

The Women's Center: Reimagining Gender Justice at GVSU and Beyond

The Women's Center, being on the precipice of celebrating our 15th anniversary next year, is embarking on a new journey: a journey of intersectional gender justice work. So what is intersectional gender justice work and what does it look like at Grand Valley State University? While the Women's Center team (or #teamWC) does not have all the answers, we are working to think about these, and other, important questions and invite the GVSU community to join us on this journey.

What is intersectional gender justice work? Kimberle Crenshaw (1994) originally coined the term intersectionality. Intersectionality recognizes that while identity groups likely share some experiences there is not a universal way of experiencing oppression. This concept is rooted in Black feminist thought and other social justice movements, both within, and outside of, higher education (Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977; Anzaldua, 1987). Intersectionality acknowledges both the diversity of identities held by individuals (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.) as well as the way in which our various social systems and institutions work to maintain oppression based on identities. Further, as Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Black feminist scholar reminds us, simply acknowledging the diversity of individual experience is not enough, we must engage in gender justice work to acknowledge and integrate the lived experience of our diverse student populations. Thus, the term gender justice shows intent to center those populations who are on the margins (e.g. women of color, queer and trans* people, people with disabilities, etc.) in justice movements.

So what does intersectional gender justice look like at the GVSU Women's Center? The Women's Center is part of Intersections (<http://www.gvsu.edu/intersections/>) a formal partnership between the Milton E. Ford Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Resource Center; the Office of Multicultural Affairs; and the Women's Center to offer joint events, programs, and professional development related to intersectional issues. Additionally, the Women's Center mission, "to create meaningful learning about women and gender and to advocate for gender justice through the education, engagement, and empowerment of women

students and the greater GVSU community” (http://www.gvsu.edu/women_cen/mission-and-values-42.htm) emphasizes both advocacy and action. To fully realize our mission the Women’s Center has been engaged in some new efforts this year in addition to maintaining the work we are known for. This new work is made possible by the addition of several new team members: Sharalle Arnold, Associate Director; Allison Montaie, Assistant Director; and Ashley Schulte, Victim Advocate and Violence Against Women Act Grant Coordinator. These new faces are building on the legacy of those who filled these roles in the past and are helping the GVSU Women’s Center integrate intersectional gender justice issues such as environmental justice, food justice, gender-based violence, and other areas of inequality into our work.

Some of examples of new Women’s Center efforts include:

- In response to the Flint water crisis the Women’s Center collaborated with student groups, NAACP, Professional Organization for Women Entering Reality (POWER) and Almighty International Movement (AIM) to host a day of service in the city of Flint to help with the ongoing water crisis and distribute a U-Haul and car filled with water collected by the GVSU community.
- The Women’s Center partnered with the West Michigan Environmental Action Council (WMEAC) to host Jackie Patterson, Director of the NAACP Environmental & Climate Justice program for morning lecture entitled, Environmental Justice as Gender Justice.
- The Women’s Center obtained an independent space for our Student Food Pantry, which received 176 unduplicated visits during Fall 2015 and embarked on a semester-long collaboration with the both the Honors College and Liberal Studies to serve as a host site for a Design Thinking class.
- The Women’s Leadership House, a residential living/learning opportunity co-facilitated with the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department, will undergo a name change beginning Fall 2016 to the Gender Justice House. In addition to offering a

gender inclusive housing experience, as well as exciting new faculty partnerships, the Gender Justice House has obtained garden space adjacent to VanSteeland Hall- the Living Center where the Gender Justice House is located- and, as a result, will be able to add food justice to the service opportunities currently offered by this experience.

- To complement the GVSU Community Read, *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine, the Women's Center offered the Storytellers Series providing students, faculty, and staff the opportunity to engage with different mediums (art, music, and poetry) to learn about storytelling and tap into their own creativity.

- Women's Center staff have engaged in diverse scholarship. Some examples include:
 - Jessica Jennrich, Director contributed a chapter in the forthcoming edited collection *On Mothering Multiples: Complexities and Possibilities* published by Demeter Press.
 - Sharalle Arnold, Associate Director will be presenting at the upcoming National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE) along with Sociology faculty. Their poster presentation is titled: *Student Parent Success: a Collaborative University Model*
 - Allison Montaie, Assistant Director presented at the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Convention in Montreal, Canada in March. The workshop was titled, *The Hidden Stories of Afro-Latinas in Higher Education* and was presented alongside two colleagues from Florida State University.
 - Ashley Schulte, Victim Advocate was given the Excellence in Faculty/Staff Support award through Fraternity & Sorority Life, and received a competitive scholarship by the American Title IX Association to receive victim advocacy training and certification.
 - Darrhonda Scott Jones, Office Coordinator was honored at the Tribute to Black Women as an Unsung Hero.

- The Women’s Center has expanded our well-established community outreach to continue building relationships with community. Women’s Center staff worked with Allendale Public Schools to offer training on intercultural issues and were represented on a number of training committees within the University. Additionally, the Women’s Center continues to jointly offer, with Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, the Women’s Community Collaborative class that allows students to gain practical field experience with various local non-profits such as The Red Project, Vote, Run Lead, Family Futures and others.
- The Women’s Center continues to be a welcoming space on campus that students, faculty, and staff utilize in diverse ways to meet their needs. Our lobby is often filled with students and everyone is welcome to join the conversation or access the services of the Center.
- The Victim Advocate has dedicated time to students who identify as victim/survivors of sexual assault, dating/domestic violence, or stalking. Since joining the team in May of 2015 she has worked with more than 50 students and has conducted more than 20 trainings with professional staff, students, student organizations, athletes, fraternity/sorority groups, and others.
- The Women’s Center, alongside a number of campus partners, offered violence prevention and education efforts such as screening *The Hunting Ground*, participation in the It’s On Us campaign, Silent Witness (domestic violence awareness event), Bystander Intervention Training, and partnered with the student organization's Eyes Wide Open and Greeks Against Sexual Assault as well as ReACT! the education theatre troupe.

As we work to align our efforts with an intersectional gender justice framework, the story of the Women’s Center continues through the voices of the students we serve and the many partners

we work with. Further intersectional gender justice efforts are not just the work of the Women's Center and as we look to the future, we also look forward to strengthening existing collaborations as well as embarking on new ones. With the Women's Centers' new home in the Division of Inclusion and Equity we are certain to make new connections, participate in new projects, and find new ways to integrate intersectional gender justice at Grand Valley State University.

Sincerely, **#teamWC**

References

- Anzaldua, G. (1987). *La frontera/Borderlands*. New York, NY: Aunt Lute.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- The Combahee River Collective. (2010). "A Black feminist statement." In C. McCann & K. Seung-Kyung (Eds.), *Feminist theory reader: Local and global perspectives* (pp. xx-xx). New York, NY: Routledge. (original work published 1977)
- Crenshaw, K. (1994). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 49(6), 1241-1299.

Links

GVSU Women's Center: http://www.gvsu.edu/women_cen/
Intersections: <http://www.gvsu.edu/intersections/>

Social Media

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/gvsuwomencen>
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