Mobilization among Women Academics: The Interplay between Feminism and Professionalization

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Semi-structured individual interviews and document and observational analyses from two feminist faculty grassroots networks provide an understanding of how faculty confront an inequitable campus climate. From these data, the author shows that two subtly different strategies emerge to help women mobilize and address issues of discrimination and bias. One organization is a professional organization of feminists while the other is an activist organization of professionals, which in both cases help define academic feminism and the faculty profession.

Keywords: academic feminism / activism / faculty / mobilization / networks / activist strategies

Introduction

Much of the research about women faculty has centered around issues of equity, particularly in salary and promotion and discrimination.\(^1\) While focusing on the professional lives of women faculty, little of the scholarship, especially scholarship within the last ten years, addresses how faculty women mobilize or how and with whom they create networks in order to be successful in academe. I focus on women who are not just adapters and survivors but change agents. I seek to understand the relationships and activism of faculty women in order to shed light on how activist academic women define women’s issues and what strategies they pursue in promoting change.

Over the last three decades, the landscape of higher education has changed dramatically. Among these changes is the fact that women now make up more than 50 percent of the undergraduate student population. Over 45 percent of all Ph.D. recipients are now women, and the numbers of women faculty are increasing (Chronicle 2003). Women’s studies programs and departments are now included among the academic programs at more than 700 colleges and universities (Thorne 2000). Moreover, many campuses house women’s centers and other resources for women. These are all positive indications that the climate has changed and, in many cases, has improved for women in higher education.

This study examines academic organizations, both feminist and activist that helped to bring about the changes described above. However, while improvements have been made, the women involved in both organizations recognize that equity for women in the academy is far from realized; thus
both organizations at the time of the publication of this study continue to seek a better climate for women on their respective campuses. I will first review the extant literature about the strategies academic feminists have pursued to address inequities and improve the campus climate for themselves and others. The research question and the design of this qualitative study follows. The findings elucidate the experiences of academic women activists, and the discussion explores how activist academic women on two campuses constructed activist strategies in subtly different ways. Implications for the future of activism on these campuses and how these models may be transferable to other less similar campuses are explored.

Theoretical Framework

This study’s theoretical framework was based upon intersections between feminist, professionalization, and social movement theories. These frameworks guided my research question and influenced how I interpreted the data. I employ a feminist perspective in part because the women in this study are working within organizations that seek equity for women in their institution. Further, my understanding of feminism is rooted in the belief that while power within the academy may be patriarchal, it can be transformed (Ropers-Huilman 1998; Safarik 2003). Such transformation is at the heart of activism, and social movement theory serves to further inform my understanding of activism, which is at the focus of this study. Finally, for this study, the change agents are also faculty. Because their lives are shaped not only by feminism and activism but also by the work that they do, professionalization theory also informs my research.

My review of the literature is embedded in the theoretical frameworks described above and focuses on the mechanisms women faculty have pursued to transform higher education. Specifically, I explore the scholarship on academic feminism and the activism that has influenced the work of women faculty as change agents.

Review of the Literature

In Shattering the Myths: Women in Academe, Judith Glazer-Raymo captured the history of academic feminism from 1890 through the 1990s (1999). She highlighted three studies that examined feminist faculty from 1890 through the 1960s. These examples portrayed feminist academics as primarily concerned about the representation of women within the faculty and institutional leadership; other issues of equity and patriarchy in the academy received little consideration. The scholarly work of these academics emphasized the personal rather than the professional, which
shifted in later decades to focus more significantly on the professional lives of women.

In the late 1960s, complementing the Civil Rights and Women’s Rights Movements outside the academy, Glazer-Raymo documents a shift in priorities among feminist academics (1999). These women were now actively demanding equity in promotion, hiring, salary, benefits, and representation on decision-making committees. This shift has continued throughout the following decades as issues of equity remain unresolved.

At the same time, the scholarship of academic feminists not only shifted in content but also became more theoretically diverse and sophisticated, including feminist ideologies of radicalism, Marxism, liberalism, socialism, and postmodernism. Many feminist scholars found disciplinary homes in women’s studies programs and departments, while others positioned themselves as feminists throughout the curriculum. Unlike their feminist predecessors, many academic feminists of the late 1960s through the 1990s focused their attention on their professions. While they were concerned about inequity and discrimination based upon gender, they felt that traditional career success, marked by achievements in research, teaching, and service, was necessary in order to be taken seriously and to facilitate incremental institutional change. Further contributing to a more professionalized and less radical academic feminist culture are the newest doctoral recipients. These women are the first generation who never experienced professional life before the late 1960s and early 1970s when the second wave of feminism was most salient and, as such, may take the cultural and economic gains of women for granted (Laslett and Brenner 2000). Despite this, feminism in the academy is still very much alive, although it has been mutually shaped by the cultural, economic, political, and professional changes inside and outside the academy over the last 25 years (Glazer-Raymo 1999; Messer-Davidow 2002; Safarik 2003).

Central to the changing nature of academic feminism are women’s studies programs and departments. Not only has the research from and about Women’s Studies changed, but the discipline that was once led by community activists is now led by national scholars (Krajewski 1999). For example, as women’s studies programs at the University of Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse worked to establish institutional credibility, conscious decisions were made by program leaders to distance the programs from the women’s movement and activism (Krajewski 1999). As some programs have acquired tenure lines, departmental status, and/or graduate programs, they have been able to return to their activist roots without compromising scholarly integrity. However, 56 percent of women’s studies programs still have no faculty lines and struggle to create scholarship and curriculum that the institution values and rewards, placing activism on the margins (Kanhai 2000). Unfortunately, with fewer resources, it is difficult for programs and departments to contribute
adequately to both the scholarly and activist agendas, and often the activists become less integral as they once were, since the professional academy doesn’t reward activist work in the same way as it rewards traditionally defined scholarship and theory development. The thinking- (i.e., knowledge production) doing (i.e., activism) dichotomy is not the sole challenge faced by Women’s Studies. Friction also exists between the humanities faculty and the more empirically-based social science faculty as to the nature of feminist theory and what is “cutting edge” scholarship (Thorne 2000). Competition, rather than collaboration or expansion of a theoretical paradigm, has become a part of Women’s Studies, just as it is a part of the academic culture as a whole.

Further, Women’s Studies, like all other fields, is embedded in a U.S. academic environment wrought with conservatism and dwindling resources. To survive in such a climate, some institutions are abandoning women’s studies programs to create a seemingly more palatable “gender studies” program or department, leaving a question as to where feminism fits in this new field (Hubbard 2000). As a result, Women’s Studies must exhibit market-like behaviors that take time away from scholarship and activism to look for outside financial support and revenue generating opportunities. This necessary shift can further marginalize activist, community-based, and non-empirical work, often considered to be at the core of Women’s Studies.

Overall, the status of Women’s Studies and its future are topics of rich and on-going discussion. The National Women’s Studies Association Journal dedicated several essays to this topic in its Summer 2000 issue (Yee 2000). The University of Arizona hosted a national conference in October 2000, titled The Future of Women’s Studies: Foundations, Interrogations, Politics, providing additional evidence that there are unanswered questions about the nature of Women’s Studies in higher education. In many ways, Women’s Studies has begun to operate like other departments in order to schedule classes, recruit graduate students, and hire and promote faculty (Yee 2000). At the same time, these programs and departments try to keep academic feminism alive by maintaining their feminist history, expanding feminist scholarship, finding a place for activism, and wrestling with unanswered questions about the direction of this academic enterprise.

With complexity as the descriptor of academic feminism, it follows that collective action among feminist faculty women may be difficult to capture succinctly. Coupled with a more competitive academic climate in terms of resources and rewards, organizing a grassroots group of feminist faculty focused on institutional change can be challenging. Yet, this study intends to contribute to the existing scholarship on how academic women mobilize and shed light on academic feminism and the collective action among feminist faculty. It is the intent of the remainder of this study to
complement the scholarship introduced with examples and analyses of how women faculty involved in grassroots collective action construct their activist lives.

Research Question

By exploring the experiences of feminist activist academic women, self-identified by their involvement in campus grassroots organizations for women faculty, I hope to provide a deeper understanding of how these women succeed in an academy often considered hostile to women. Specifically, the research question I seek to answer is: How do women faculty in campus-based grassroots feminist networks organize and construct their activist strategies?

To clarify, a grassroots organization is one that, for the design of this study, is formed and maintained by women faculty. Such organizations are not created by Boards of Regents or Trustees, university administrators, or affiliated with parties outside the institution (e.g., American Council on Education or the American Association of University Women)—they are constructed and led by women faculty. The focus of the activism of these organizations is primarily to address concerns of and improve the climate for women faculty. I define activist strategies as the purposeful methods in which members of an organization engage in order to raise consciousness and foster change about issues central to women in the academy.

Design

In order to address my research question, I conducted an exploratory qualitative study. I used a comparative case study design to investigate intensively two feminist faculty organizations at two public doctoral/research-extensive universities over the course of an academic semester.

I selected two feminist faculty organizations that serve as the foundation of my study. The first organization was the Association for Women Faculty (AWF) at the University of Arizona (UA). I chose this organization because I was a board member of the AWF at the time of investigation, and therefore, had easy access to all aspects of the organization. Because of my involvement in this organization, I was a participant-observer throughout the collection and analysis of the data. For the second case, I selected the Faculty Women’s Caucus (FWC) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). The two settings, the University of Arizona and the University of Nebraska, had several similarities that made them ideal for comparative purposes.

For each case study, I conducted a cross-case analysis (Patton 1990). This sort of analysis allowed me to group together perspectives from
different data sources to shape the themes that guided my research. By using a variety of field methods (document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and observations), I gathered comprehensive, in-depth information about each case.

In total, I analyzed 23 newsletters from the University of Arizona’s organization, the AWF (a temporally representative sample from 1983–2000), and the organization’s constitution and by-laws. I observed six board meetings, a luncheon with the organization and the Board of Regents, and two meetings with the AWF board and university leadership. Finally, using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, I conducted 27 semi-structured interviews that were audio taped and transcribed, verbatim, with eleven active AWF board members, six former AWF board members, and the Director of Women’s Studies at the University of Arizona.

The University of Nebraska’s organization, the FWC, as the findings elucidate, had a less formal structure, so the nature of the available documents, observations, and interviews differed from the more formal AWF. However, documents, observations, and interviews served as the criteria that comprised my sample in both cases, but the particular characteristics of those criteria reflected the composition of each organization. Thus, for the FWC, I analyzed eighteen organizational documents that included electronic mail messages, meeting agendas, petitions, and letters. I observed one meeting related to the work of the FWC. Finally, eight active FWC members (including the Director of Women’s Studies at UNL) and one former FWC member were interviewed using the same semi-structured interview protocol and design described above for the members of the AWF.

The most powerful patterns and themes that emerged from the data served as the framework for my findings that follow. In addition, I worked closely with a peer research group throughout the process to help me refine my protocols, address issues of bias, and reinforce the salient findings from this study. The findings that follow often use quotes directly from the participants in this study to give voice to the women activists who are working to improve the climate for women faculty on their campuses. The quotes are not anecdotal. Rather, they reflect significant themes that emerged from the documents, observations, and interviews, and in all cases, pseudonyms are used to maintain the confidentiality of the women activists in this study.

Findings

Just as feminism is complex, the activism that emerged from feminist faculty organizations is complex as well. There appears to be no one mold to describe academic feminism and activism. Strategies ranged from
collegial to confrontational, from leveraging the university administration to leveraging a wider public. The Association for Women Faculty at the University of Arizona and the Faculty Women’s Caucus at the University of Nebraska provided examples of the nature of activism among feminist women faculty, and the activism for both organizations centered on similar issues. The issues fell into four categories: salary, representation of women in senior faculty and leadership positions, climate for women, and benefits. The categories are broad enough that there are many facets to each, allowing for new issues within each category to surface. For example, women in the AWF worked to create a policy for faculty to stop the tenure clock for childbirth or adoption voluntarily but continued to fight for better childcare benefits. Similarly, the women in the FWC fought to secure insurance coverage for contraceptive devices but were still working to ensure domestic partner benefits. These were the issues around which the women in the AWF and the FWC mobilized. However, to understand activism and the nature of academic feminism fully for these women, it was critical to explore further how they engaged in their work and what motivated their efforts.

By triangulating the findings from the analysis of organizational documents, observations of meetings, and in-depth interviews with women involved in the AWF and the FWC, the structure and purpose (i.e., the organization), of the AWF and the FWC were explored. The AWF was a professional organization of feminists, while the FWC was a feminist organization of professionals, as evidenced by the purpose, membership, leadership, and centrality of feminism within each organization.

**Professional Organization of Feminists**

When I spoke to the women involved with the AWF about the purpose and description of the organization, their responses expressed a wide array of perspectives. Among the breadth of responses, seven women indicated that advocacy for women faculty to the administration was the purpose of the AWF and three shared that the organization was also there as a network of women faculty to support one another professionally. With regard to the administration, members of the AWF felt that their work was not only to be spokespersons for women faculty to the administration but also to work in concert with the administration to resolve concerns:

I think the purpose of the AWF is to advance women’s issues on campus, to make them more visible, to get them heard, to identify what are the most important and pressing issues facing women on campus, and to try to carry those issues forward to the administration and to get them acted on. (Olivia Nelson, AWF 2001)
I wouldn’t call it a militant—I wouldn’t even call it a strongly activist group. It is an activist group who has strong feelings who want to approach and deal with problems in a professional way. It is a group that is trying to bring some of those issues to light and to have a forum and a platform for presenting it to the administration to see if some of the problems can be solved and if the environment on this campus for women can be improved. [Deborah Young, AWF 2001]

A review of the documents of the Commission on the Status of University Women (CSUW), the precursor to AWF that included faculty, staff, and students (not to be confused with the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which was mandated by the University of Arizona Board of Regents in the early 1980s), suggested that the organization was initially reluctant to buy into and accept the prevailing institutional culture. In the early years of the CSUW, which was formed in 1972, the organization proposed the creation of a women’s studies program, which developed into one of the first such programs in the country. The group participated in community women’s marches, Equal Rights Amendment rallies, and encouraged membership in the National Organization for Women (NOW). These activities were not surprising, since the CSUW formed simultaneously with the rise of second wave of feminism and many of the activist activities mirrored those happening throughout the United States. The CSUW was first referred to as “the group” by its members. There was speculation, according to a recorded history created by a CSUW member and later AWF president, that the organization disbanded, in part, due to limited membership linked to the fear of junior faculty women belonging to a “women’s group.” This is to say that the CSUW had a reputation of being a feminist organization and belonging to it could compromise one’s reputation in the university, threatening tenure and promotion.

Some of the types of activities of the CSUW were similar to the activities of the AWF that followed. For example, the CSUW documented information-gathering about numbers of women by department and rank and making gender-related policy recommendations—all efforts complementing the administrative workings of the UA. Initially, the CSUW was more clandestine in its activities and organization. However, the CSUW indicated during a meeting that they needed to break down the organization’s secretive and radical stereotypes to demonstrate that it was an “active and professional organization.” This change was a purposeful response to some women on campus who indicated they were unwilling to join “women’s groups.” This sentiment was the first documented evidence that for the CSUW it was more important to be considered professional than feminist. Indeed, there was some sense that being feminist and being professional were mutually exclusive. Thus, the organization’s vision shifted from a more radical feminist activism to emphasizing professionalization and academic legitimacy, which set a precedent for much of the activism of the AWF that followed.
In 1979, the CSUW disbanded due to lack of membership and concerns that its focus was too broad. While a broad constituency should have led to a large membership, that was not the case. Even after the CSUW shifted its focus, some women were afraid to be affiliated with a feminist group. Still others felt that their particular issues would not be adequately addressed because the CSUW agenda was too broad, trying to resolve issues for students, staff, and faculty. Because of the vacancy created by the dissolution of the CSUW, a group of women faculty, led by Claudia MacIntosh, decided to form a new feminist organization in 1981:

People wanted to form a group that would be more of an activist group and could focus more on faculty issues, and also more of a mentoring and advocacy group for the members. (Robin Neigh, AWF 2001)

[Women faculty] were upset about salaries [in the early 1980s]. I always wanted there to be a political organization [to address this and other issues] because [as head of women’s studies], I didn’t want to do explicit politics from Women’s Studies. Finally, I got a group together and we went to the Union Club. We said we need to start an organization. (Claudia MacIntosh, AWF 2001)

The downfall of the CSUW and the recognition by Claudia MacIntosh that a politically activist organization was vital marked the beginning of the AWF. Focusing specifically on faculty issues led to the creation of an organization with a clearer mission than its CSUW predecessor that also stressed the centrality of the faculty profession. Moreover, the organization also sought to include feminists intentionally, and to provide a political outlet for those feminists in Women’s Studies. Claudia MacIntosh, who was Director of Women’s Studies at that time, spearheaded the formation of the AWF to provide a place for activism outside of the academic discipline of Women’s Studies.

The group who initiated the AWF wanted to form a feminist organization for faculty. As such, the organization purposely excluded most staff and students from membership. However, some staff (termed academic professionals at the University of Arizona) engaged in some of the same responsibilities as faculty. These academic professionals included researchers and librarians, and were invited to become members of the AWF. In addition, graduate students, due to their roles as aspiring faculty, were also invited to become members. Including academic professionals and graduate students in the work of the AWF was secondary, at best, to providing support for women faculty, as evidenced by the lack of data about these groups or their issues in interviews, observations, or newsletters. While both groups were invited to become members and some academic professionals even served in formal leadership positions, there was very little evidence to indicate that graduate students and academic professionals were allowed anything but a marginal role in the AWF.
In the early years of the AWF, Claudia MacIntosh’s vision of a broad-based grassroots organization came to fruition. Although there was an executive board that met, the general membership participated in meetings for the organization. While the meetings may not have had the entire membership present, the entire membership was invited. If there were executive (or board) meetings, those appeared ancillary, according to the emphasis in the newsletters, to the larger, general membership meetings. The primary work of the organization centered around luncheons where the entire membership was invited. For example, in 1986–87, 180 dues-paying members would be invited to lunch meetings, and often more than half of the members would attend.

The more inclusive pattern in the early years differed considerably from the recent efforts of the organization, where the primary work has been done by the board, not by the general membership. Claudia MacIntosh contends, “In a way, the AWF is the board. Mostly, the rest of the people who belong to AWF are the audience. The only people who are the activists are the board. I don’t even think the membership knows what is going on” (AWF 2001). While there were events that included the general membership, with the exception of the annual Board of Regents luncheon, most events had about 30 participants. Although there were more women faculty, academic professionals, and graduate students at the University of Arizona at the time of the study than in the 1980s, there were only 100–120 dues paying members when this study was undertaken. However, a current board member of the organization reflected that membership numbers were not necessarily critical:

I don’t think [the administration] has a sense of who the membership is really, and in some ways, even though there is paid membership, in a lot of ways, it is all women faculty in whatever rank or position who are part of it. I think it is perceived that way by the central administration and by the university at large. So when they talk about the Association for Women Faculty, they talk about all those women. So in a sense, it is bigger than it really is, when you think of paid membership. (Uma Himinez, AWF 2001)

In a number of ways, this statement captured the essence of the organization. First, it recognized that perception, especially among the administration, was a very important strategy. Second, it reinforced that the board was doing the activist work; the paid general membership was no longer at the heart of the organization.

The AWF had an executive board of leaders designated in traditional positions—president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer/membership. In addition, there was a larger board that included the executive board, liaisons with other campus organizations, and chairs of the various subcommittees. Specifically, liaisons to the CSW, Women in Academic
Medicine, and the American Association of University Women served as AWF board members, as did the chairs of the subcommittees concerned with minority women, action, graduate and professional student, and family care issues.

Because of the minimal role of the general membership, the AWF’s agenda was shaped by the will of the board, not by the will of the general membership. Board members might talk to general members about issues of concern and those issues might become a part of the agenda, but it was the board, and in many cases, the president of the board, who established the organization’s agenda:

I think the chair has a lot of weight, but they listen to other input too. I think the agenda is determined this way. [Da-Ming Quo, AWF 2001]

The president [of the board] would decide if there were bigger overarching issues that needed to be dealt with the [university] president and the provost. . . . I would say that is one way in which the agenda gets set. I would say another area is by members raising issues—like junior people needing information about how to get through the tenure process or whatever. [Robin Neigh, AWF 2001]

This organizational method, including membership and leadership structures, was top-down and hierarchical, resembling the professional institutional bureaucracy rather than a more feminist collegial structure.

Six of the women with whom I spoke at UA were former board members of the AWF but were no longer actively involved with the organization. All of these women self-identified as feminists. It was among the current board membership where feminist self-identity was more vague. While someone may not identify with feminism, a bystander may evaluate that person’s actions and motivations as feminist. However, it is not insignificant that some of the women in this study felt uncomfortable with, or unclear about, the label of feminism.

Among the women involved in AWF who discussed feminism, one woman stood out. She stated that she did not consider herself to be a feminist: “I don’t see myself as a feminist, where I think a lot of the other people [in the AWF] are, or they have really strong women’s issues.” [Kari Morgan, AWF 2001] However, as our conversation continued, she did reconsider her position about feminism: “I agree that there is a real problem in the way women are treated on this campus. I don’t know, maybe I am [a feminist].” [Kari Morgan, AWF 2001]

Another woman was also unsure of her relationship to feminism. When asked whether she considered herself a feminist, she responded: “If I could figure out a definition, maybe. I don’t know, because I just don’t know what that really means” [Uma Himinez, AWF 2001]. There was also one woman who only felt comfortable using her own definition of feminism. (The Director of Women’s Studies is not formally involved in the organization, so her discussion of feminism was not included in this part of the
analysis.) In light of these findings, it appeared that the feminist identity of the members and, by extension, the organization and their subsequent priorities have shifted over time. The AWF was an organization that once purposefully included and spoke as feminists; yet over time, feminism within the organization became less transparent.

Further emphasizing the professional rather than the personal and feminist, the first AWF newsletter in 2000–2001 introduced the 16 members of the AWF board. In the introductions of board members, connections to professional status and prestige dominated. Most read like an abbreviated curriculum vitae. The majority of references about the issues of women faculty that were to be the core of the association appeared at the end of lengthy paragraphs that listed professional credentials. This positioning backgrounded the work of the AWF and foregrounded the women’s qualifications in traditional academic terms. Only three mentioned roles other than professional work (e.g., wife, parent, community volunteer). Further, only one woman used the word “feminist” in her biography, and this was used to describe her scholarly work.

The individual interviews told only a slightly different story with regard to incorporating gender and feminism into the scholarship of the participants. While all six former and founding members with whom I spoke used a strong feminist frame to describe their scholarly work, only four of the twelve current members indicated that they purposefully incorporated feminism or gender in their scholarship. This diversity in theoretical perspectives has opened the board to include a multitude of academic voices, and it has created some challenges for the organization:

It used to be like that was where the AWF faculty came from—Women’s Studies. Now it’s like they come from different places. But we find often we are talking different languages. Some of the people who didn’t come from Women’s Studies have different understandings and are not in some ways as advanced in their perception of what feminist activism is. You are bringing along people who are less aware of the issues in that way and kind of have to learn how to speak about them. [Olivia Nelson, AWF 2001]

To maintain its feminist grounding, the AWF had to do consciousness-raising work for its members, including its board members; however, this could potentially take time away from advancing other agenda items. Or, the organization could forgo this activity, potentially shifting the AWF further away from its feminist roots. Either way, growth and expansion for the AWF has been both a blessing and a curse and has moved the organization to one that is professional first and feminist, second. As the data below describes, however, a professional organization of feminists is not the only configuration around which a grassroots network of feminist faculty may mobilize. The faculty women in the FWC at University of Nebraska maintained emphases on the professional and the feminist
but underscored each in a slightly different manner than the women in the AWF.

**Feminist Organization of Professionals**

In 1988, Beth Newman met a colleague for lunch. During that meeting, they decided that the women faculty at the University of Nebraska needed a mechanism to get their voices heard on campus. While there was a CSW, faculty were only a subset of the membership and vision of that organization. In addition, the CSW was a university committee. Beth and her colleague wanted a grassroots organization that had an independent voice and was not responsible to UNL administration. Like Claudia MacIntosh’s meeting at the University of Arizona, Beth’s meeting ignited a spark—a spark that became the Faculty Women’s Caucus.

The FWC differed from the AWF in its organization. Rather than being a professional organization of feminists, it was more aptly described as a feminist organization of professionals. As with the AWF, feminism and academic work were both important parts of the organization. However, for the FWC, it was feminism first that shaped the organization. Moreover, unlike the AWF, in which the members were more cooperative with the administration, the members of the FWC saw their roles as much more active and confrontational. The described purpose of the organization centered on feminist activism rather than professionalized activism [Hart 2005]. For example as a member stated:

> I would say [the purpose of the organization] is to keep an eye on the administration and try and prod them to making this a more female friendly, even minority friendly environment. [Natalie Ingram, FWC 2001]

> [We are a group of women who] don’t let administrators get away with things. If we weren’t there, I can’t imagine what would happen. [Nancy Nichols, FWC 2001]

“Keeping an eye on” and “not letting the administration get away with things” characterized an organization that was much more commanding than congenial. Others interviewed shared that the organization must remain distinct and separate from the administration in order to be effective:

> [The purpose of the FWC] is to have another voice on campus for women faculty that is not beholden to any administrative unit. I think that is the political position of the Caucus. [Karen Smith, FWC 2001]

> [The purpose is] to speak for women in ways that the Commission on the Status of Women can’t, because it has to answer to the president. That is sort of the underlying premise. [Nicole Carsen, FWC 2001]
Both the FWC and the AWF described themselves in relation to their respective university administrations. However, the FWC had a more separatist stance within UNL, which was markedly different than the partnership the AWF tried to foster with the administration. The FWC’s separatism was reminiscent of more radical feminism, while the AWF chose to engage in more liberal feminist tactics by believing, on some level, that the administrative structure can be trusted and can work.

In some ways, the FWC was more exclusive than the AWF. Only faculty comprised the membership. However, by having a more restricted membership that did not include students nor academic professionals, the FWC did not struggle with competing issues and constituencies that the AWF had to consider. The Caucus did not have dues or even a formal list of members. Unless a member self-identified as affiliated with the FWC, she was anonymous. This strategy was particularly important for untenured women who may face condemnation among colleagues for being connected to a feminist organization.

The Caucus is good because there is no list of individual names. No one knows if you are there or not. There is never attendance [taken]. Sometimes we do take attendance just to gather e-mail addresses and stuff. But no one really knows if anyone was there. [Beth Newman, FWC 2001]

We don’t want too much formalization, as we might become an adoptee of the administration—I really like to think of us an orphan. [Natalie Ingram, FWC 2001]

Another difference between the professional AWF and the feminist FWC was the way in which the memberships were involved. For every meeting, the FWC sent out an electronic message to all women faculty at UNL, inviting them to attend the upcoming meeting and to get involved in the FWC. Over time, the numbers of women who have responded to these invitations have increased. However, there was a core group of individuals who have consistently participated in the FWC since its inception in 1988:

[It is important to have] a group of women who respond to immediate issues that no one else will respond to, that don’t forget things that haven’t been changed that people have brought up over the last many years, who have an institutional memory among all of us and don’t let administrators get away with things. [Nancy Nichols, FWC 2001]

[The FWC] is a loose coalition of women faculty who have specific agendas that address the general status of women on campus and that target women faculty in particular. [Over time], new people have come on, particularly around particular issues. [Irene North, FWC 2001]

The core group has been critical in sustaining the Caucus, but it relied on the additional support of more peripheral members to advance its
agenda. Those members whose involvement tended to wax and wane participated according to their interests in a particular issue in which the FWC was engaged at the time. They chose to participate based upon individual passions for an agenda item, and they saw their commitment as finite (i.e., until the issue is resolved). This differed from the membership role in the AWF. Although the intent of the subcommittee structure in the AWF was to engage the general membership in particular issues, the commitment to a subcommittee was year-long. This length of time proved to be problematic as faculty often dropped out of the subcommittees, attended only a limited number of meetings, or declined to participate altogether. Thus, the subcommittees overall tended to be comprised of core members and not general members.

Identifying leaders in the FWC was a simple, straightforward process. Seven of the nine women interviewed at UNL discussed the leadership of the organization and indicated that it was not a matter of certain faculty trying to garner power by becoming leaders. Rather, someone had to emerge as a chair or co-chair, and individuals who were willing found themselves in those roles for one or two years. More often than not, the chair or co-chairs volunteered only after they had tenure. These tenured women saw that these leadership roles had some external visibility to the larger university community, and the women who volunteered to facilitate the group felt that it was important to do so to protect more vulnerable women (i.e., those without tenure or not on the tenure track).

Basically, anyone who is willing to [facilitate] it can do it, as long as they are not trying to undermine [the organization]. (Beth Newman, FWC 2001)

Just by being willing and say you will [facilitate] it. I think some of us have a sense of obligation that it is my turn. Others have done their turn, so I will take a turn, and maybe I’ll have to take another turn in the future. (Catherine Eller, FWC 2001)

Further, it was not just the chair or co-chairs who were considered leaders. Anyone who was interested in mobilizing around an issue could, and often did, become a leader. The diffusion and fluidity of leadership was non-hierarchical and more feminist in nature. The following voices captured the open, participatory perspective on leadership within the FWC. When asked how someone becomes a leader in the group, women shared the following:

Just by default, by speaking up, by coming to meetings. (Nicole Carsen, FWC 2001)

And also by active participation in the meetings, I think you naturally take an important role. (Margaret Green, FWC 2001)

Although the core group of women [about eight to ten women faculty] provided leadership in terms of maintaining a historical perspective of the
organization and doggedly continued to be involved in nearly every issue of the FWC, it was personal and not positional power that enticed them into these leadership roles. Leadership was dynamic and inclusive within the FWC. Because of this, any faculty member who had an issue to raise was in a position to strategize and implement change with the support of the organization.

The agenda for the FWC was established in a non-hierarchical fashion that complemented its organizational and leadership structure. According to those currently involved in the group, women throughout campus brought issues to meetings, and those issues established the content of the FWC’s activist agenda:

> Whoever wants to put work into it, that is what the agenda will become. If you are willing to pick up the ball and carry it, it will happen. [Irene North, FWC 2001]
> [The agenda is determined] either by someone raising an issue, or just by thinking about the issues that are out there and bringing it to the agenda. [Nicole Carsen, FWC 2001]

In true grassroots fashion, any woman faculty member at UNL can raise an issue that may become part of the FWC’s agenda. Ultimately, if there was support for the issue, members of the Caucus mobilized and acted. For the AWF, it was up to the president of the group and the board to create and carry out the agenda—a strategy that was much more top-down than the web-like approaches of the FWC.

In contrast to the AWF, the FWC tried to focus the agenda on issues that would improve the situation for a large number of women, rather than to address the individual concerns of a single woman. This strategy allowed the organization to try to make broad, systemic changes instead of looking for a loophole or helping an individual negotiate and perpetuate the perceived patriarchy:

> There have been people who have brought their very individualized agendas to the Faculty Women’s Caucus. I think the Caucus has been very good at providing support and also leading those people back into other mechanisms for dealing with that and not getting sidetracked. . . . It is not because we don’t value, understand, and sympathize with those experiences. . . . But it is the understanding that it is about the FWC moving forward everybody as best you can, trying to lift everybody. [Irene North, FWC 2001]

The FWC highlighted feminist priorities. Rather than fighting for the merits of an individual case, systemic change was what was sought. The FWC again placed more radical feminist principles over those of liberal feminism, which would be more likely to seek to advance an individual cause within the existing administrative structure.6

At the University of Nebraska, however, all of the faculty members with whom I spoke considered their organization and themselves feminist.
While two women were more hesitant to embrace the label of feminism outright, they agreed that they were feminists but only by their own definition of feminism:

I’ll say what feminism is to me. I know this doesn’t coincide with the others. [Fran Cousins, FWC 2001]
Let me put it in [terms of] how I act within what I call my feminism. [Margaret Green, FWC 2001]

Neither of these women was among the core group involved in FWC. Fran left UNL in 1992 and was only involved in FWC peripherally while she was a faculty member there. Margaret periodically participated when the organization was working on an issue that was salient to her. However, all those in the core group considered themselves feminist without qualifying the word “feminism,” which was in contrast to the relationship to feminism as described by the active board members in the AWF.

Discussion

Through exploring the collective action of women in two different grassroots feminist organizations, I have highlighted the experiences of successful academic women who want to make it easier for other academic women to succeed. The stories that emerged from organizational documents, activities, and most poignantly, from their own voices defined two different ways to organize for the purpose of facilitating institutional change. In order to find deeper meaning in this study’s findings, I will return to the research question that guided this research.

To answer the question, “How do women faculty in campus-based grassroots feminist networks organize and construct their activist strategies?” most completely, I have taken a feminist approach that merges the personal and professional, recognizing that these organizations (the AWF and the FWC) were part of the lives of the academic women whom I studied. As such, the nature of the organizations was a fundamental part of the way in which their academic lives were constructed.

For the women at the University of Arizona, the organization of which they were a part was a professional organization of feminists. They saw the AWF as a grassroots collective that, first and foremost, addressed issues central to faculty women in a professional way. These academic women sought to work with the administration to resolve problems. In fact, the AWF, and the women who were involved in it, acted in many ways as an extension of the university administration.

The idea of working with the administration placed the AWF in a position to influence institutional decision-making beyond the conservative ideals of some scholarly perspectives of shared governance that allows for
faculty to advise only in curricular and other “academic” matters. In fact, the joint participation in decision-making toward which members of the AWF strived was the kind of shared authority that scholars like Thomas McConnell and Kenneth Mortimer (1971) preferred. Further, this type of governance assumed mutual trust, cooperation, and negotiation that were also often linked to organizations of feminists, so it is not surprising that the AWF sought this type of relationship with the administration.

Dealing with problems in a professional way and working with the administration to advance the issues of women faculty were the foci of the AWF. Assuming the responsibility of shared governance reinforced the professionalized expectation that faculty will have a voice in institutional decisions. And, the AWF participated in shared governance by providing advice through established mechanisms of consultation.

Confrontation and protest that are often evident in social movements, including the women’s movement, were gentler or non-existent strategies for the AWF, despite the purposeful effort to create AWF as an activist outlet for feminist faculty. These strategies were similar to those found by Messer-Davidow in her study of academic feminism; the confrontation and protest that were absent for the AWF she considered “extraordinary politics,” while the gentler tactics the AWF used were what Messer-Davidow referred to as “ordinary politics” (2002). By using such ordinary politics, the academically marginalized discipline of Women’s Studies could gain legitimacy by distancing itself from activism and could focus on enhancing feminist scholarship, teaching, and grant writing. In addition, Women’s Studies could extricate itself from the conflict created by two competing systems—social change and knowledge-building (Messer-Davidow 2002).

Ultimately for the AWF, to be seen as professionals first and feminist activists second was critical. In fact, the bylaws of the organization, which were written in the early 1980s, stated that the purpose of the AWF was to “address itself to the interests and concerns of professional faculty women at the UA.” Never was the AWF to get in the way of the administrative workings at the University of Arizona; rather, it was the purpose of the AWF to help the administrators do their work with the goal of improving the climate for women faculty. In fact, the “middle of the road” alliances formed by the AWF were very similar to those suggested by Ellen Messer-Davidow (“Women’s Studies and Activism” 2004, 11). Moreover, the leadership of the AWF very much mirrored the hierarchy of the university administration, with a president who constructed the agenda. In the end, the agenda that the AWF president (with or without input from the board) created was not inclusive or consensual. Instead, data showed that for the AWF, power, legitimacy, and traditional patriarchal systems framed the agenda set by the organization.

Further, while there was a board and a general membership body, the membership had little involvement in the day-to-day work of the AWF,
which may have led to the decline in the numbers of women faculty who have participated in the organization over time. However, this shift may also be due to other factors. I speculate that one possible reason for the decreased membership may be a decreasing interest or need among women to be involved in feminist activities, including the perception that the women’s movement is over. Another reason may be an increasing work load among potential members that does not provide ample time to engage in volunteer work that is not rewarded in promotion and tenure processes, an idea supported by the findings from Lynn Safarik’s study of feminist faculty at UCLA (2003). Still, a third reason may be that the potential members have more loyalty to their professional identities and individual disciplines than to an identity of activism oriented toward changing the University of Arizona.

The place of feminism in the organization has shifted over time. The foremothers of the AWF purposely selected organizational leaders who were feminist. Now, for this organization, the place of feminism is secondary. Some women involved in the AWF did self-identify as feminist, but the organization has evolved to include women who are uncertain about labeling themselves as such. Perhaps this shift over time is due to the fact that those first involved with the AWF in the early and mid-1980s “came of age” during the height of second wave feminists, but as time elapsed, the organization and the faculty role itself became more professionalized and younger faculty who did not identify with the second wave of feminism became involved. Further, a compelling account of anti-feminist harassment and other challenges faced by Annette Kolodny, who was dean of the College of Humanities at the University of Arizona in the late 1980s may have reminded these faculty of the obstacles faced by avowed feminists on their own campus (Kolodny 1998). Her experiences reinforced the need for the work of the AWF, but may have tempered how the faculty in this study constructed their own ideas of feminism. Whatever the reason for the back-grounding of feminism over time, the academics involved in the AWF appeared to want their legacy tied to professional efforts, not to feminism. However, professionalization is not to be confused with institutionalization nor should it be totally independent from feminism. Women in the AWF were still involved in a feminist grassroots organization and, despite their strong connections to the institutional leadership, they were not obligated to the institution.

In contrast, at the University of Nebraska, the women in the FWC have constructed an organization that places feminism first. By creating an organization distinct from UNL’s Commission on the Status of Women, which was a part of the administrative structure of the university, the women in the FWC purposely designed an organization that was separate from the administration. They saw the FWC as a mechanism to keep the administration in check when it comes to addressing gender issues on
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The organization was loosely structured, lacking a board, but did have co-chairs to call meetings. Every woman involved, either as a core member or as a member on the periphery, could contribute to the agenda and participate in activities to advance the FWC’s agenda. Power was shared within the organization, complementing the foregrounded feminist nature of the FWC. Further, individual members self-identified as feminist and saw that connection as important to the work of the FWC.

Given these findings, one may ask whether an organization is truly a feminist organization if its members are not all feminists. While the answer seems to beg a simple “yes” or “no,” simplicity will not suffice. Feminism is a complex social theory, comprised of multiple strands, and it exists in a political, cultural, and social context. The voices of the women in this study and the descriptions of their organizations demonstrate the rich, complicated dimensions of feminism for women, as well as for men and institutions.

Being a member of an organization dedicated to improving the climate for women on campus did not preclude membership of non-feminists or those unsure of their relationship to the feminist movement. The political, cultural, and social climate as it relates to feminism shaped a context where some activists were uncertain about embracing or unwilling to accept a feminist label. It is clear that this climate, and those women involved in FWC and AWF, mutually shaped how these women organized and strategized in a context of grassroots activism. Further, these findings did not support Messer-Davidow’s argument that academic feminism has been institutionalized through Women’s Studies (“Women’s Studies and Activism” 2004). Rather, the evidence from my study showed that academic feminism was broader than that and was influenced by many aspects; and in the cases of the University of Arizona and the University of Nebraska, academic feminism relied only tangentially, if at all, on Women’s Studies as the catalyst.

Despite the complexity of feminism, it was the role of feminism for these organizations and their members that was significant. Feminism was the guiding force for the professionals within the FWC. For the AWF, being seen as professionals first was paramount; feminism had an important place, but it was historical and secondary (and for some within the organization, perhaps even tertiary). As Elizabeth Allan argued, professionalization has an incredible predictability and normalizing power (2003). Messer-Davidow referred to this power as intellectualization or institutionalization (2002). This power absolutely had an impact on the mobilization and activism of the FWC and AWF. However, that power did not eclipse the salience of feminism and gender in either organization. Moreover, it was the positioning of feminism and its relationship to professionalization that made each organization, and the strategies that were used to advance its agenda, unique. Although, it must be noted that the
since the AWF was established six years prior to the FWC, the life cycle of the organization may have an impact on the positioning of feminism and professionalization over time. The scope of the current study is not intended to provide a definitive conclusion for this temporal issue; however, the current study does provide ample rationale for future research to explore in-depth the life cycles of such organizations.

Implications and Conclusion

My research leads to several implications not only for organizations like the Association for Women Faculty and the Faculty Women’s Caucus but also for the institutions that have such organizations. First, campus-based grassroots feminist faculty organizations are faced with multiple influences that ultimately shape the way academic feminism is defined for these groups. The ways that women involved in such organizations define and embrace feminism, coupled with how they see themselves influenced by their profession, shape the strategies and agendas that they use.

Second, for activists like those in this study, access to administrative leadership can dictate the networks that the organization seeks. For an administration that is trusted and welcoming, creating close ties with the administration is crucial. However, for an administration that is adversarial, distancing the organization from the administration is a helpful tactic to advance its agenda.

Third, organizations like the AWF and the FWC include mostly tenured women. Those women who have tenure are more able to take risks and to rock the institutional boat. They are in a much better position to address the issues of those who are students (particularly those aspiring to be faculty, so as not to dilute the faculty focus of the organization); and of those who are faculty of color; faculty with disabilities; gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered faculty; and/or faculty not on the tenure-track. Further, given the large numbers of women in these more marginalized groups, campus-based grassroots feminist faculty organizations can exponentially increase their power base by welcoming these women and simultaneously creating a critical mass and safe space for all women.

Fourth, institutions benefit from these sorts of organizations. This is not to suggest that administrative leaders should seek out members and establish an organization, for the grassroots nature would be eliminated. The effectiveness of such organizations would be undermined, as is often the case with campus commissions on the status of women (Glazer-Raymo 1999). However, the women in these organizations have a certain degree of institutional loyalty. In a time when faculty have become increasingly nationally and internationally focused, this is particularly meaningful. Further, these women are committed to improving the climate on their
own campuses not only for themselves but also for the women who follow them. They provide examples (and cautionary tales) of how feminists can mobilize to address gender inequities on campuses that continue to manifest themselves.

The evidence from this research showed that women faculty in campus-based grassroots feminist networks constructed their organizations, activism, and lives in multiple ways. Both organizations made meaning of the professional and feminist identities of academic women, but the degree to which one takes precedence over the other differed. Neither construction was better than the other, even though both mobilized around similar broad issues related to gender inequities and discrimination in academe. Rather, the research showed that the lives of academic women were complex, and there were multiple ways to make meaning of and to organize the personal and professional—further reinforcing the complexity of academic feminism.

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Notes


2. See Judith Glazer-Raymo 1999; Mary Hawkesworth 2000; Allan G. Johnson 1997; Joan Kennedy-Taylor 1992; Imelda Whelehan 1995. However, it should be noted that these emerging feminist discourses are also criticized for being inaccessible to and not practical for those outside the academy.


4. See Jeni Hart for additional analysis of these issues (2003; 2005).

5. It should be noted here that during the course of this research, most of the participants encouraged me to use their given names because as activists, they felt that putting themselves out there publically was being true to their activism and their feminist work. However, while the members of both
organizations embraced their activism and did not feel the need to remain anonymous, I decided to change the participants’ names in order to enhance confidentiality of those who were part of this study, which is methodologically important in certain research traditions.

6. It should be noted that there is no evidence in the data from the AWF that it focuses on the merits of individual cases. Like the FWC, it is interested in improving the climate of all women.

References


Green, Margaret. Personal Interview. FWC. 3 May 2001.


