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Redefining the Work of Feminist Praxis: Making Space for a (Rebellious) Undergraduate Feminist Research Group

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the practices and outcomes of an undergraduate research group that began organically to foster research and activist collaborations in a small group setting and without the rubric of a structured course, formal lab setting, or formal institutional backing. We consider several outcomes of this group: (1) Graduate school entry and preparation for graduate school; (2) The importance of feminist friendships and feminist community among students; (3) The fusion between scholar/activist identities, with clear emphasis on de-centering whiteness, challenging patriarchy, and undermining homophobia and transphobia; and (4) The investment in mentoring and nurturing relationships with students across race, class, gender, and sexual identity lines. In particular, we argue that students of color, gender queer/trans/LGBT students, and students from working class backgrounds are especially served by such models of mentoring and community, particularly as feminist mentoring can contribute to the work of social justice for underprivileged students.

Student success, defined quite differently across institutions, regions, and countries, is typically conceptualized as the process through which students learn new academic skills (e.g., writing papers, conducting experiments), develop interpersonally (e.g., become more responsible, self-aware, happy), and move toward graduation (e.g., low attrition rates, low drop rate for courses). Many aspects of college can enhance student success; in a meta-analysis of effective student programs, Kuh et al., (2011) argued that undergraduate research and small learning groups are some of the most impactful programs at universities. The creation of faculty-led research groups have been widely adopted in the natural sciences, but faculty have been slower to create these programs in the social sciences and humanities (Craney et al., 2011; Zimbardi & Myatt, 2014). Humanities professors, however, rarely utilize these approaches (Schantz, 2008); most often work in one-on-one mentoring relationships with students (or eschew working with students altogether). While some social science professors have research labs (Taraban & Logue, 2012), these most often happen in the context of supervising graduate students and ensuring sufficient research productivity at research universities.

This article explores the dynamics of an undergraduate research group in women and gender studies. It traces the first five years of an undergraduate research group in the southwest—a group that began organically as a way to foster research and activist collaborations in a small setting without the rubric of a structured course, formal lab setting, or even formal institutional backing. Building on our university's mission of *access* and *equity*, we trace the reasons for the group's establishment, how students are recruited, how the group operates, the benefits and costs to faculty participants, and the impact on the 25 students who have been involved with the group since Spring 2013. We then consider several outcomes of this group that are notable to scholars interested both in feminist pedagogy and in building feminist communities of students on college campuses: (1)

Graduate school acceptance and preparation for graduate school; (2) The importance of feminist friendships and feminist community among students; (3) The fusion between scholar/activist identities (that is, the creation and maintenance of identities that fuse commitments to activist-driven scholarship); and (4) The investment in mentoring and nurturing relationships with students across race, class, gender, and sexual identity lines.

Ultimately, we argue that more critical feminist professors (that is, professors interested in social inequalities, social justice, and ending institutional modes and practices that disadvantage women, people of color, and queer people) need to consider forming and nurturing an undergraduate research group as a way to invest in mentoring that extends far beyond one-on-one interactions and individual oversight/support. This article is intended for fellow faculty members as a challenge for them to consider the necessary role of close and inventive feminist mentoring for student success *and* working toward social justice for underprivileged students. In particular, we argue that students of color, gender queer/trans/LGBT students, and students from working class backgrounds are especially served from such models of mentoring and community, particularly as feminist mentoring can contribute to the work of social justice for underprivileged students.

What we already know about (feminist) mentoring

Faculty mentoring can provide an extra layer of support to students in their educational careers, as students benefit from collaborative environments (Benishek et al., 2004; Shore et al., 2008). Professors who serve as mentors can help students grow, nurture their professional development, serve as role models, and provide psychological support (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Waldeck et al., 1997). Mentorship from a feminist perspective can be especially helpful to undergraduate students from stigmatized communities because feminist research groups often prioritize the lessening of faculty/student hierarchies, greater self-disclosures related to gendered topics of study, critical analysis of power structures; the demystifying of arcane academic processes, and working toward social justice and social change (Humble et al., 2006); thus, activism and analysis of power go hand-in-hand with feminist mentoring (Moore et al., 2013), particularly as “justice learning” gets more attention (Butin, 2007; McArthur, 2010).

Literature on feminist mentoring also has worked to revise traditional models of mentor/mentee relationships in meaningful ways; this literature certainly influenced the creation and maintenance of this group. Feminist mentoring typically tries to avoid the conventional master-apprentice model of mentoring that frames the mentor as the “all knowing” tutor who graciously provides support, guidance, and expertise to a less-informed and immature protégé (Godbee & Novotny, 2013). Feminist educators often see this model as too hierarchical and as an impediment to a feminist education that strives for real social change.

Instead, feminist mentoring often argues that faculty and students should abide by more explicitly feminist models of teaching and mentorship (Benishek et al., 2004; Bona et al., 1995; Chesney-Lind et al., 2006; Dua, 2007; Godbee & Novotny, 2013). While there is no single definition of feminist mentoring, Moss et al. (1999) and Fassinger and Hensler McGinnis (2005) suggest that feminist mentoring should promote women and feminist sensibilities within the academy and the broader social world. They argue that feminist mentors should work from a woman-centered approach, align with marginalized groups, use collaborative decision-making, and work toward dismantling exploitative practices in the academy and elsewhere. They also suggest that feminist mentoring requires open and honest conversations, doing research on the lived and understudied experiences of women and LGBT students (for example), and modeling ethical and rigorous research practices without espousing one way of “doing research.”

Further, drawing on the broader work of feminists of color (see below), we imagine feminist mentoring as striving to embody several additional facets beyond the more traditional understandings of the mentoring relationship, particularly as it de-centers whiteness, patriarchy, and capitalism as guiding frameworks that too often infect academic practices. (We use the term *whiteness* to mean,

as bell hooks (1992) argues, a category of identity that “makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, is a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness” [p. 341].) Ahmed (2012) has called for widespread pushback against institutional racism within the academy, arguing that diversity work is too often imposed on women of color themselves rather than actually made a priority within the institutional frameworks of the academy. Other ways to expand mentorship to de-center whiteness include nurturing transformative anger and justice-based collectivity (per Lorde, 1997), prioritizing the political frameworks of love and compassion (per hooks, 2000), decolonizing writing and speech within the group (per Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015), and developing humor as a tool for collective political and social struggle (per Florynce Kennedy, see Fahs, 2018).

Buzzwords and university priorities

“Student research”

Colleges and universities have often provided opportunities for students to do original research. Historically, out-of-class research projects have occurred in the context of graduate student settings, where experiences of professorial mentorship in such settings help students get external grants and produce publications, and are crucial to the subsequent professional careers of students (Curtin et al., 2016). The Boyer Commission Report on Reinventing Undergraduate Education from 1998 also constituted a major push by universities to provide formal and informal opportunities for undergraduate research collaborations (Katkin, 2003). Accordingly, in the last two decades, professors and university administrators have created and institutionalized a wide set of university-funded undergraduate research programs. While the qualities and structures of these programs vary dramatically by school type, these programs have appeared more often in large research universities and often are limited to only honors and high-GPA students in STEM programs (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) (Craney et al., 2011; Zimbardi & Myatt, 2014). Moreover, final year projects are typically required only of honors students, and research assistantships are not widely available.

Undergraduate research opportunities often result in positive outcomes for students, as students who engage in such programs often find school more enjoyable, have better self-esteem, graduate at higher rates, and attend graduate school more frequently (Craney et al., 2011; Hathaway et al., 2002; Linn et al., 2015). We view each of these outcomes as part of the project of social justice, one that advances equity and access for students who may be less privileged or less likely to thrive in academia. One study found that students who conducted undergraduate research with faculty in English, History, and foreign languages were much better at thinking logically and pursuing information on their own than students in the same majors who were not enrolled in an undergraduate research project (Ishiyama, 2002). While the positive effects of these programs are not disputed, the structuring of these programs often provide unequal access to students from different gender, race, and social class backgrounds. STEM degrees, for example, have much higher concentrations of white male students from affluent families than do other majors like nursing, social work, teaching, psychology, ethnic studies, and women’s studies (Spoor & Lehmiller, 2014). The draw for women, students of color, and poorer students to women’s studies, sociology, and critical race studies as compared to other majors occurs for many reasons: interest in class content about social inequalities, being treated unfairly by STEM professors, or poor climate for lower status groups (Leaper & Van, 2008; Settles et al., 2006; Simon et al., 2017). This starkly contrasts some of the stereotypes of women and gender studies courses as “easy,” filled with “man haters” or lacking in career possibilities (Marchbank & Letherby, 2006; Spoor & Lehmiller, 2014).

Further, first generation college students in the humanities benefit the most of any group of students who participated in undergraduate research projects (Ishiyama, 2002). Administrators and educators often have different goals behind research groups. Brew and Mantai (2017) have noted

that some professors think that undergraduate research should be limited to only the most intellectually talented students while others want greater opportunities for students from all different ability levels. Likewise, some imagine undergraduate research as a way to simply develop skills while others view it as a transformative process that helps students' well-being and makes them more engaged citizens (Goss et al., 2010; Ishiyama & Breuning, 2003). Clearly, as feminist professors we agree with this latter viewpoint.

The literature lacks studies on how *feminist* undergraduate research groups influence the lives of students and faculty; that said, a number of studies have found that taking feminist and women's studies classes improves students' abilities to think more critically, recognize sexist biases, converse more openly with students, and leads them to have better body images, and consider attending graduate or professional schools (Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Case, 2007; Katz et al., 2004). Moreover, the activist aims of women's studies classes are often translated in curriculum and teaching pedagogies that engage in the work of social justice by lessening gender and racial biases among students and increasing a commitment to feminist activism (Bowman, 2011; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1999; Nelson et al., 2008; Stake, 2007). Feminist teaching has a strong impact on students, making it all the more important that we understand new and innovative ways to engage in strong feminist pedagogy (Larson, 2005).

"Attrition"

Universities also devote a great deal of time and effort to thinking about and managing attrition rates (i.e., students dropping out of school). Research suggests that retention rates among undergraduates in research groups are higher than for students not doing research (Craney et al., 2011). In general, poorer, first generation college students and men have a harder time staying in college than women students from more affluent families with college educations (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Studies also have shown crucial gender differences in school withdrawal, as women students withdrew more often because of social, rather than academic, concerns, while male students withdrew more because of academic problems; further, women more often withdrew voluntarily while men withdrew after being forced to by the university (Johnson, 1996). Other studies on attrition have argued about the value of faculty serving as "parent" roles for students versus helping students to be more independent (Loss, 2014). Understanding the needs of students is complicated, of course, by the fact that reasons for attrition change dramatically depending on the year of the student in the program and the type of university or college they attend (Willcoxson et al., 2011), and because attrition rates rose for *both* underperforming *and* overperforming students in years two, three, and four of college (Shaw & Mattern, 2013).

Notably, research consistently shows that, while mental health issues, disability, low socioeconomic status, and being a person of color are all risk factors for attrition, a sense of belonging was a critical factor in student retention, as "The creation of a caring, supportive, and welcoming environment is critical in creating a sense of belonging." This can be achieved by the development of positive student/faculty relationships, the presence of a well-resourced counseling centre and the encouragement of diversity and difference" (O'Keeffe, 2013, p. 605). In a review of the vast literature on student retention, Tinto (2016) argued that student retention was dependent on seven factors: (1) universities and professors set high expectations of student effort; (2) student receive clear guidelines on success in classes; (3) ample financial aid is available; (4) the university provides high quality academic and emotional support systems; (5) students feel like they belong to the campus community; (6) student friendships are common and thriving on campus; and (7) students are involved in student groups. Further, having career direction and purpose, studying a range of subjects, peer bonding, and teaching quality also help to retain humanities and social science students (Mestan, 2016).

“Scholar/activist”

The fusion between scholarship and activism, or “scholar/activist” identities, has figured prominently in critical fields that want to teach students how to engage with feminist praxis (Naples & Bojar, 2002). Frances Fox Piven (2010) has argued that academic commitment to activism is crucial in order for the university to remain relevant to social justice causes. Faculty support was beneficial to the student social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Van Dyke, 1998). Recognition of scholar/activist links in contemporary social movements like Black Lives Matter (Hall, 2016) and anti-Trump activism (*The Feminist Wire*, 2016) have strengthened the interest in understanding the value of the scholar/activist connection. For many scholar/activists, these identities are inseparable (Suzuki & Moyorga, 2014), as community engagement, commitment to social change, public speaking, writing useful papers, and leadership are major parts of the university experience (Maxis et al., 2017), as is future-oriented thinking and investment in future generations (Suzuki & Moyorga, 2014).

Scholar/activists are interested in pushing researchers to consider the intellectual and political merits of different projects and to invest in community and social movement collaborators (Derickson & Routledge, 2015; Siplon, 2014). The push toward action research, “academia without walls,” critical thinking about institutional practices, and the importance of thinking about the conditions of work within universities also have constituted major goals of scholar/activist work (Do Mar Pereira, 2016), as have integrating protest into the academic identity (Young et al., 2010). Still, the understanding of how people become scholar-activists is underdeveloped, and research on how to teach *students* to value scholar/activist identities is still scarce, as most of the scholar/activist literature focuses on faculty identities in relation to political activist ventures.

“Diversity”

Universities also differ dramatically in how they think about diversity and how to best value and nurture diverse student environments. One study argued that universities typically either take a “minority-support” perspective, where programming and activities highlight under-represented groups as a means to give those groups more power, while other universities take an integration and celebration approach that values cosmopolitan identities but rarely addresses power imbalances; these different approaches differ dramatically in how students perceive issues of diversity (Warikoo & Deckman, 2014). Other approaches that universities take to improve issues of diversity include the continued investment in women’s studies and ethnic studies departments (Milen et al., 2005), the establishment of diversity awards (Luther et al., 2011), attention to campus climate issues (Mayhew et al., 2006), using moderators to improve intergroup dialogue (Dessel & Rogge, 2008), reducing exclusionary experiences for students of color (Mohamad Karkouti, 2016), and closely attending to religious diversity (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). Further, prejudice toward people from different race, gender, and sexual identity groups was reduced with contact that was interpersonal, cooperative, rewarding, and positively sanctioned by students’ institutions and social networks (Berryman-Fink Verderber & Verderber, 2006). Ultimately, universities are starting to pay more attention to the ways that diverse student bodies mean that some students have extra vulnerabilities that need attention.

Origins of the research group

In working to embody feminist mentoring as a mode of relating to students, Fahs, the first author, established a feminist research group that prioritizes collaboration, mutuality, and a commitment to feminist principles (Benishek et al., 2004; Bona et al., 1995; Godbee & Novotny, 2013). The group offers many social benefits but was explicitly formed for research purposes. When collaborating on joint projects, group members work side-by-side and everybody is encouraged to add their comments and insights. Research projects may be initiated by students and professors alike and everyone participates in the entire research process (creating instruments, gathering data, transcribing

interviews, doing analysis, writing and editing papers, submitting IRB approval documents, etc.). This is all done under the auspices of creating research that challenges sexist, racist, and heteronormative power structures (Chesney-Lind et al., 2006).

We teach at Arizona State University's West campus. This campus is an interesting fusion of a liberal arts school environment (e.g., small classes, small campus) within a larger research university environment (e.g., massive library resources, expectations for publications similar to other R1 universities, etc.). Our campus has about 6,000 students and mostly serves undergraduates, including a high percentage of first generation students, students of color, and working-class students. The campus also provides grants and conferences that facilitate undergraduate research projects, which is often cited as a key institutional factor behind the creation of groups like this (Brew & Mantai, 2017).

In the Fall of 2012, I (Fahs) was concurrently mentoring three students in one-on-one independent sessions throughout each week. Each of these students had similar interests: feminism, activism, research, potentially going to graduate school, and an interest in sexuality and the body. I found myself repeatedly saying to each of them, "*You should meet [other student I'm working with] because you'd really like her and you have a lot in common.*" I realized that semester that I wanted to drastically change the way I mentored students, in part because I felt that these students could potentially form their own community, and in part because I wanted the students to have other students to talk to about the work they were doing rather than just talking to me about it. The type of mentoring that semester was too faculty-centered and lacked the positives of collective and collaborative efforts. I had joined a research lab as a graduate student at the University of Michigan where each student presented her work, people cheered each other on for conference and revise and resubmit decisions on papers, cited each other's work, and we kept in touch after we graduated (and this group has produced a long line of celebrated feminist psychologists). I wanted to recreate this kind of a community at the college I was teaching at but with some different goals in mind that fit more closely with undergraduate experiences. Rather than mentoring students who were already admitted to Ph.D. programs, I wanted to form an *undergraduate* research group that would emphasize research collaborations, community between students, and political activism (and scholar/activist identities). I also wanted to see if such a community would have better success in helping students do well in school, gain academic confidence, produce some student-driven research, and, ultimately, gain admission to prestigious graduate schools; further, students who were struggling (emotionally, psychologically, financially, etc.) would feel they had an extra layer of support.

Notably, I did not seek any institutional backing for such an idea and did not even report to my university that I was trying this until well after its inception. I did not seek course release or a formal course number for it, and I did not seek any funding or grant money for it. Instead, I wanted this group to emerge organically as something the students and I would invest our time and energy into without formal institutional frameworks. (I had worried that more overtly institutionalizing the group would negatively impact the goals and practices of the group.) I would benefit from working with a group of research assistants who would train together, and they would benefit from having weekly meetings where we would discuss not only research but also activism, graduate school, professional socialization, and interpersonal challenges. Also, in a group setting like this, we could far more easily foster research collaborations among the group. We could work more efficiently, talk about ideas more expansively, and normalize the oft-experienced frustrations and difficulties of the research process. I also wanted to create a group that would eventually have its more senior members serve as mentors for the more junior members, and where the eventual "alumni" of the group could still help the younger members of the group years later. Ideally, I wanted to create a genealogy of graduate students, faculty members, and students that could support each other's work and careers and keep in touch with each other in meaningful ways.

The group began in the Spring of, 2013 with four members. Together with these students from diverse backgrounds and majors (sociology, women's studies, English, and psychology), we created

a name and designed a mission statement that summarized the group's aims and intents (note: mentioning Trump was added later on) "[The research group] focuses on cutting edge, critical research that prioritizes the study of social identities like gender, race, class, and sexuality as examined through a feminist lens. Specifically, the group has evolved and focuses on research in three areas: critical body studies, radical sexuality studies, and activism/rebellion. Members of the group include select undergraduate and graduate students at Arizona State University as well as faculty, community, and postdoctoral collaborators across multiple universities. Our goals are multiple: we want to inject a feminist perspective into traditional or even anti-feminist spaces; unite activist, pedagogical, and scholarly work; subvert the assumed hierarchies of 'what counts' as feminist research; engage in creative and inspired forms of resistance; collaborate in new and imaginative ways; work in a permanent state of opposition to Trump's policies of xenophobia, sexism, racism, and classism; and, finally, to engage, on multiple levels, the question of how to fight against inequalities, oppression, and injustices enacted onto the body and into the political and social sphere."

In terms of recruitment, I (Fahs) typically announced in my classes that students interested in working in the group could contact me to set up a meeting; students also contacted me when they heard about the group through friends or campus events. There were no formal requirements to join the group (e.g., GPA, major, etc.), but I did require that they had at least one course with me. This allowed me to ensure a good mutual fit (e.g., political interests, intellectual merits, work ethic, etc.), as they would know how I worked and I would know how they worked. I also targeted students from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, social class, and sexual identity and sometimes specifically invited certain students to join the group. While most students join on a voluntary basis, some students were able to secure small grants to work in the group from the college undergraduate research grant program and others have received course credit for their work in the group. Meetings were (and are) held in a round-table conference room on campus (requested informally) and membership means that we work to establish a mutually agreeable meeting time and we encourage everyone to attend each week. Attendance is not taken and the group is about *mutually investing* in it rather than me monitoring them.

To structure our meetings, we typically discussed a range of agenda items at each of our weekly appointments: (1) research collaborations, troubleshooting of research issues, and plans for new or existing studies; (2) their mentoring needs, including writing a CV, applying for graduate school, looking for jobs (for those about to graduate), and finishing a thesis project; (3) their logistic and conference needs in terms of seeking financial help to attend conferences, applying to conferences, getting financial aid for graduate school, and applying for undergraduate fellowships; (4) activist goals in terms of furthering campus and community activism, with items ranging from menstrual product awareness, attending feminist and immigrant rights rallies, working in solidarity with underserved populations, and working with activists to come to campus for talks (and beyond); and (5) interpersonal issues, including student financial hardships, health issues, family dilemmas, and school stressors. This range of items allowed the group to have multiple focus areas at once, and to evolve into a group that fostered real feminist friendships among the students. I immediately noticed that this research group had, in comparison to one-on-one mentoring sessions, more collegiality with each other, better research productivity, more fun/satisfaction with the work, and an eagerness to help each other beyond the boundaries of our meetings. We had an end-of-semester party (which later became a tradition each semester) where the existing members of the group welcomed new members starting the following Fall semester, and where we bid goodbye to the graduating students. A community—one with real and immediate positive outcomes for both the students and for me—was born.

Reflections five years later

In the past five years, the group has typically had 4–8 members per semester, with 25 total students to date. A few notable changes occurred over these years. In the spring of 2015, I (Fahs) welcomed masters students to join the group, particularly students who had begun in the group as undergraduates and become masters students. Also, the group was fortunate to have its first postdoctoral

scholar in the Fall of, 2016, which fostered an extra layer of mentoring support to students in the group. As she was completing her first book during that year, the group also served as a space for reading/feedback of her work. I outline here four areas of (what I see as) major accomplishments of the group: graduate school preparation and admission, nurturing feminist friendships, fusion of scholar/activist identities, and mentoring across identity lines. Notably, these descriptions reflect our role as faculty mentors and do not include student narratives about the group; we recognize this as a limitation to the scope and breadth of this manuscript.

Academic socialization: graduate school preparation and admission

Almost every student has presented her/his research at feminist conferences like the National Women's Studies Association conference, the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research conference, and the Association for Women in Psychology conference. Students also have helped to organize and run two conferences held at our university and have published co-authored articles in journals like *Women's Reproductive Health*, *Generos*, *Personal Relationships*, and *Feminism & Psychology*. (One study by Craney et al., 2011 found that only 16% of all students in undergraduate research programs have done posters or presentations at conferences that are not on their campuses, so we are way above average for this.) The group also has had extraordinary success in getting students admitted into both Masters and Ph.D. programs, particularly given that students at our campus often come from underprivileged backgrounds where they are, at times, the first in their families to graduate from college and certainly the first to earn a graduate degree. Of the 20 students who have already graduated, 11 have gone on to get masters degrees (or are currently enrolled in masters degree programs), and 4 have been admitted to Ph.D. programs at schools like the University of Colorado-Boulder, Texas A&M University, University of Arizona, and Arizona State University. Of those who have not gone to graduate school, several are currently applying for graduate school, all are employed (several have worked in domestic violence shelters), and one works for a radical feminist archive in New York City. This is, by all accounts, an extraordinary record that speaks to the importance of feminist community when going through the process of applying for graduate school and preparing for starting graduate school.

We engaged in a variety of tasks that helped with this preparation. First, the group works to take the shame and anxiety out of the steps necessary to prepare graduate admissions files. The students talk openly about their fears about the GRE, their scores, how to study for the exam, and that they should "just do it" when scheduling to take it. They work together on editing personal statements for graduate school and solicit advice from me about graduate writing samples. We create a CV for each of them and talk about schools that best fit their needs and sensibilities. They talk about the frustrations of the expense of applying for graduate school and support each other's efforts. Most importantly, the group has rarely, if ever, been anything but truly and genuinely happy for each other whenever anyone gets into graduate school; I have worked to foster little competition between students and to instead emphasize the fact that we are all a community that is "in it together."

Students also get a substantial amount of preparation about the actual process of research and the challenges of publishing an article. I have co-authored articles with at least eight of them over the years, and have worked to involve them in all aspects of research across humanities and social science methods: editing manuscripts, finding research articles, designing research questions, collecting data, transcribing interviews, working on reference lists, constructing arguments, understanding different methodologies, and accepting (without shame) the inevitably painful process of rejections, revisions, and setbacks. While many of our research projects are initiated by me, many projects arise from the students' interests as well. I work with them to transform their initial ideas into translatable research, including getting projects passed through the ethical review board and following up with participants to collect original data. In all, this has resulted in students having preparation not only with certain *skill sets* but with the emotional and time demands of conducting research.

The importance of feminist friendships and collaborations

Numerous studies have shown the value of building communities of feminists as friends and collaborators in order to support and nurture academic work. Students who build new friendships when entering college show far better adjustment to university life than those who do not (Buote et al., 2007). In general, undergraduate research groups offer a good opportunity for students to develop friendships among their classmates. Up to 60% of students in undergraduate research groups reported developing new friends through their participation in such groups (Craney et al., 2011). Solidarity can operate as a key principle for collaborative research groups, including those that include a variety of different hierarchical statuses (e.g., undergraduates, graduate students, junior faculty, and senior faculty) (Ritchie & Rigano, 2007). In line with this, feminist research groups among faculty can operate with a non-hierarchical atmosphere, continuous examination of ethical questions, and reflexivity (Krane et al., 2012). With student-faculty collaborations, groups can emphasize empowerment, community building, privileging voice, respecting diversity of personal experience, attentiveness to student needs, greater trust among participants, and challenging traditional views (Bozalek et al., 2014; Webb et al., 2004); feminist friends and classmates also inspire later feminist activism (Nelson et al., 2008). These foundational concepts can help faculty to avoid some of the hazards of student research groups, including power struggles, unwillingness to hear constructive criticism of the work, sporadic involvement, and poor communication with other group members (Leonard, 2008). Ultimately, feminist friendships and collaborations can serve as a challenge to traditional power structures and can help women to nurture and support each other (Andrew & Montague, 1998).

One of the most delightful outcomes of developing the research group into a community of feminist students was the “care work” and nourishment the group provided for sustained friendships between students (and, at times, romantic relationships). This has taken many different forms and shapes. For example, students support each other through difficult family and relationship issues. They have watched each other’s pets and loaned each other money. Students have pooled resources for conference travel so that they room together, travel together, and combat the loneliness that students often feel both on campus and at academic conferences. They have supported each other’s artistic and academic performances, talks, senior projects, thesis defenses, and award ceremonies. They attend graduation events to support members of the group who are graduating. The students attend parties to celebrate wedding engagements or the return of a group member to town after a long absence. They offer rides to each other and become Facebook friends. Two students formed an activist group that focuses on menstrual activism and designed workshops that they gave around the country. These friendships are sustained not only while students are in the group itself, but also well beyond the end of graduation. Many of them still get together socially years after graduating and are a major part of each other’s lives.

As faculty, we have been humbled and in awe of the real value of these feminist friendships in nurturing students through difficult periods of the semester and in providing students with an additional opportunity for social and interpersonal connection. Group members have rarely, if ever, expressed or experienced negativity, competitiveness, or problems with each other. I set an expectation early on that the group will support its new members (even before the new member has officially entered the group). The students have always expressed remarkable generosity and graciousness toward each other, seeing themselves and the newer members as part of an ongoing cohort (with many “generations”) that is part of a bigger whole. As evidence of this, during the coronavirus outbreak of the Spring of, I held Zoom meetings with former and current members of the research group to provide support and community to the students during that difficult time; they shared resources and food with each other, checked in from cities like Seattle, Atlanta, New York, and Chicago, and nurtured newer and younger members of the group.

Fusion of scholar/activist identities

The model of scholar/activism originally asks that students not only value their more traditional academic work (e.g., writing papers and thesis projects, earning excellent grades, etc.) but also that they recognize the value of feminist praxis and feminist activism. In particular, the scholar/activist identity asks that students de-center whiteness, challenge patriarchy, and undermine institutional practices of homophobia and transphobia in their scholarly and activist work. Pushing them to think in more intersectional, radical (going to the root) ways is a key goal of the group. As women's studies professors, we care deeply about the roots of our field and its emphasis on activism. The women's liberation movement initially saw women's studies as the "academic wing" of feminism and imagined that women's studies would work arm-in-arm with radical feminist activism (Fahs, 2018; Ginsberg, 2008). This meant that women's studies as a field emerged from a context where activists *expected* students to not only care about and study activism, but to engage in it with a broader community of feminists (Costa & Leong, 2012; McArthur, 2010; Naples & Bojar, 2002).

This undergraduate research group also emphasize the scholar/activist identity in that the group spends as much time working on academic projects and research as it does engaging in activist and artistic work. For example, in the Spring of 2017, students in the group all attended the women's march together in downtown Phoenix, and then designed a women's history month event that brought together local activists, artists, and scholars to think about vulva imagery (entitled "Viva la Vulva!"). The students got involved in all aspects of this event, helping attendees make political posters and design vulva craft. In other semesters, students have engaged in a wide variety of activist efforts together: They have worked to preserve women's studies as a major on campus, engaged in menstrual activism to distribute products to underserved populations, designed performance art pieces that they performed on campus and in the community, worked with groups that provide resources and protection for LGBTQ homeless youth, protested our (former) Sheriff Joe Arpaio, protested the Trump administration's xenophobic practices, participated in voting drives for Latino/a communities locally, and worked with groups that serve undocumented immigrant women. These activist efforts were spearheaded by the students themselves rather than by us as faculty, revealing the compelling connections between building a feminist community on campus and engaging in activism in the broader community beyond campus.

Scholar/activist identities also have been nurtured at academic conferences, as members of the research group have presented work that pushes the boundaries of traditional academic work (and, more importantly, pushes back against dangerous and destructive narratives of student "respectability" as more important than creativity). For example, several research group members have designed poster sessions at conferences where they do not passively wait for people to approach them, but instead hand out fliers, do art/crafts with passersby, invite audiences to engage in activism, and use the poster as a platform for talking about difficult social identity questions and themes. Students also have read manifestos instead of presenting formal academic work, engaging audiences to think more deeply about tone, style, emotion, and radical politics in these conference talks. Additionally, the students have led workshops where they have taught others (including faculty) how to do activism; one pair led a session on alternative menstrual products and handed out kits for students and faculty to lead their own workshops back at home. These kinds of efforts reveal an important political priority of moving students toward a scholar/activist framework.

Mentoring across identity lines

As a final reflection of the value of developing an undergraduate research group, we note the ways in which a small feminist community like ours allows for close mentoring across social identity lines (McArthur, 2010). Of the 25 members of the group thus far, 2 have been genderqueer or gender fluid, 7 have been women of color, and 10 have been LGBTQ identified. Further, the group has included students from a huge range of class backgrounds, ranging from first generation college

students with parents who have worked in factories and fields to students with (quite conservative) wealthy parents. This diversity has allowed us to closely mentor students from a wide variety of backgrounds and it encourages students to further challenge their ideas about social identities (beyond what they are already getting in the classroom). For example, the group recently attended a film screening together for the film, *I Am Not Your Negro* (about James Baldwin); afterwards, the group had a sort of “debriefing” where they shared their ideas about the film, race, and privilege. Because the group has developed close friendships, this kind of conversation is different than one in a typical classroom; one African-American woman in the group asked rather intense follow-up questions to the group in a way that embodied personal closeness and interpersonal challenge.

Studies on intergroup dialogue among students from different racial, class, gender, and sexuality backgrounds often find a litany of positive relationship outcomes for people who engage with diverse groups of peers—everything from greater listening skills to higher levels of mutual respect and the recognition of social complexities (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; McArthur, 2010). Moreover, for intergroup contact among peers, such as students from different races or sexual identities, talking to each other often lessens sexual or racial prejudice and leads to a political consciousness that inspires social justice activism for groups that the person does not belong to (Becker et al., 2013; Goldstein & Davis, 2010). For example, prolonged discussions with sexual minorities lead heterosexual teenagers toward more LGBT-affirming behavior (Walls et al., 2010) like attending gay pride events (Calcagno, 2016).

At its best, feminist groups like these can build solidarity, enhance their understandings of each other, and develop a support system that furthers student resiliency and agency. Feminist research groups also create conditions for student success, as students know they have an advocate who wants them to flourish as scholar-activists. This group also has worked to help students negotiate the unwritten rules of academia and other power structures (Dua, 2007). We ideally want to see more justice-based mentoring groups on campus that merge together feminist mentoring techniques with other existing practices like the mentoring of students of color and underprivileged groups of students. This could create a more robust environment for justice-based student work and advancement of all students within the academy. Further, such work pushes the boundaries of the university, bleeding together student work, scholarship, activist work, and community work—a goal we feel is both truly rebellious and a “win-win” for the university. If universities want to throw their weight behind things like “community engagement” and broad-minded creative critical thinking skills, cultivating scholar-activists is one way to do this.

The research group described here has many of the qualities that lead to student success, better mental health outcomes, stronger publication records, successful graduate school admissions, and the developing and nurturing of politically engaged scholar/activists. In a group like this, students work in close contact for at least a semester and often much longer, collaborate on complicated intellectual tasks, and see each other as a set of colleagues working to dismantle traditional academic hierarchies. We are interested in making space for students to imagine themselves as allies, creators of original research, editors of each other’s work, cheerleaders and supporters of each other’s careers, and as a team (regardless of who does or does not go on to graduate school and/or Ph.D. programs). In this way, the group is engaging in quintessentially feminist tasks: undermining hierarchical structures that funnel power to the top and lessen power at the bottom; valuing and nurturing feminist friendships that are sustained long after university coursework commences; working across social identity boundaries and pushing each other to take stock of blind spots; and engaging in work that transcends mere scholarship *or* activism, instead combining them both into the fabric of the group and its mission.

While the future of the group may look different from its current iteration, we are, for example, exploring the possibility of applying for grants or forging even more directly confrontation politics during the post-coronavirus era. Its origin story is one that we hope other scholars and activist will use to forge their own undergraduate research groups. We especially encourage faculty to see the development and support of these groups as a win-win-win, in that students benefit enormously and

in of unexpected ways (as we have noted in our reflection above); the university administration benefits by seeing results in areas that they have as key priorities (e.g., retention, diversity); and faculty members benefit by having committed scholars all working together on complicated projects that lead to the dissemination of feminist research and the development of future generations of scholar/activists. Ultimately, we argue that cultivating of undergraduate feminist research groups embodies the best of second- and third-wave thinking about collectivity, solidarity, and social change.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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