will remain current in the marketplace instead of training you for a specific job.
- People may question your choice of a degree because they do not know what Women's and Gender studies IS or they have misconceptions about the discipline. Prepare an "elevator" speech (a pitch you can make in the time it takes an elevator to ascend a few floors). This speech is no longer than 30 seconds and is usually under 100 words. Some points you may want to consider are the benefits the degree provides you with as a student and the connections you can make between your education and your life outside of school.

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(1) Nikki Ayanna Stewart, "Transform The World: What you can do with a degree in women's studies." *Ms. Magazine*. Spring 2007.  
<http://www.msmagazine.com/spring2007/womensstudies.asp>

All other material drawn from Michele Tracy Berger and Cheryl Radeloff, *Transforming Scholarship: Why Women's and Gender Studies Students are Changing Themselves and the World*. Routledge, 2011.