Second-Degree Feminism

Women’s studies and law combine in these graduate programs

When I applied to graduate school in 1990, I had two passions: law and feminism. At the time, I was immersed in the pro-choice activism that exploded around the 1989 Supreme Court decision in Webster v. Reproductive Health Services, which opened the door for new restrictions on abortion. I wanted to understand the law, but I also wanted to understand how women’s social movements have changed the law. So I brought these interests together by pursuing two different degrees: a juris doctor (J.D.) and a Ph.D. in women’s studies.

But today, students have the option of dual-degree programs in law and women’s studies.

University of Cincinnati, George Washington University, University of Arizona and University of Florida now offer dual J.D./M.A. women’s-studies degrees. Pace University and Sarah Lawrence College offer a joint J.D. and M.A. in women’s history. Indiana University-Bloomington offers a J.D. with a minor in gender studies, and American University bestows an LL.M. (Master of Laws) degree in gender and law. All these programs teach students how to think critically about the law using feminist perspectives.

Students usually complete a separate year in each field, then two years combining law school and women’s-studies courses. Professor Amy Lind, graduate director of the women’s, gender and sexuality studies department at University of Cincinnati, says that women’s-studies teaches students to think about law “in a much more intersectional way,” attentive to the experiences of diverse women. For example, recent Pace/Sarah Lawrence graduate Alana Mihovics recalls advocating for an undocumented Latina survivor of domestic violence who was reluctant to share any information.

“In the legal community, there can be a push to force as much information out of a client as possible so that you can most effectively advocate,” she says. “It was only by having the cultural and historical awareness of her potential fear of authority…language barriers, shame, religion and other factors that I realized I could most powerfully advocate for her when she could most powerfully advocate for herself. I was able to listen and build a rapport…eventually assisting her in obtaining a full order of protection against her abuser.”

Graduates of dual-degree programs become public-interest attorneys, employment-discrimination lawyers, lobbyists and educators. The law degree opens doors that might not so easily open to someone with a women’s-studies M.A. alone.

If the commitment of a dual-degree program is not for you, you can still learn feminist legal theory and practice in law school by making connections with feminist faculty and feminist legal journals or clinics. More than 20 law schools have women’s-rights journals, and law school clinics provide hands-on experience. For example, University of Michigan Law School offers a human trafficking clinical program, and Columbia Law School has a sexuality and gender law clinic. You can find feminist law professors at www.feministlawprofessors.com.

The dual degree provides tools to combat attempts to weaken women’s rights. Professor Patricia MacCorquodale at University of Arizona says that while law school teaches students “how to work in the establishment,” women’s-studies teaches students “how to work for social change.”

For more information, see Smith College’s list of dual-degree programs and law schools with feminist journals and clinics at www.smith.edu/swg/graduate.php.

—CARRIE BAKER

Dual-degree graduate Alana Mihovics