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**THE
IDENTITY
GENERATION**

Today's students embrace
their unique identities,
boosting women's studies
and colleges. | 26

THE IDENTITY GENERATION

By Rachel Williams

Today's college students cherish spaces that celebrate their unique identities. Coupled with cultural and social movements like #MeToo, this has elevated the study of women and gender issues, and even increased interest in women's colleges. Here's what that means for counselors.



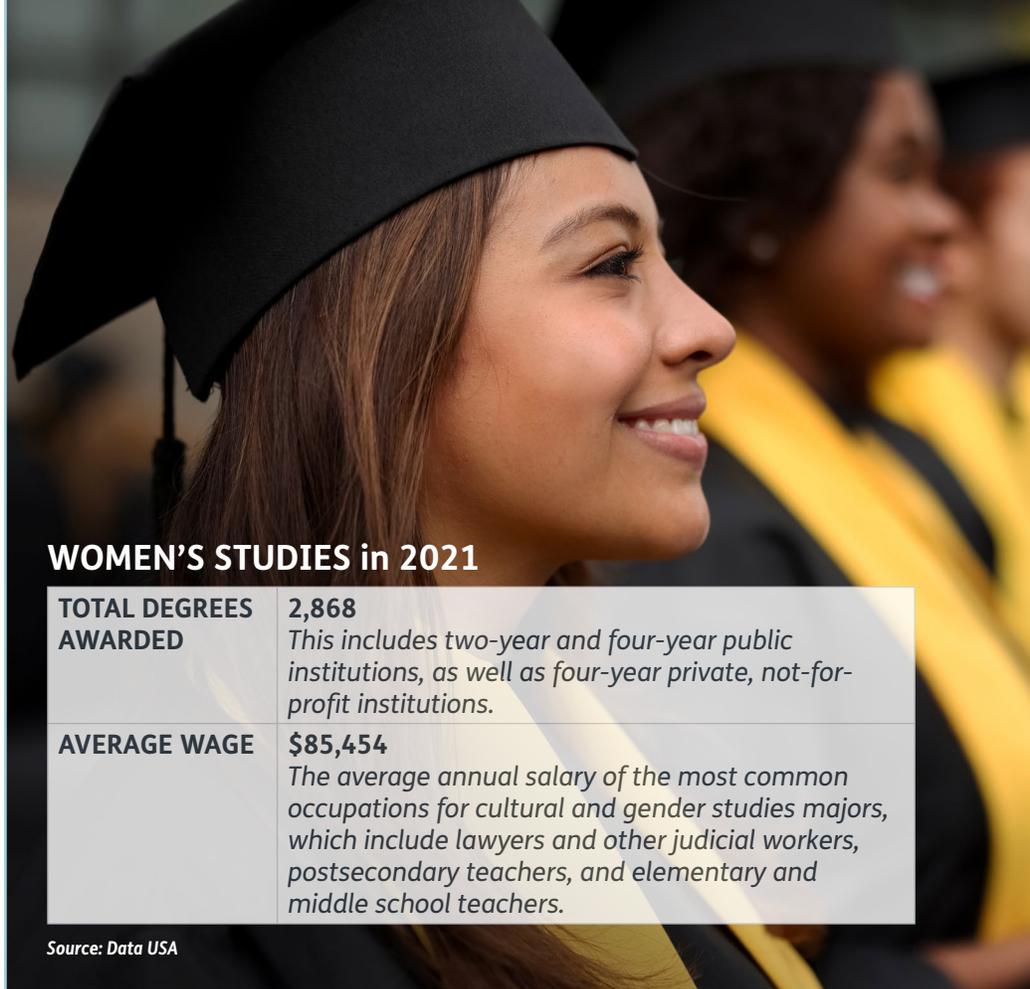


Sophia Volpe has been interested in gender since the early days of her education. While participating in middle school debate, she would receive feedback from judges that the tone of her voice was too high and distracting compared to her male counterparts. She also found the dress code, which mandated that girls cover up, hypocritical and advocated to change it.

“I went to a private school that was pretty progressive; they preached equality a lot. But I thought it was hypocritical that the dress code was built around not distracting boys,” said Volpe. “It placed the responsibility on girls to cover up, rather than on boys to take responsibility for their own education and their own actions.”

She’s been interested ever since in how gender structures — particularly for females — have shaped society, and data show she’s not alone.

According to Data USA, which compiles education and workforce



WOMEN’S STUDIES in 2021

TOTAL DEGREES AWARDED	2,868 <i>This includes two-year and four-year public institutions, as well as four-year private, not-for-profit institutions.</i>
AVERAGE WAGE	\$85,454 <i>The average annual salary of the most common occupations for cultural and gender studies majors, which include lawyers and other judicial workers, postsecondary teachers, and elementary and middle school teachers.</i>

Source: Data USA

As women’s issues and issues of equality continue to take hold in national conversations, counselors should be equipped to advise students who express interest in studying these areas.

data from the U.S. government, interest in women’s studies programs has been on the rise. From 2012 to 2021, the most recent year of data available, there’s been a 10 percent increase in the number of women’s studies degrees awarded. There was a spike in 2018, which saw a 13 percent increase in degrees awarded, compared to 2012. Experts point to 2016, when the #MeToo movement against sexual abuse was strengthening, as a key factor contributing to that spike.

“I think what happened in 2016 — the rise of Donald Trump, the retrograde misogyny that got more play — a lot of the young people

coming in and people who identified as women or genderqueer had experienced the idea that we weren’t really as far along in equality as we thought we were,” said Gwynn Thomas, chair of the Department of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University at Buffalo (NY). “This is beyond Roe v. Wade being overturned, or the Supreme Court. It (inequality) had been happening before.”

Interest has remained steady in the study of women’s issues with the overturning of the U.S. Supreme Court case Roe v. Wade, ending the federal right to an abortion in 2022. Greater awareness of the pay

gap between women and men and the lack of women representation in many industries and leadership positions also has sustained interest in studying women’s issues.

Another reason is students like Volpe, the generation of college students today, grew up keenly aware of women’s rights issues. Volpe, 19, a sophomore at the University of Georgia double majoring in women’s studies and biology, was in middle school at the height of the #MeToo movement.

“Generally, we’re seeing an uptick in applications, in part (due) to women’s issues being elevated culturally and socially,” said Nichole Reynolds, dean of undergraduate admissions at Bryn Mawr College, a women’s college in Pennsylvania. “Younger generations understand that identity-based spaces are important; that’s no longer a hurdle we need to clear.”

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Dean of Undergraduate Admissions
Bryn Mawr College

The Evolution of Women's Studies

Women's studies gained a footing in higher education in the 1970s, when colleges and universities started responding to the social and cultural climate of the feminism movement of the 1960s. These programs established the "study of women, but also women as producers of their own knowledge," said Thomas, who's been a Buffalo faculty member since 2005.

In Thomas' nearly 20-year tenure, she's seen attitudes around the discipline change. In 2005, she recalls "a belief that the battle had been won;" that girls could do anything, and all the doors were open to those who worked hard. Students were less likely to identify as feminists, she said.

Now, women's studies programs — often known for their inclusivity — have become safe spaces for

more than just women, and students generally more often identify as feminists, she said.

"As the field developed and feminist theory developed, we've seen more emphasis on gender and how knowledge and power were being constructed," said Thomas. "A lot of departments have broadened their focus to gender studies."

Many departments also have broadened to include sexuality studies, due to the rising focus of LGBTQ+ issues.

"The drive is always to be inclusive, and that's been reflected in the name," said Thomas.

At the University of Georgia's Institute for Women's Studies, students tend to mostly be women, but also nonbinary students and students across the gender spectrum, said Patricia Richards, director of UGA's institute, adding that women's studies often becomes the academic home for students who have questions about their own identities.

At UGA, the Institute for Women's Studies offers a Bachelor of Arts, a minor, and undergraduate and graduate certificates. Compared to the 2014-15 academic year, UGA now has 16 percent more students enrolled in a women's studies major or minor. Like national trends, UGA's women's studies also saw a spike from 2016-18, with 37 percent

more students enrolled compared to 2014-15. The institute's minor and certificate programs are the most popular, partly because of the interdisciplinary nature of women's studies.

"Students are really seeing the value-added of doing an interdisciplinary certificate program on top (of what they're studying)," said Richards. "Students are facing a challenging job market."

"Adding that feminist, gender-studies lens in which to look at the world — it's applicable to any job they want," said Elise Robinson, PR and program coordinator of UGA's women's studies institute. "I think that's a big appeal."

Take Volpe, for example, who ultimately aspires to attend medical school or earn a Ph.D. in population health sciences.

"Especially if I go into medicine, identity is such an important factor in patient outcomes and doctor-patient interactions," said Volpe. "There's discussions on intersectionality and reproductive justice and all that, but women's studies can also be a lens in which you look at any issue."

It's as simple as this: Diseases can manifest differently in women versus men, and without the study of women's issues, we'll never know that and those outcomes, said Volpe.



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Patricia Richards
Director
UGA Institute for Women's Studies

An Impact on Women's Colleges

While women and gender studies programs have students examine the world through a gender lens, women's colleges generally have been doing that since their inception in the mid-19th century.

"The mission of women's colleges is more critical and more relevant than ever," said Reynolds of Bryn Mawr. "Our mission has been to confront these hurdles."

Among the hurdles she's referring to are underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, in STEM, and in public policy, as well as the wage gap, where women make 82 cents to every dollar a man makes, according to Pew Research Center. These hurdles often exist because of stereotypes, such as that women are not as strong as men in STEM subjects.

"At best, that creates anxiety. At worst, that creates a lack of women pursuing opportunities," said Reynolds.

Students at women's colleges are more likely to study STEM, said Laura Stratton, director of



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PR and Program Coordinator
UGA Institute for Women's Studies

admission at Scripps College (CA), because they know they belong in that space. They don't have to worry about being the minority in a male-dominated classroom.

As women and gender issues have claimed a stake in the national conversation, some women's colleges report seeing greater interest from prospective students. Younger generations are more engaged in the political issues of the day, leading to a renewed interest in women's colleges that hasn't been seen in a decade, said Reynolds.

At Spelman College (GA), for example, a historically Black liberal

arts college for women, applications have been up by about 80 percent since 2019, said Chelsea Holley, director of admissions. A big reason why is racial reckoning in the United States, but also because of elevated women's issues.

"I will say being in Georgia, one of the states where reproductive rights have been stifled, we get a lot of interest from that as well," said Holley.

What This Means for Counselors

Hugh McIntosh, a Washington D.C.-based independent counselor with Marks Education, said he's noticed more and more students involved in advocacy work. While that doesn't necessarily mean students will pursue that as their career, there are options available to them to explore in college.

One option is to take general education classes that align with their passions. In women's studies, for example, introductory courses often satisfy the general-education humanities requirement.

"Thousands of students have gone through our introductory course," said Richards. "That impact shouldn't be underestimated. You're introducing new ways to thinking about the world."

The University of Buffalo is experiencing similar levels of interest.

"Our level 100 classes that we sometimes struggled to fill up 10

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years ago are now all doing really well,” said Thomas. “What used to have 20 students now has 60 students a semester.”

When it comes to women’s studies, and even women’s colleges, counselors often need to be ready with information that debunks common misconceptions or eases fears, said Stratton with Scripps College. A common point of concern is return on investment.

Stratton suggests that counselors and others who help guide students through their college decision engage with staff from women’s colleges for help in addressing students’ concerns about these institutions. In addition to return on investment, common concerns are about the culture and social life of women’s colleges.

“When we look at our critical sectors, (women’s college graduates) are overrepresented,” said Reynolds. “Twenty percent of women in

Congress went to a women’s college. One-third of Fortune 1000 board members are women’s college graduates. Our students are more likely to graduate in four years and are less likely to transfer.”

Women’s studies programs also often have to plead their case.

“One of the real frustrations among faculty in women and gender studies is there’s a general disparagement of this field,” said Thomas. “What would you ever do with a gender studies degree?” My students tell me they still hear this. It’s not true that our graduates can’t get jobs. They continue their social activism. They work toward making the world a better place through health care, law, and politics. They come with a perspective of how things aren’t fair and how they can be changed. They think critically, communicate their ideas, defend their ideas, and work in groups. They have real, in-demand skills.”

Women’s studies and women’s colleges aren’t for everyone, of course. Just 2 percent of college students, on average, attend private women’s colleges, said Reynolds. They are students who are OK carving their own path. Students in these spaces also tend to be intellectually curious, are willing to cross traditional boundaries of humanities and sciences to be interdisciplinary in nature, and ask lots of questions, said Thomas.

“Often when I tell people that I’m studying this, I get questions about what kind of job I can get and what I will do with it,” said Volpe. “I wish that people would have a little more expansive idea of what getting a college degree looks like. Women’s studies have been one of the best parts of my college experience.”

Rachel Williams is a content editor and writer at NACAC.



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