Reviews of Conferences

National Girls and Women in Sport Symposium
Back to the Future . . . It's a Whole New Ball Game
Slippery Rock University
Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, USA
. February 11-14, 1993

Pre-Conference Workshop Review: The 'isms' in the University Community

The full-day pre-conference workshop, 'The 'isms' of a University Community;' consisted of a combination speaker and discussion format in which the participants addressed the issue of 'isms' (oppression) in the university community. The interdisciplinary panel of speakers had backgrounds in sport, physical education, policy, psychology, leisure, and social justice. The workshop attendees primarily were symposium participants, along with faculty, staff, and students from area universities and colleges, including Slippery Rock University. The morning session was an overview of the selected 'isms; and the afternoon was spent in breakout sessions and focused-discussions on particular 'isms'. A monograph was provided for workshop attendees.

The opening speaker, Dr. Sharon J. Washington, from Kent State University, set the tone for the day by discussing the need for addressing 'isms' in the university community and showing the interconnectedness of racism, ageism, heterosexism, ableism, and sexism. A key message of the speech was a quote from Audre Lorde in which she stressed the importance of working as allies in the fight against oppression.

"I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the front upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination, wherever they appear to destroy me. And when they appear to destroy me, it will not be long before they appear to destroy you". (Lorde, A., taken from There Is No Hierarchy of Oppression).

Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall from Spelman College, spoke on the topic of racism. She stressed that all people have a racial identity, whether recognized and acknowledged, or not. Dr. Guy-Sheftall spoke of white peoples' tendency to ignore skin color by taking a color-blind attitude. This attitude constitutes an ignoring of a significant portion of who an individual is and does not result in a productive dialogue of racism. She urged that individuals and university communities make a commitment to pluralism, not color-blindness. The academy has not addressed racism or racial privilege, and universities are a major site for transformation. Dr. Guy-Sheftall asked powerful and direct questions of those in attendance:
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can we teach in ways that don't reinforce domination? Can we model the good behavior? Can we undo the mis-education that most students have before they get to the university? Can we undo our own mis-education? Are we willing to endure the hostility when we challenge the ways of seeing the world?

Dr. Bernice Sandler from the Center for Policy on Women discussed sexism. She began by recounting six major changes which have occurred in the past three decades regarding sexism: 1) an awareness of the existence of sexism; 2) the existence of laws which make it illegal to discriminate on the basis of gender; 3) the elimination of quotas; 4) women's issues have been institutionalized (Affirmative Action, Women's services and policies); 5) women have organized; and 6) Women's Studies.

Dr. Pat Griffin from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, discussed heterosexism and homophobia and the special challenges of addressing these 'isms: "Homophobia is like a glue that holds sexism together" by teasing and criticizing children into traditional gender roles from the time they are very young; whether it be statements such as, 'you're such a tomboy;' that's for sissies; to a lack of support when children and adults push the boundaries of traditionally prescribed gender roles. Clearly homophobia and heterosexism is everyone's issue, for it cuts across the lines of gender, race, religion, ability, age and class. There is a tendency to combine homophobia (fear of lesbian and gays) and heterosexism (belief that heterosexual orientation is right, correct, better than a homosexual orientation), when heterosexism is the root of the oppression against lesbians, gays and bisexuals, and homophobia is a manifestation of that 'ism.' A greater focus on the root is necessary to begin to unravel this form of oppression. Dr. Griffin's quote of Audre Lorde was an appropriate message to encourage activism on this issue. “If we wait until we’re not afraid, we’ll be speaking from our graves.”