

New task force debates gender issues

By Middlebury Campus

Author: Michelle Constant Members of the new Task Force on the Status of Women at the College discussed increased access to childcare for faculty members, increasing faculty diversity and protecting female students during social situations at the group's first open meeting on Oct. 11. Faculty, staff and students gathered in McCullough Social Space to engage in discussions over the wide variety of issues. Their work will result in a final report issued in March 2008 that will contain the goals of the College regarding women's and gender issues for the next 10 years. "This is our first effort to let anyone come out and talk to us," said Area Director of Library and Information Services and Task Force Chair Carrie Rampp, "to see what topics others want to focus on in the future." Since the 1997 Task Force, the College has taken steps to increase the availability of childcare for employees on campus and to better establish the Women and Gender Studies (WAGS) Program. However, Rampp feels that although considerable progress has been made in the past 10 years, the College still must address certain issues to reach a level of gender equality. "Parental leave and child care issues continue to be really relevant," said Ramp. Other staff issues addressed included flexible work hours for staff. This would make it easier for staff members to continue education and to take leaves, and is not necessarily gender limited. A member of the staff suggested allowing the predominantly female coordinators at the College to go back to school for Master's degrees and making it a priority to highlight women at the College and their accomplishments. In terms of diversifying the curriculum, the groups addressed that faculty members in different departments have varying amounts of flexibility. Many agreed on the need to diversify staff – bringing in female professors of color, as well as professors with more diverse fields of scholarship. However, it was agreed that it is important to put support systems in place before new faculty members arrive, so that these women feel comfortable and welcome at the College. The groups also discussed student life issues, particularly violence committed against women in social situations with alcohol involved. Students as well as faculty were concerned with safety issues on campus, especially at night. Many feel that student life is focused around alcohol and sexuality to relieve daily pressures of trying to fit into the stereotype of the "ideal student" at the College. At the open meeting, community members broke into smaller groups to discuss which issues they found to be the most pressing. Individuals agreed that childcare issues are especially difficult for female staff members who work irregular hours. Suggestions were made of formalizing a system of childcare that incorporates students as "baby-sitters" for faculty and staff, or of creating a college-sponsored day care center. Faculty and staff were concerned with the smaller number of motivated, invested men in the classroom as compared to their female counterparts. Students argued that women often compete against one another, and are

overrepresented in extracurricular leadership roles and volunteer work, perhaps as a feeling of needing to overcompensate for their gender. Rayna Rogowsky '09, a double major in History and Women and Gender Studies, is one of five student Task Force members. According to Rogowsky, female students at the College are taught to maintain the "we can do it all" attitude, but not prepared to address the realistic difficulties about finding a work/life balance. "There are things just under the surface that aren't even institutionalized," said Rogowsky, "Social things that reflect larger societal attitudes." Rogowsky discussed the need to address women's more subtle, emotional issues on campus, where their private lives are often exposed to the larger community. She hopes for greater accessibility to the Health Center and more of an outreach to students with women's health and mental health issues. "We have a campus culture that reflects the outside world," said Rogowsky. "We can start [to deal with gender issues] at this scale to effect change in a larger way." Michael Sheridan, assistant professor of Anthropology and leader of the Student Life Group of the Task Force, is considering how to address unique groups of female students – by gathering women from predominately female clubs on campus or attending commons organized events. Sheridan hopes to address the issue of safety for women on campus, and to reexamine the mentoring system in place for underclassmen students. "As an anthropologist, I try to find ways for people to explain themselves, to tell their stories," said Sheridan. Sheridan was disappointed by the small turnout of students at the first Task Force open meeting. He realized that "flashier" issues gain greater attention, but emphasized that they are a part of larger issues that can be addressed collectively and constructively by the Task Force. Sheridan also discussed the need to address diversity on campus. "It cross-cuts student life and faculty and staff representation," said Sheridan, "How does being a minority of some kind affect females' everyday lives – in athletics and jobs? It's at the center of everything we do, whether we like it or not." The initial Task Force on the Status of Women, created in 1990, was a result of a number of incidents against women on campus in 1989. Subsequent task forces have re-worked the original report, to remain up to date with contemporary issues at the College. President of the College Ronald D. Liebowitz charged the current task force with considering how the College has reacted to the 1990 and 1997 reports and create new recommendations that directly address the current gender issues of the College. According to Provost and task force member Alison Byerly, the Task Force is one of few groups on campus that pulls together faculty, staff and students to discuss shared issues. "The different pieces fit together," said Byerly. "Faculty, staff and students do have an effect on each other." Byerly, also a member of the 1997 Task Force, is eager to examine how many issues from 10 years ago that seemed to speak to women are now gender issues that effect the entire community. She believes that, in addition to the hard data gathered, the conversation generated from the report may be an end in itself. "Some issues are just a matter of the community taking interest," said Byerly, "being conscious of the issues and taking what steps they can individually." The task force members are eager to discover the opinions of all genders, races and social groups on campus. "We don't have to think of 'women' as much as the pervasive issues," said Rogowsky. "Gender is underneath everything. We should have the democratic idea of gender as a discussion base." "I think as a community and a society, our future is to adjust the scope to focus on gender-equity topics in general," said Rampp. "To consider how men feel about these issues too."